

THE NIGHT BIGFOOT TOOK HER
And the day he brought her back.

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FADE IN:

EXT. RIDGES SOUTH OF CHILLICOTHE - DUSK

Hills that don't rise so much as lean, ridge folded into
ridge, dark with hemlock and shagbark hickory. Hollows so
narrow the sun only reaches the bottom an hour a day.

A gravel road bleeds into dirt. Dirt bleeds into a deer
path, swallowed by jewelweed.

SUPER: SOUTHERN OHIO

The air has weight. Wet-wool thick, even in August.

Total stillness. No birdsong. No cicadas. No wind.

TITLE CARD: BRING HOLLOW

FADE TO:

EXT. SOURWOOD CREEK - DAWN (RECURRING IMAGE)

Fog crawls low off the creek, pooling around sycamore
roots like something poured rather than formed.

It does not burn off.

It sits. Patient.

CUT TO:

INT. RIDGELINE DINER - MORNING

A laminated menu that hasn't changed in twenty years. A coffee pot that never runs dry.

At the front table: OTIS VANCE (81), hands like knotted hickory root, and three other OLD MEN — retired loggers, an ex-miner, a man with a coal-truck stoop.

OLD MAN #1

Heard the Township's finally
gonna repave past the Kimball
crossing.

OTIS

(not looking up)

Won't get past the bend.

OLD MAN #2

Why not?

Otis doesn't answer. He drinks his coffee. The silence sits there a beat too long.

A STRANGER (30s, backpack, hiking boots) approaches the counter.

STRANGER

Any good trails south of the
ridge? Heard there's an overlook.

The table goes still — smooth, practiced, a beat of nothing before Otis speaks without turning.

OTIS

Depends how bad you want to see something.

The other old men chuckle like it's a joke. It isn't.

CUT TO:

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - KIMBALL RIDGE - DAY

A small county office. A deer-antler coat rack. A window-unit AC straining against the heat.

SHERIFF DALE PRUETT (40s, broad through the shoulders, sandy-haired) sits at a desk. A locked bottom drawer.

He doesn't open it. His hand rests on it a moment, out of old habit, then pulls back.

A DEPUTY, JENNY MCCOY (30s), pokes her head in.

JENNY

Dale. Got a call from Otis Vance.

Says the sky's doing that thing again.

DALE

(beat)

What thing.

JENNY

Storm-red. No storm.

Dale looks out the window. The light outside is already turning wrong — a bruised, sourwood color with no clouds to explain it.

He says nothing. That's an answer too.

CUT TO:

EXT. RUTHIE'S GRANDMOTHER'S PORCH - EVENING

RUTHIE COMBS (23, sharp-eyed, quick) shells beans into a chipped enamel bowl. Her GRANDMOTHER (80s) rocks beside her, eyes on the western ridge.

Ruthie stops mid-motion, a bean forgotten between her fingers, staring at the sky. Bruised red. No storm.

GRANDMOTHER

Storm color with no storm.

(beat)

Means something's stirring that ain't weather.

Ruthie doesn't ask what she means. You don't, in this house.

Grandmother rises, slow, joints stiff, and crosses the yard toward the tree line. Ruthie sets the bowl down and follows, quiet on the balls of her feet.

EXT. TREE LINE - CONTINUOUS

Grandmother kneels at the base of a shagbark hickory, bark peeled back in silvery strips. She sets something small, wrapped in cloth, into the leaf litter at the roots. Her lips move — not quite words. A rhythm, worn smooth by repetition.

She straightens, unsurprised to find Ruthie behind her.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)

Your great-great-grandmother did this. Her mother before her, far as anybody kept count.

(beat)

You leave something at the edge, time to time. You don't ask questions about who — or what —

comes to take it.

RUTHIE

Grandma —

GRANDMOTHER

Sky's the wrong color tonight.

You mind you're inside your own
walls before full dark.

(a held breath)

And if that boy of Maddie's has
got her up at that overlook
again —

She stops herself. Shakes her head once, sharp.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)

Go on and finish them beans.

She walks back toward the porch. Conversation closed, the
way it always closes in that house. Ruthie stands at the
tree line, a knot of unease tightening in her stomach that
she can't name yet.

CUT TO:

INT. MADDIE'S BATHROOM - EVENING

MADDIE KESSLER (23, twenty-three-year-old belief that the
worst things happen to other people) pulls her hair back
at the mirror. A country station crackles on a radio,
fading in and out.

She checks her reflection. Smiles at nothing. Ordinary.

EXT. MADDIE'S HOUSE - EVENING

CALEB WHITFIELD'S (25, broad-shouldered, steady) truck
pulls up. Headlights cut twin cones through air already
thicker than the season should allow.

Maddie climbs in. A kiss. Easy laughter. The radio finds a station, loses it, finds another.

INT. CALEB'S TRUCK - MOVING - CONTINUOUS

CALEB

Framing job went sideways today.
Whole crew standing around a
header beam like it owed us
money.

MADDIE

(laughing)

Ruthie's running late. Grandma's
got her doing something with the
chickens.

The ordinary rhythm of two people who know each other's
rooms by feel.

Through the windshield: the ridge road climbing, switch-
backing hard along the shoulder, a rusted guardrail and
forty feet of empty air between the tires and the hollow
below.

The air changes as they climb — thins from the warm green
smell of the bottomland into something cooler, sharper. A
faint mineral coldness that doesn't belong to any
forecast.

Maddie rubs gooseflesh from her arm. Rolls the window up
an inch.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Ridgetops.

CALEB

Ridgetops.

Neither of them thinks anything of it.

EXT. THE OVERLOOK - CONTINUOUS

The only vehicle in the gravel pull-off. Caleb backs the truck around, tailgate to the view, drops it, spreads a blanket, pops a cooler.

Below: the hollow drops into a dark, tree-choked bowl. Beyond it, the next ridge rises black against the last bruised light. Porch lights prick on across the valley floor like stars fallen wrong.

Maddie leans back into Caleb's chest. His arms loop loose around her.

MADDIE

Ruthie's gonna be so mad she missed the sunset.

CALEB

Tell her it wasn't much.

It's a lie. It's beautiful. Neither of them notices — not yet — the exact moment the crickets stop.

CUT TO:

EXT. KIMBALL RIDGE FARM - EVENING

Ruthie latches the last hook on the chicken coop. Straightens. Brushes feed dust from her jeans.

She feels it before she understands it — a total absence where a moment ago there was ordinary evening noise. No dog barking. No hum from the highway. No crickets. No tree frogs.

Nothing.

She stands very still, feed bucket forgotten in her hand.
The hair rises along her arms.

RUTHIE

(a whisper, to no one)
Something's stirring that ain't
weather.

She's moving toward her car before she's decided to.

EXT. SANDSTONE HOLLOW - BRING HOLLOW - CONTINUOUS

Deep shadow beneath an overhang of rock. Something massive
shifts in the dark — we see only a suggestion of it. A
shoulder. The slow articulation of a hand against stone.

Breath. Long, deep, deliberate.

It has caught a scent on the wind it hasn't caught in a
long while.

It rises.

EXT. BRING HOLLOW - TREE LINE - CONTINUOUS

Fog climbs the hollow wall in long fingers that don't move
like fog is supposed to move. Not drifting. Advancing.
Curling around trunks, swallowing deer trails one by one —
a hand closing slowly around something it means to keep.

EXT. THE OVERLOOK - CONTINUOUS

Caleb notices first — a change in his own body before his
mind catches up. The hair rising on the back of his neck.

Then: every whip-poor-will on the ridge goes silent within
the same handful of seconds. Like a switch thrown.

MADDIE

(small, tight)

Caleb. Do you hear that?

He doesn't. Then he does.

A single, low KNOCK. Wood against wood, deep in the hollow below.

A long beat.

Answered — closer.

Maddie's hand finds Caleb's arm and grips it hard enough to leave a mark that will still be there three days later, when no one can explain how she got it, because by then she won't be there to ask.

Fog reaches the edge of the gravel pull-off and stops, like it's deciding something.

CALEB

(low)

Get in the truck.

They don't run. That's the detail Caleb will repeat to the sheriff, over and over, in the days to come, like it might change something if he says it enough times. They didn't run. They walked. Fast, but they walked, because some animal part of both of them understood, without either one saying it out loud, that running was the wrong thing to do.

They're three steps from the truck when the fog swallows the tailgate light whole.

MADDIE

Caleb —

CALEB

I'm right here. I'm right —

A SOUND — not a growl, not a roar. A vast exhalation, low and controlled, from something with lungs the size of oil drums, twenty feet up the slope in fog too thick to see through.

Caleb reaches for Maddie's hand. Finds it. Holds it.

Then doesn't.

The fog thins for one half-second — long enough for Caleb to see, at the treeline, upright, motionless, impossibly tall, a SILHOUETTE watching him with a patience that has nothing to do with fear.

CALEB (CONT'D)
(a whisper, then a scream)
MADDIE!

Silence swallows the name whole.

CUT TO BLACK.

SOUND OF WIND. NOTHING ELSE.

EXT. THE OVERLOOK - LATER - NIGHT

The fog is gone, as if it never was. Stars out. Crickets back, timid, testing the air.

Caleb is on his knees in the gravel, alone, the cooler knocked over, ice melting into the dirt. The blanket half off the tailgate.

He is saying her name. He has been saying her name for what might be minutes, might be an hour. He has lost the shape of time.

Headlights swing into the pull-off. Ruthie's car brakes hard. She's out before it fully stops.

RUTHIE

Caleb — Caleb, where's —

She sees his face. She doesn't finish the question.

END OF SEQUENCE.

CUT TO:

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Dale Pruett takes the call standing up, one hand flat on the desk like he needs it to stay upright.

DALE

(into phone)

Say that again.

He looks at the bottom drawer of his desk. For the first time in eleven years, he doesn't hesitate before opening it.

Inside: old reports. A curling photograph of a plaster cast — a footprint, fourteen inches, five-toed. A yellowed clipping: UNUSUAL TRACKS FOUND NEAR KIMBALL RIDGE.

He closes his hand around the photograph.

DALE (CONT'D)

(into phone, quieter now)

I'm coming up.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT ONE.

ACT TWO

FADE IN:

EXT. THE OVERLOOK - NIGHT

Floodlights on tripods. Sheriff's cruisers, a volunteer fire truck, a scatter of pickups. A search-and-rescue tent going up in the gravel lot.

DALE moves through it like a man doing a job he's dreaded his whole career. JENNY MCCOY coordinates volunteers with a clipboard, her hands not quite steady.

Ruthie sits on the tailgate of Caleb's truck, a blanket around his shoulders that he hasn't noticed is there. He's not crying. He's past that, into something quieter and worse.

DALE
(crouching to Caleb's eye level)
Walk me through it again. Slow this time.

CALEB
(hollow)
The crickets stopped. Then the whip-poor-wills. Then the fog came up wrong — fast, like it was being pushed. There was a knock. Wood on wood. Answered from farther off.
(beat)
I had her hand. I had her hand and then I didn't.

DALE
Did you see anything.

Caleb looks at him. Really looks.

CALEB

You already know what I saw.

Dale doesn't answer that. He doesn't have to. Something passes between the two men — an old, unspoken inheritance, three generations of Pruetts standing in for one.

DALE

(standing, to Jenny)

Get me topo maps of the hollow.

Every drainage, every cave
mouth we've got on record.

Dutchman's Shelter, the Hollow

Eye, Toby's Slip. All of it.

JENNY

(lowering her voice)

Dale, if this is what I think
you think it is —

DALE

It's a missing person. We work
it like a missing person.

(a beat, quieter)

We just work it careful.

CUT TO:

EXT. BRING HOLLOW - TREE LINE - NIGHT

Search lights sweep the dark in long white columns, catching fog that shouldn't still be there this many hours on. Volunteers in orange vests move in a loose line, calling Maddie's name into the trees.

The calls don't echo the way they should. The hollow eats them.

A HOUND, straining at its handler's leash, suddenly plants all four feet and refuses to go another step. It isn't afraid the way a dog gets afraid of a stranger. It's afraid the way a dog gets afraid of something it has no name for.

HANDLER

(to Dale)

Never seen him do this. Not once in six years.

Dale kneels by the dog. Looks where the dog is looking — into a stretch of hemlock so dense the flashlight beam just dies in it, ten feet in, swallowed whole.

DALE

(quiet)

Yeah.

CUT TO:

INT. RIDGELINE DINER - MORNING (DAY 2)

The diner is fuller than usual — reporters from Chillicothe, a stringer from Columbus with a camera bag, townsfolk talking in low voices that stop when strangers pass.

Otis sits in his usual seat, coffee untouched. Ruthie slides into the booth across from him, dark circles under her eyes.

RUTHIE

You know something.

OTIS

(long beat)

I know a lot of things I don't say.

RUTHIE

My cousin's missing, Otis. Not

some story to keep for the
grandkids.

Otis looks at her for a long moment. Something in his face
softens — the particular tenderness of an old man who has
carried a weight a long time and is tired of carrying it
alone.

OTIS

My cousin went up that hollow to
run a trapline in '61. Come back
two days later and never said
another word about it. Not one
word. Forty-one years, Ruthie.
He died with it still in him.

RUTHIE

What did he see?

OTIS

Don't matter what he saw. Matters
what he understood after.

(beat)

It ain't hunting you for meat.
It's territorial. Emotional, even
— don't let anybody tell you
different, they been studying
this thing longer than any
biologist's had a chance to.

(beat)

And it's partial to young women.
Always has been. Nobody wants to
say that part out loud, but
that's the shape of it, you go
back far enough in the county
record.

RUTHIE

Then how do we get her back?

OTIS

(shakes his head)

Wrong question. You don't get
taken back from Bring Hollow.
Sometimes you get let go.

He says it flat, without drama. That's what makes it land.

CUT TO:

EXT. GRANDMOTHER'S PORCH - DAY

Ruthie sits with her grandmother, who is stringing a
necklace of small bones and river stones with slow, sure
fingers, the way she's done it a thousand times before.

RUTHIE

Otis says it's happened before.
Other girls.

GRANDMOTHER

(not looking up)
Not many. Not often. Often enough.

RUTHIE

And nobody stopped it.

GRANDMOTHER

You don't stop weather, child.
You learn its patterns. You learn
when to be indoors and when it's
safe to walk.
(beat, meeting her eyes)
Your daddy's grandmother left
things at the tree line same as
me. Not because it's kind. Be-
cause it remembers who's kind to
it, and it remembers who ain't.

RUTHIE

That's not good enough anymore.

GRANDMOTHER

(a long, sad look)

No. I don't suppose it is.

She hands Ruthie the finished necklace.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)

You're fixing to go up there
anyway. I can see it on you. So
you'll wear this, and you'll
leave something at every tree
line you cross, and you will not
— you hear me, Ruthie Combs — you
will not follow a knock that
answers you from more than one
direction at once.

RUTHIE

Why not?

GRANDMOTHER

Because that ain't it calling
you home.

(beat)

That's it telling you there's
more than one way to be lost.

CUT TO:

EXT. BRING HOLLOW - FIRE ROAD - DAY

Search teams fan out along the old fire road. Dale walks
point with a topo map, Jenny beside him, a line of
volunteers strung out behind.

They reach the bend Otis has kept off the county
maintenance schedule for decades — the road simply stops,
swallowed by chest-high brush.

JENNY

This where it ends?

DALE

This is where it's ended for
forty years.

He looks past the brush, down into the bowl-shaped
clearing beyond — sixty yards across, ringed in hickory,
the ground strangely bare in patches, packed and hard where
nothing should grow that way.

Nobody wants to be the first one to step into it. Dale
steps into it.

The moment he crosses the tree line, the temperature drops
— visibly, his breath fogging where it hadn't a second
before.

DALE (CONT'D)

(low, to himself)

Alright.

He finds, at the center of the clearing, a scrap of fabric
snagged on bark eight feet up a hickory trunk — too high
for a fall, too high for a snag, torn clean at the shoulder
seam.

He recognizes it. It's Maddie's.

He doesn't call out. He photographs it, bags it, and stands
there a long moment in the cold with his hand on his
sidearm, looking at the trees, understanding — the way his
father understood, the way his grandfather understood —
that he is being watched, and that whatever is watching
him has decided, for now, to let him leave.

CUT TO:

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Evidence photos pinned to a corkboard. The 1978 plaster cast photo. The scrap of fabric in an evidence bag. A map of Bring Hollow with red pins marking every disappearance Dale's grandfather and father ever quietly logged, going back to 1911.

Caleb stands in the doorway, unshaven, hollowed out.

CALEB

You knew. This whole time, your family's known, and you let people keep walking up there like it's just woods.

DALE

(not defensive, just tired)

What was I supposed to do, Caleb.

Put up a sign? "Danger: cryptid"?

County'd have me committed.

(beat)

I did what my daddy did. Kept it quiet, kept the fire road unmaintained, and prayed it stayed on its side of the ridge.

CALEB

It didn't stay on its side.

DALE

No. It didn't.

A beat. Something shifts in Dale — the weight of the drawer finally too heavy to carry alone.

DALE (CONT'D)

There's a pattern to it, far as my grandfather worked out. It takes. Then there's a window —

three days, maybe four — where
whoever it took is still...
present. Still in the hollow.
After that —

He doesn't finish.

CALEB
After that, what.

DALE
After that, it's not a rescue
anymore. It's a recovery.

Caleb absorbs this like a physical blow.

CALEB
Then we've got three days.

DALE
Caleb —

CALEB
(sharp, final)
Three days.

CUT TO:

EXT. BRING HOLLOW - CAVE MOUNTAIN - "THE HOLLOW EYE" - NIGHT
(DAY 2)

MADDIE, alive, disoriented, sits against damp sandstone in
a shallow cave chamber. Her shoulder seam is torn. There's
a shallow scratch along her forearm, already scabbing —
not an attack wound. Something closer to a mark. A claim.

She's not bound. There's nothing physically stopping her
from walking out.

But she doesn't.

Water drips somewhere deep in the dark behind her. Her breathing is the loudest thing in the chamber.

At the cave mouth: a shape. Massive. Utterly still. Not entering. Not leaving. Watching her the way a man watches weather he can't control and has stopped trying to.

MADDIE

(barely a whisper)

What do you want.

No answer. Only breath — slow, deep, patient — and the faint, unmistakable rhythm, somewhere far off in the dark, of wood striking wood. Once. Twice. Answered.

Maddie closes her eyes. Doesn't cry. Something past crying. The particular stillness of a person deciding, consciously, to survive whatever this is one hour at a time.

CUT TO:

EXT. FIRE ROAD - DAY 3

Ruthie, Caleb, and Dale move together now — an uneasy alliance of grief, guilt, and inherited knowledge. Ruthie leaves a small bundle of cloth at every tree line they cross, murmuring the same half-remembered rhythm her grandmother uses.

CALEB

(watching her do it)

You really believe that does something?

RUTHIE

I believe not doing it does something worse.

They reach a game trail marked with claw scores on bark

eight feet up — deliberate, evenly spaced, unmistakably not the work of any bear.

DALE

(measuring the stride between
prints in the mud)
Just under six feet between
steps. Same as my grandfather's
cast.

CALEB

It's close.

DALE

It's always close. That's not
new information. What's new is
it's letting us see it this
time.

RUTHIE

(realization dawning, cold)
It's not hiding from us.

DALE

No.

RUTHIE

It's herding us.

A long, terrible silence.

CUT TO:

EXT. DEEP HOLLOW - MIDPOINT SEQUENCE - DUSK

The search party — now a dozen strong, volunteers with
rifles they were told not to use, dogs straining at leads
— pushes deeper than any organized search has gone in
Kimball Ridge's memory.

The fog rises early. Faster than it should this time of day.

A DOG bolts, leash torn from its handler's grip, and vanishes into brush, yelping once, then nothing.

VOLUNTEER

(panicking)

Something's out there — something's right there —

Flashlight beams cross in the fog, catching glimpses — never the whole shape, only pieces. A shoulder. An arm longer than it should be. Two eyes, low to the ground for one half-second, catching the light with a flat animal shine before they're gone.

A KNOCK, deafening, from a tree not fifteen feet from Dale — the whole trunk shuddering with the force of it.

DALE

FALL BACK! EVERYBODY FALL BACK TO THE ROAD!

Chaos. The search line breaks. In the scramble, Ruthie is knocked down, loses sight of Caleb.

RUTHIE

CALEB!

She scrambles up — and stops.

Fifteen feet away, through a gap in the fog, she sees it. Fully, for the first time. Not a silhouette. Not a suggestion.

Nine feet of muscle and dark, matted hair, crouched low at the base of a hemlock, utterly still, its breath fogging in the cold air. Its eyes — small, deep-set, intelligent in a way that has nothing human in it and nothing animal

in it either — fixed on her.

It doesn't move toward her. It doesn't move away.

It watches her the way her grandmother watches weather.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

(barely audible)

Please. She's my family.

A long, unbearable beat.

Then it turns, unhurried, and is gone into the fog — not fleeing. Choosing to leave. The distinction matters, and Ruthie will spend the rest of this story understanding why.

CALEB (O.S.)

RUTHIE!

He crashes through the brush, hauls her up, and they run for the road, the fog closing behind them like a door.

CUT TO:

INT. RIDGELINE DINER - NIGHT (DAY 3, LATE)

The search has been called off for the night. The diner is half-empty, exhausted. Dale sits across from Otis, a map between them.

DALE

Tell me the rest of it. Whatever you didn't tell Ruthie.

OTIS

(a long breath, then)

My cousin didn't stay silent because he was scared, Dale.

Least not only that.

(beat)

He was ashamed. Said the thing
let him go. Didn't have to. Had
him dead to rights in that
hollow three days running, and
on the third day it just — walked
off. Left him a way out.

(beat)

He never could square that a
monster'd show him mercy when
plenty of men in this county
wouldn't have.

DALE

Why would it.

OTIS

Same reason a bear won't always
finish a fight it's already won.
Same reason my daddy's coon dogs
would corner something in the
barn and then just sit down and
watch it, tails wagging, no
notion of killing it at all.

(beat)

Something in it decides. We don't
get to know what tips the
decision. But it decides.

DALE

That's not a comfort, Otis.

OTIS

Wasn't meant to be. It's the
truth, though. And on a night
like this, that's about the best
thing I got to offer you.

Dale looks down at the map — at three days' worth of pins,
all converging, slowly, unmistakably, on Dutchman's
Shelter.

DALE

(standing, resolve hardening)

Then we go in the morning, and we
go in together. All of us. And
we ask instead of hunt.

OTIS

(a small, sad smile)

Now you're starting to under-
stand this county.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE HOLLOW EYE - CAVE ENTRANCE - NIGHT (DAY 3, LATE)

Maddie, weaker now, dehydrated, sits at the cave mouth in
moonlight. The creature is closer than it's ever allowed
itself to be — ten feet, sitting back on its haunches like
something out of an old woodcut, watching her with what
might, in another creature, be called concern.

She's stopped being afraid, in the specific way a person
stops being afraid of something that has had a hundred
chances to hurt her and hasn't taken one of them.

MADDIE

(hoarse)

You're not gonna hurt me. Are
you.

It doesn't answer. It can't. But something in the set of
its shoulders — the way it doesn't flinch from her voice
the way every other wild thing would — tells her something
close enough to an answer.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Then why won't you let me go.

Long silence. Wind through the hollow. Somewhere, far off,

a single knock — different from the others, softer, almost tentative — answers a question she didn't know she was asking.

Maddie starts to cry, finally, quietly, the exhaustion of three days catching up all at once.

The creature doesn't move away from the sound. If anything, it leans very slightly closer — the way a parent leans toward a child's crying without knowing quite what to do about it.

That's the moment. That's the "all hope lost" hinge point — not despair, but something stranger and harder to name: the terrible possibility that whatever has taken Maddie does not think of itself as her captor at all.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT TWO.

ACT THREE

FADE IN:

EXT. FIRE ROAD - DAWN (DAY 4)

Grey light. Fog still pooled low in the hollow bottoms, not yet burned off. Dale, Caleb, Ruthie, and Jenny gather at the tree line with a small, resolved group of volunteers — no rifles this time, at Dale's insistence. Otis is there too, against everyone's advice, leaning on a hickory walking stick that looks older than he is.

DALE

(to the group)

We are not hunting anything today. We are looking for a missing woman, and if something else is out there, we are not

giving it a single reason to see
us as a threat.

(beat)

Anybody not comfortable with
that can wait at the road. No
shame in it.

Nobody leaves.

Ruthie ties her grandmother's necklace of bone and river
stone around her own neck. Places a bundle of cloth at the
base of the first tree they pass, murmuring the half-
remembered rhythm.

RUTHIE

(to Caleb, quiet)

Three days was yesterday.

CALEB

(grim)

Then today we don't leave without
her.

They move into the fog.

CUT TO:

EXT. DEEP HOLLOW - THE BOWL CLEARING - MORNING

The search party crosses into the bare, bowl-shaped
clearing near the old fire road — the place hunters won't
enter, where dogs won't bed down.

The temperature drops the moment they cross the tree line.
Every breath fogs.

At the center: the SILHOUETTE, waiting. Not hidden. Not
retreating. Standing in open daylight for the first time in
this story, massive and still, dark hair matted with damp,
one long arm resting against a hickory trunk like a man

leaning on a fence post.

Everyone stops. A rifle-less volunteer instinctively raises empty hands. Dale raises a hand too — not in threat, in the oldest human gesture there is.

DALE

(low, steady)

We're not here to hurt you. We
just want her back.

The creature doesn't move. Doesn't retreat into the fog the way it has every other time. It watches Dale with those small, deep-set eyes — weighing something.

Then it turns its head, slow, deliberate, toward the north slope, toward the sandstone overhangs.

An invitation. Or a warning. Nobody can tell which, and it doesn't matter — it's the only direction any of them are willing to go.

OTIS

(barely breathing)

Well I'll be damned. Forty years,
and it never once looked a soul
in the eye.

The creature turns and walks — unhurried, enormous, utterly silent despite its size — into the hemlock, toward the Hollow Eye.

Nobody has to say it. They follow.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE HOLLOW EYE - CAVE ENTRANCE - CONTINUOUS

Maddie, hearing voices for the first time in three days, struggles upright at the cave mouth. Weak. Alive.

MADDIE
(cracked voice)
Ruthie —?

RUTHIE
(breaking into a run)
MADDIE!

She reaches her cousin first, pulling her into a fierce, disbelieving embrace. Caleb is a half-second behind, and for a moment the three of them are a single knot of relief and shaking hands, nobody able to say anything that makes sense.

Dale hangs back, weapon still holstered, watching the treeline.

The creature stands twenty yards off, at the edge of the clearing, watching the reunion with something that, in a human face, would be unmistakably grief.

Maddie, over Ruthie's shoulder, meets its eyes one last time.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
(quiet, only to it)
Thank you.

It doesn't nod. It doesn't need to. It holds her gaze one more long moment — Bigfoot's presence undeniable and, for the only time in the whole story, entirely still with something that resembles peace — then turns, unhurried, and walks back into the hemlock.

The fog closes gently behind it. Not swallowing. Just closing, the way a door closes behind someone who was always going to leave through it eventually.

CALEB

(watching it go, hollow with relief)

Is that it? It's just... over?

DALE

(quiet)

It's never over, son. It just goes back to waiting.

CUT TO:

EXT. FIRE ROAD - LATER - MORNING

Maddie, wrapped in a blanket, is carried out on a stretcher, alert enough to wave off help walking the last stretch herself, leaning on Ruthie instead.

EMTs check vitals. Dehydration. Exposure. The claim-mark scratch on her forearm, already scarring in a way that no doctor in Chillicothe will ever be able to fully explain, though none of them will ask twice, either — some things in this county, people learn not to ask twice about.

Otis watches from the tailgate of a pickup, hat in his hands.

OTIS

(to Dale)

Forty-one years my cousin carried that silence. Wonder what she'll carry.

DALE

Something lighter, I hope.

(beat)

She's got people who'll believe her.

CUT TO:

INT. RIDGELINE DINER - DAY (WEEKS LATER)

The diner, back to its ordinary rhythm. Otis at his table.
Dale in a booth with paperwork. Life resuming its shape.

Maddie and Caleb sit together near the window. She's
healing — physically. Something in her eyes has changed
permanently, a stillness that wasn't there before, not
fear exactly. Understanding.

Ruthie slides into the booth beside her.

RUTHIE

Grandma wants you to come by.
Says there's something she wants
to teach you. About the tree
line.

MADDIE

(a small, real smile)
I think I'm ready to learn it.

CUT TO:

EXT. GRANDMOTHER'S TREE LINE - DUSK (LATER)

Maddie kneels where Ruthie's grandmother once knelt, sets
a small bundle of cloth into the leaf litter at the roots
of the old hickory. Her lips move — the same half-
remembered rhythm, passed down again, one more generation
carrying it forward.

She rises. Looks out at the ridges leaning into each other,
dark with hemlock, folded in shadow.

Somewhere, far off, so faint it might be imagination — a
single knock. Wood against wood.

Maddie doesn't flinch. She lifts a hand, not quite a wave, something more like a nod between old acquaintances who understand each other now.

MADDIE (V.O.)

(soft, over the image)

The old-timers say the land remembers everything that ever happened on it. I used to think that was just something people said to scare kids off the ridge after dark.

(beat)

I don't think that anymore. I think the land remembers because somebody's still walking it. Somebody who was here before any of us, and who'll be here after all of us are gone too.

(beat)

And I think, some nights, it's not so bad a thing, being remembered by something that old.

EXT. BRING HOLLOW - WIDE - NIGHT (FINAL IMAGE)

The hollow from a distance, ridge after ridge disappearing into blue dark. Fog gathers low along Sourwood Creek, the way it always has, the way it always will.

At the tree line, at the very edge of visibility, a shape stands motionless among the hemlocks. Watching the ridge. Watching the road. Watching the town lights flicker on, one by one, in the valley below.

Not hunting. Not hiding.

Just watching. The way it always has.

The fog thickens, and the shape is gone.

FADE OUT.

THE END.

FADE IN:

EXT. KIMBALL RIDGE - DAWN

Gray light over the ridge, reluctant. Fog still pools thick along SOURWOOD CREEK, refusing to burn off. The porch swing at the KESSLER HOUSE hangs dead still -- no breeze, no creak. The whole property feels sealed under glass.

EXT. TREE LINE, KESSLER PROPERTY - CONTINUOUS

CALEB sits slumped against a sycamore, flashlight dead in his hand, jeans soaked to the knee, palms scraped raw. He hasn't slept. He stares at nothing.

RUTHIE approaches fast, a fresh flashlight and an untouched thermos of coffee in hand. She crouches, grips his shoulders.

RUTHIE

Caleb. Look at me. You didn't sleep at all, did you.

CALEB

Couldn't. Every time I closed my eyes I saw it. The fog parting. That thing just standing there. Watching us like it had all the time in the world.

He drags both hands down his face, smearing dried mud.

CALEB (CONT'D)

I should've done something. I keep running it back and I end up right here. Useless.

RUTHIE

You couldn't have known.

CALEB

Come back for her. Not us. Not you. Her. You saw the way it looked at her.

Ruthie has no answer. Gravel crunches -- SHERIFF DALE PRUETT's

cruiser pulling up through fog that hangs motionless in gray light.

EXT. KESSLER PROPERTY - CONTINUOUS

Pruett climbs out, notebook already open, pen uncapped. Eleven years wearing this badge, and something about this particular quiet -- no birds, even in full light -- has his jaw set harder than usual.

PRUETT

Tell me again. Start to finish. Don't leave anything out because you think it sounds crazy. I've heard crazy before.

Caleb tells him -- the overlook, the fog parting, the shape on the ridge road. Pruett's face stays flat, unreadable, his pen steady -- until Caleb describes the head-tilt. The pen pauses. One beat. Continues.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

Show me where you found the fabric.

EXT. OLD-GROWTH TIMBER - CONTINUOUS

Fog thick at ground level, visibility dropped to twenty feet. Oaks and hickories too wide to wrap arms around. Green half-light, underwater-dim. No birdsong. No insects. A flatness to the silence that feels deliberate.

Ruthie glances over her shoulder more than once.

They reach a low thorn bush, a branch snapped clean.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

This isn't a struggle break. Struggle's ragged, more than one direction. This is clean. One direction. Whatever caught on it kept moving forward. Didn't stop to fight.

CALEB

Meaning what?

PRUETT

Meaning whoever was wearing that jacket didn't stop at all.

EXT. SOURWOOD CREEK BOTTOM - CONTINUOUS

The ground slopes toward wetter growth -- sycamore, willow, greenbrier crowding the trail. A smell drifts up from the water: cold stone, and under it, something musky and old, like a den left unaired for years.

RUTHIE

You smell that?

Caleb nods, jaw tight.

They step out onto a wide gravel bar. The fog here doesn't thin -- it thickens, pooling low over water that lies dead flat. No current. No ripple.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

Sheriff.

She points. The pool is glass. Then, with no wind, no stone dropped -- a single ripple spreads outward from the center. Slow. Perfect. Deliberate.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

That's not right. Water doesn't do that on its own.

PRUETT

Fish, maybe.

RUTHIE

There's no fish makes a ring that clean. That's something coming up and going back down without breaking the surface enough to splash.

CALEB

(quietly)

Guys. Look at the mud.

A wide silt bank. Deer tracks cross it, small and ordinary. And running through and over them, obliterating half a dozen prints in a single stride --

A line of footprints. Fourteen, fifteen inches. Five splayed toes, each with its own depression. Skin-textured, not tread.

Pruett crouches, sets his own boot beside one for scale. His boot looks small.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

(flat, careful)

I know what it's the same as.

The stride between prints: nearly six feet. No forepaw marks. Two feet the whole way up the bank.

RUTHIE

Bears got claws out front of every toe. There's none here. And bears don't walk upright more than a few steps without dropping back down. This is just one line. The whole way.

Caleb leans in close to a print, finds a puckered scar crossing the heel pad -- old, healed, real.

CALEB

It's been hurt before. That's an old wound. This isn't a ghost story. It bleeds. It heals. It's a body.

RUTHIE

That's supposed to make you feel better?

PRUETT

(standing, all business)

Get some plaster. I want casts before this fog burns off. And photographs, before anybody else's boots get near this bank.

CALEB

Sheriff. What does this mean. For Maddie.

Pruett looks up the line of prints toward a stand of rhododendron, thirty yards off, where the bank curves out of sight into rising hollow.

PRUETT

It means whatever took her wasn't in any hurry. Didn't stumble once in fifteen feet of soft mud -- carrying, best I can tell, a hundred and thirty pounds of extra weight without a hitch in its stride. It means carrying a grown woman through a mile of hollow was about as much effort for it as carrying a jacket would be for you or me.

He looks at the tracks a long moment.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

(quieter)

Eleven years hearing the old-timers hint at something they never wanted to name outright. I don't get to tell myself it's nothing anymore. Not standing here.

A branch SNAPS somewhere off in the trees -- sharp, deliberate. Silence follows, total, like the hollow is holding its breath.

All three feel it at once: watched. Patiently. The entire time.

RUTHIE

(quietly)

We should get back. Get more people down here before --

CALEB

(hollow, hardened)

Before what. It's already shown itself twice. It's not hiding. It's letting us see exactly what it wants us to see.

RUTHIE

That's exactly why we need to be careful. That's not carelessness, Caleb. That's control. It's choosing what we get to see. If it wanted us gone, we'd already know it.

PRUETT

She's right. We're not chasing this today.

He keys his radio, calls in the plaster kit, backup, the evidence unit.

EXT. RIDGELINE DINER - DAY (LATER)

OTIS VANCE and the old men's table. A young DEPUTY, TYLER ROSS, has already leaked the size of the prints to the counter girls. Otis sets his coffee down untouched, face gone still and gray.

OLD MAN AT TABLE

Fourteen inches. Toes splayed like a hand. You believe that, Otis?

OTIS

My cousin Wendell ran a trapline up that hollow back in 'eighty-one. Forty-one years he never said a word about what he saw, right up till the stroke took him. Said the prints weren't the worst part. Said the worst part was how they went in a straight line, easy and even -- like whatever left them wasn't hurrying and wasn't hiding. Said it made him feel like it already knew exactly where he was standing, and just hadn't bothered with him that day.

The table goes quiet. Tyler finishes his coffee fast and leaves.

EXT. CREEK BOTTOM, WILLOW LINE - DAY

DEPUTY JOSH RINER, alone, coils measuring tape near the willows. The temperature drops -- ten degrees in seconds, his breath suddenly fogging in air that was warm a moment ago.

Across the creek, the willow branches bend and part in a slow, deliberate line -- tracking parallel to him. No wind. No shape visible. Just movement, unhurried, exact.

DEPUTY (O.S.)

Riner! You coming or you planning to grow roots down there?

Riner says nothing. He watches the last branches settle. The cold lifts, slow, like something exhaling. He climbs the trail fast and tells no one.

INT. RUTHIE'S GRANDMOTHER'S PORCH - AFTERNOON

RUTHIE sits beside her GRANDMOTHER, a pitcher of sweet tea sweating untouched between them. The tree line holds still in gold light.

GRANDMOTHER

Your great-great-grandmother's name was Orpha Combs. Came up from Kentucky in eighteen and ninety-one. Buried a husband to typhoid inside two years, left alone with three young ones. She's the one started leaving offerings at the tree line.

RUTHIE

Why.

GRANDMOTHER

Her oldest, Iva, went missing off this same property in the autumn of eighteen ninety-four. Nine years old. Gone from the yard in broad daylight, her mother thirty feet off hanging wash. Whole community searched. Found nothing, three weeks running -- until Orpha herself, half out of her mind, walked up past where the fire road gives out today, into a bald clearing that didn't feel right, and found her daughter sitting in the leaves. Alive. Unmarked. Wrapped in what Orpha always called a coat that wasn't a coat, made of something that wasn't cloth.

RUTHIE

It let her come back.

GRANDMOTHER

It did. But Iva was never the same. Went quiet sometimes, listening to something nobody else could hear. Never once, her whole life, set foot past the fork at the old chestnut stump.

RUTHIE

What made it let her go?

GRANDMOTHER

Orpha never knew for certain. Believed it doesn't take without eventually giving something back, on its own terms, for reasons

no living soul's going to understand. What I know, from a hundred and thirty-five years of women in this family leaving offerings and praying it's enough -- it does let some of them go. Not all. And the very worst thing anybody could do is go charging in after her with guns and dogs and grief driving the whole operation. This ground doesn't answer to that. It answers to patience.

RUTHIE

Caleb's not going to wait. I saw it in his face this morning.

GRANDMOTHER

(grim, aged a decade in a breath)

Then you'd best figure how to slow him down, or go with him prepared. A boy in that state is exactly the kind of fool that hollow's been swallowing whole since before either one of us was born.

EXT. SOURWOOD CREEK BOTTOM - MIDDAY

The plaster has set. The state tech and deputies pack out. Pruett lingers, walking the print line one last time, notebook shut, face grim and distant.

CALEB

Sheriff. You're going to follow them. Into the deep hollow.

PRUETT

I'm going to organize a proper search. With enough men, enough daylight, enough respect for what we found here that nobody goes wandering off half-cocked and ends up another name in a file I already keep too many of.

He looks at Caleb, something almost like sympathy crossing his tired face.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

I know what you're thinking, son, because I'd be thinking the same thing in your boots. But that ground's swallowed grown men who knew these hills better than either of us, and it didn't break a sweat doing it. Whatever's holding onto Maddie Kessler isn't going to be

moved by one desperate boyfriend charging in alone.

His eyes flick, briefly, to Ruthie. Something unspoken passes between them. Caleb doesn't understand it yet.

Pruett walks to his cruiser. The fog finally begins to thin under a climbing sun.

Caleb stands alone at the water's edge, staring upstream at the dark gap in the rhododendron where the tracks vanish. Grief hardens into something colder, more decided.

CALEB (V.O.)

(quiet, resolute)

He was going into that hollow. With or without the sheriff's blessing. With or without a search party. With or without any real understanding of what waited past the fork at the old chestnut stump.

He looked back once at the tracks. He was going to bring her home.

EXT. RHODODENDRON THICKET, DEEP HOLLOW - CONTINUOUS

Deep in the thicket, where the tracks disappear from sight, a single branch bends -- slow, deliberate, under a weight far greater than any deer or bear could carry. Then stills. Patient. Certain, in whatever old calculus governs its territorial memory, that the boy will come.

They always came, eventually. The hollow had learned to rely on that, going back longer than the sourwood trees themselves.

It only ever had to wait.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. RIDGE OVERLOOK - NIGHT

A gravel pull-off above a black hollow. CALEB (20s, work-hardened hands) sits on his truck's tailgate beside MADDIE (23, wound tight). Fog nowhere in sight. Not yet.

A hollow KNOCK rolls up from the trees. Wood on wood. Patient. Silence stretches after it, taut.

MADDIE

That's not a woodpecker.

CALEB

I know.

MADDIE

Caleb.

CALEB

I know, Mad. Just -- hang on.

Fog climbs the north slope where there was none ten seconds ago. It moves with direction, the way water finds the low places first.

The whip-poor-wills have already gone quiet. So have the crickets. So has the distant hum of the highway. Caleb doesn't move. Some older part of him says: not yet.

MADDIE

We should get in the truck.

CALEB

Yeah.

He doesn't move. The fog reaches the guardrail, then the tailgate. Cold pours off it -- wrong cold, August-wrong. It carries a smell underneath the damp: wet fur, old barn.

MADDIE

Do you smell that?

CALEB

Yeah.

MADDIE

What is that?

He says nothing. His hand finds the tire iron clipped under the bed.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Caleb -- I can see it. By the big oak.

A wrongness under the white oak, forty yards off -- an outline with shoulders where there should be only dark. The fog thickens. It's gone.

A second knock -- closer, felt through the ground and up through their boots.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

It's not by the oak anymore.

CALEB

Truck. Now, Mad. Get in the truck.

They move. In the side mirror, the fog PARTS -- not scattered, but drawn aside like a curtain. A shape fills the gap for one frame: a massive sloped shoulder, an arm too long, five human-shaped fingers curling once. Two points of dull amber, low to the ground, fixed on the truck.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Go. Caleb. Go.

He reverses hard, gravel spitting, then guns it down the ridge road.

EXT. GRAVEL RIDGE ROAD - CONTINUOUS

RUTHIE (20s, steady until tonight) grips the wheel of an old Civic, radio dissolved to static, fog spilling across the road ahead. She eases off the gas. Something in her says: slow is safer than fast.

A knock, off to her right, down in the hollow. She stops the car dead in the road, hands locked white on the wheel.

A second knock answers -- closer, ahead, toward the overlook.

RUTHIE
(barely a whisper)
Maddie.

She floors it into the fog. Headlights catch nothing but gray churn -- then a low branch, bent all the way to the forest floor, folded with a pressure no wind could manage. Not broken. Placed.

She doesn't stop to look. She rounds the last bend to the overlook.

Empty pull-off. No truck.

EXT. RIDGE ROAD, LOWER SWITCHBACK - CONTINUOUS

Caleb's truck and Ruthie's Civic meet nose to nose, fog curling low between them. Ruthie is out of the car before it's fully stopped. She and Maddie collide in a hard, wordless hug.

RUTHIE
We need to get off this ridge. Something's -- I saw a branch bent all the way down like --

CALEB
We saw it too. At the overlook. Forty yards off, and then it wasn't, and then it was right by the truck --

MADDIE
(rigid, staring past them)
Get in the truck. Both of you. Now.

The fog PARTS again -- a clean channel between two ragged walls of

gray. And there it stands.

Nine, maybe ten feet. Shoulders wide enough to fill the gap between two hickories. Long arms, hanging loose -- not frantic, not animal in its stillness. Dark matted fur that seems to drink the light instead of catching it. Old pale scarring visible even at this distance.

Its amber eyes are fixed -- not scanning, fixed -- on Maddie.

Nobody breathes. The fog holds its shape around the creature like a frame.

It tilts its head. Small. Almost gentle. The way a person looks at something they recognize.

CALEB

(barely a whisper)

Truck. Now. Both of you. Now.

Ruthie hauls Maddie backward. For one frozen beat Maddie resists -- not fighting, just still, her eyes locked on the creature's eyes.

RUTHIE

Maddie, move.

The spell breaks. They scramble into the cab. Doors slam. Caleb fumbles the truck into gear -- twice -- then guns it into a tight three-point turn.

Headlights sweep the spot where the creature stood.

Empty. The fog already closing over it, unhurried, as if the whole encounter had served its purpose and ended itself.

The truck fishtails once, finds gravel, and runs.

INT. TRUCK CAB - CONTINUOUS

Three people breathing hard. The fog thins behind them. An owl

calls. Far off, the ordinary hum of the highway creeps back in.

RUTHIE

We need to call somebody. The sheriff.

CALEB

And say what? That we saw Bigfoot on the ridge? They'll laugh us out of the county.

RUTHIE

I don't care if they laugh. I care if that thing is still out there.

Maddie says nothing. She stares out the windshield, arms wrapped around herself. Ruthie takes her hand. It's cold -- colder than the night alone accounts for.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

Mad? You okay?

MADDIE

(distant)

It looked at me. Not both of you. At me. Like it knew me.

CALEB

That's the adrenaline talking. You're in shock. We all are.

INT. MADDIE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - LATER

Tea nobody drinks. Caleb paces, sits, wraps both hands around a mug he never lifts. Maddie sits curled on the couch, eyes drifting again and again to the dark window facing the tree line.

MADDIE

I think it's gone.

Neither friend asks how she knows.

EXT. MADDIE'S HOUSE - PORCH - NIGHT (LATER)

Headlights recede down the drive. Maddie stands at the window long after they're gone, watching the tree line. Watching the place where the dark pools thickest.

She doesn't tell them what she feels: that something out there is watching back. Not with hunger. With patience.

INT. MADDIE'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - LATER (ONE A.M.)

Maddie lies awake, nerves still humming. She rises.

INT. MADDIE'S HOUSE - BACK DOOR - CONTINUOUS

She opens it. Cool night air. That same wrong mineral cold. Under it, fainter now: wet fur, old earth. She stands in the doorway, rational mind screaming to shut it. She steps out anyway.

EXT. MADDIE'S BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

Silver moonlight, long shadows that seem to lengthen wrong. Dew-wet grass under her bare feet. She walks toward the tree line with a steadiness that should frighten her more than it does.

MADDIE
Hello?

Nothing answers. The tree line seems to lean closer.

She reaches the edge of the woods. The canopy swallows the moon almost whole. A shape stands thirty feet in, between two old hickories. Motionless. Waiting.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
I saw you. Earlier. On the ridge.

The shape doesn't move. She feels, somehow, that it is listening.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
What do you want?

Silence answers -- long, suspended, older than the night itself.

A phone RINGS inside the house. The spell snaps. Maddie gasps, spins, and runs -- stumbling, graceless -- back across the yard and through the door, which she slams and locks, both locks, and slides down until she's sitting on the kitchen floor, gulping air.

Her phone has stopped ringing. A missed call from Ruthie, 1:14 AM. No message.

She doesn't look toward the backyard window. If she had, she'd have seen the shape still standing at the tree line. Unmoved. Unhurried. Watching the house the way something waits when it already knows waiting costs it nothing.

INT. RUTHIE'S GRANDMOTHER'S KITCHEN - DAY (SIX DAYS LATER)

RUTHIE'S GRANDMOTHER (70s, weathered, quiet authority) presses a small cloth-wrapped bundle into Ruthie's hands.

GRANDMOTHER

Take this to Maddie's place. Leave it at the edge of her yard, same as I do here. Don't ask her about it. Just do it, quiet. And don't tell her boyfriend either.

RUTHIE

Grandma, what is that thing?

GRANDMOTHER

(long pause)

It's old. Older than this county. Older than any name we've put on it. It doesn't take what it wants all at once, most times. It watches first. Waits to see who's willing to walk toward it on their own two feet.

She looks at Ruthie, suddenly frightened.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)

You said it looked at her. Not you. Not the boy. At her.

RUTHIE

Yeah.

GRANDMOTHER

Then get that offering to her yard tonight, and pray it buys her time. Because if it's already decided on her, honey, there's precious little any of us can do to change its mind. All we can do is slow it down.

RUTHIE

Enough for what?

The Grandmother doesn't answer. She looks out at her own tree line, at the blue going dark.

GRANDMOTHER

Go on, now. Before it gets too late.

EXT. MADDIE'S FAMILY YARD - DUSK (THREE DAYS LATER)

Warm, cloudless -- an ordinary Thursday. Maddie tells her parents she's walking off a headache. Her mother waves her off through the kitchen window. Her father doesn't look up from the ballgame.

Maddie walks past the garden, past the collapsed fence line, into the shadow of the tree line. She doesn't stop.

EXT. TREE LINE BEHIND THE HOUSE - NIGHT (LATER)

The garden gate swings open on its hinge. A flashlight beam catches a trail of bent grass and broken twigs vanishing into the dark.

RUTHIE and CALEB run the tree line, shouting Maddie's name into fog that swallows the sound and gives nothing back. Caleb's light finds a scrap of pale fabric snagged on a thorn bush -- torn from Maddie's jacket sleeve.

CALEB

Here! Ruthie, I found --

A KNOCK, close, cuts him off. Wood against wood. Both of them freeze.

Silence answers. Total.

Then, far off -- impossibly far, given how close the first knock was -- a second knock answers. Retreating. Moving deeper into the hollow.

CALEB

(voice tearing)

MADDIE!

He's running before the echo fades. Ruthie a half-step behind. The sound keeps its distance no matter how fast they move -- patient, unhurried, certain that no human speed will ever close the gap.

They don't find her.

EXT. CREEK-BANK - DAY (DAYS LATER)

Search dogs. Grim volunteers combing the ridge. In the mud: a scattering of enormous five-toed footprints, already filling with standing water.

SHERIFF DALE PRUETT (40s, tired eyes, a badge that's carried more than this before) stands over them a long moment, saying nothing. Recognition, not surprise, in his face.

INT. RIDGELINE DINER - DAY

OTIS VANCE and the old men's table by the window, coffee gone cold. A young DEPUTY stops by.

DEPUTY

Any of you hear anything useful for the search?

OTIS

You're looking in the wrong hollow, if you want my opinion. But nobody's asked for that in forty years, so I don't expect they'll start now.

The deputy writes nothing down. He leaves without finishing his coffee.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Pruett alone at his desk, a bottom drawer open in front of him -- the third time in eleven years. He thinks of an 1839 letter framed under glass at the historical society: something upright and man-shaped, watched from among the hemlocks. A hundred and eighty-seven years, and the land hasn't changed its habits once.

He tells no one.

EXT. GRANDMOTHER'S PORCH - NIGHT

Ruthie, hollow-eyed, sits with her grandmother as the light fails.

GRANDMOTHER

You keep that boy close. Caleb. Whatever guilt he's carrying, don't let him carry it alone out at that property line. Grief makes people careless. And careless is exactly what it's waiting on.

RUTHIE

Waiting for what? What does it even want?

GRANDMOTHER

I don't rightly know. Nobody living does, not for certain. But it's patient, and it's old, and it doesn't take a body just to be rid of them. Whatever it wants from Maddie Kessler, it isn't done wanting it yet. That much I'd stake my life on.

EXT. HOLLOW - NIGHT (CONTINUOUS, PULLING BACK)

The land holds its silence -- no birds, no insects, a quiet worn for longer than anyone searching tonight could imagine.

Somewhere beyond any flashlight's reach, deep in sandstone hollows no map fully charts, Maddie Kessler is still breathing.

But the girl who walked into those woods on a warm Thursday evening
is already, in ways no one who loves her can yet understand,
beginning to become someone else.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - EVENING (THE NIGHT BEFORE)

PRUETT stands with CALEB, hat in hand.

PRUETT

Two days. Maybe three, to organize it right. State wildlife officers, somebody from outside the county who knows what to look for. I'm asking you, man to man, to wait that long. Just that long.

Caleb nods along. He has no intention of waiting.

EXT. GRAVEL PULL-OFF - PRE-DAWN

Caleb and RUTHIE park at the same pull-off from two days before. Gray, overcast light. No sun to burn off the mist clinging low over the hollow floor.

EXT. DEER TRAIL, LOWER HOLLOW - MORNING

They climb past a collapsed rail fence, iron-gray with age. A spring-fed seep runs a strange rust-orange. Ruthie crouches, tests it with her fingers, breath fogging in air that shouldn't be that cold.

RUTHIE

There's iron in this water. Or something like it. Grandma always said the deep hollow's got its own kind of ground. Soil that won't hold a garden. Water that runs strange.

CALEB

Superstition finds a reason for everything.

RUTHIE

Maybe. Or maybe the land's just as wrong as everything else up here.

EXT. OLD CHESTNUT STUMP, FORK IN TRAIL - CONTINUOUS

A black, punky stump split by old lightning, wide enough for four men. Two thin paths diverge -- one along the lower slope, the other climbing hard into a wall of rhododendron, dense as a green barricade.

Ruthie stops without needing to be told.

RUTHIE

This is it. This is the fork she told me about.

CALEB

Official search is covering the lower trail. Pruett's not touching the upper one. Not yet.

RUTHIE

Meaning he doesn't have a plan for it any more than we do.

CALEB

Meaning we're not waiting for him to find one. She's up there, Ruthie. I can feel it.

RUTHIE

(after a beat)

We stay together. No matter what we see or hear. You don't run off after some sound you think might be her. We mark our trail, and the second either of us says turn back, we turn back. No arguments.

He nods -- a hollow nod, a promise he may not keep.

They step past the stump. The hollow seems to exhale.

The temperature drops -- five, six degrees in a few strides. The rhododendron closes tight on both sides. Canopy thickens overhead; gray light dims to something like dusk with no shadows to throw.

Then the silence -- total, all at once, as if something reached out and switched off every bird, every insect.

CALEB

(a whisper, hand raised)

Listen.

Nothing. Not even wind in the canopy, though it moved plainly just a few hundred yards back.

RUTHIE

It's like this the whole way up. Grandma said the quiet up here's got a shape to it. Like something's holding its breath, waiting to see what you do next.

EXT. TIMBER, DEEPER HOLLOW - CONTINUOUS

They move single file through rhododendron scratching at bare forearms. The trail passes a rusted length of wire fence, then a collapsed cabin foundation -- fieldstone mounds, a leaning blackened chimney.

RUTHIE

Somebody lived here.

CALEB

Somebody left.

He moves on. Ruthie lingers, studying moss over the old stone -- and finds a single deep footprint pressed into it, edges just starting to fill back in with new growth.

RUTHIE

Caleb. Come look at this.

He backtracks, crouches.

CALEB

How old is that?

RUTHIE

Days. Maybe longer, judging by the moss growing back. This isn't from last night, Caleb. This is its ground. Has been for longer than either one of us has been alive.

EXT. OLD-GROWTH TIMBER - LATER

Massive oaks and hickories, canopy so dense the forest floor sits in permanent twilight. A branch hangs snapped clean, eight feet up -- too high for any deer, too high for a bear on its hind legs without visible strain.

CALEB

Eight feet. Nothing reaches that standing flat-footed.

RUTHIE

Not without being tall enough that eight feet's barely above its shoulder.

More broken branches follow at the same height, tracing a loose line parallel to the trail, ten or fifteen feet off, as if something has been pacing them the whole way, staying just out of sight.

A DOE stands rigid at a clearing's edge, ears pinned, every muscle locked -- staring north, not at Caleb and Ruthie at all. She's worn a hollow into the leaf litter standing there.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

She's not looking at us.

CALEB

I know.

The doe bolts suddenly -- straight across their path, back the way they came, crashing blind with panic.

A KNOCK -- close, off to their right. They freeze. Long silence. Then, far off, deeper in the hollow -- a second knock answers.

CALEB

Same thing from the ridge road. One knock, wait, second knock further off.

RUTHIE

(distant, instinct rising)

It's not talking to us. I don't think it ever was. Territory markers. Saying this ground's spoken for.

CALEB

You think there's more than one?

RUTHIE

I don't know. But that second knock didn't sound like an echo. It sounded like an answer.

EXT. TRAIL, CLIMBING - LATER

The path thins to a suggestion of one. Ruthie turns family stories over in her head -- a hunter gone three days in 1911, mules stampeding, a boy found along Route 104 in '63, clothes shredded at the shoulders. And older still: Orpha Combs, and Iva.

RUTHIE

There's a pattern to it. It doesn't take people just to be rid of them. Iva came back. Changed, but back. If we can figure the pattern, maybe we figure what it wants from Maddie.

CALEB

I don't care what it wants. I care about getting her back.

RUTHIE

Those might be the same thing. Or they might not. Charging up here with no plan beyond find her, fight it, drag her out -- that's not a strategy. That's a wish. This ground doesn't care much for wishes.

He walks a dozen paces before something in him cracks open.

CALEB

Truth is I don't know what I'm doing up here beyond just moving. Every hour I'm not doing something feels like an hour I'm choosing to leave her wherever she is. I can't sit in that kitchen one more day drinking coffee I don't want.

RUTHIE

(softening)

I know. I'm not saying we shouldn't be up here. I'm saying we should be up here smart.

They push on. Cold pockets come and go, always with that breath-holding silence. Twice Ruthie catches movement at the edge of her vision -- gone the instant she looks. The second time, Caleb sees it too.

CALEB

There -- did you see that?

RUTHIE

I saw something.

Thirty count of stillness. Nothing resolves. But the temperature has dropped again.

EXT. SECOND CABIN FOUNDATION - LATER

Smaller, barely one room. Ruthie crouches at the stone.

RUTHIE

Grandma said half the reason nobody homesteaded these hollows wasn't poor soil or hard winters. Said families would clear ground, build a cabin, and inside a few years just -- leave. Sometimes in the dead of night.

CALEB

(finding a mound in the leaf litter)

Ruthie. I think this is a grave.

A flat fieldstone marker, weathered blank. No name. No date.

RUTHIE

Grandma said not every story ends like Iva's. Said some of the old accounts talk about the ones who didn't come back at all. No trace, most times. But somebody buried this one. Which means somebody knew enough to give them that much.

CALEB

(rough)

Don't. Don't stand here and tell me about the ones who didn't come back. Not now.

RUTHIE

We need to keep moving. This place doesn't want us staying.

EXT. SHALLOW DRAW - LATER

Fog rises out of a draw fast, climbing in slow, purposeful fingers that curl around trunks like it's feeling its way forward.

RUTHIE

We should wait it out. You don't walk into fog that moves wrong.

They tuck against an ancient oak, crouched close, the fog rolling past in silent waves. Ruthie's teeth start to chatter.

A sound rises beneath the fog -- low, rhythmic, almost too faint to separate from settling timber. A breathing. Coming from everywhere at once.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

(whisper)

Do you hear that.

CALEB

The breathing. I've heard it every night since the ridge road. I thought it was just grief playing the worst sound on a loop. Ruthie -- it's real.

The fog thins. The breathing fades with it, so gradual neither can say when it stopped.

EXT. MOSS-DRAPED BOULDER - LATER

A massive slab of gray sandstone, marked with four deep parallel grooves running crown to base.

RUTHIE

(hand flat on the stone)

Caleb. Come look at this rock.

CALEB

Weathering. Frost cracks. Rocks do that.

RUTHIE

Not like this. Four straight lines, evenly spaced, cut that deep into solid stone. This is a claim. Same as the knock. Same as the branches. Something marking territory in the only language territory understands.

Bone fragments scatter the leaf litter at the boulder's base -- a rough circle, ten feet across. Ruthie finds a scrap of fabric, sun-bleached gray, coarse and hand-spun. Old. Not Maddie's.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

This has been going on a long, long time, Caleb. I don't say that to scare you worse. I say it because I don't want us to become one more scrap of fabric for the next two people who make it this far.

CALEB

(quieter now)

Then we watch each other's backs. The whole way. No matter what.

RUTHIE

The whole way.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

(minutes later, unsteady)

I think it's starting to get into my head a little. Grandma warned me. Said the longer you stay in it, the harder that feeling gets to shake off. We shouldn't be up here much longer.

CALEB

A little longer. Please. We're close. I can feel it.

RUTHIE

(reluctant)

A little longer. But if things get worse, we're done. I mean it.

EXT. SHALLOW DEPRESSION, TWO MILES IN - LATER

A thin wash of daylight breaks through. Caleb drops to his knees in the leaf litter, hands trembling, and brushes debris aside.

CALEB

(barely audible)

Maddie's bracelet.

A thin silver chain, a mountain-laurel charm. The clasp snapped clean, not unclasped. He holds it with both hands, shaking.

Ruthie studies the depression -- drag marks running in a single deliberate line deeper into the hollow. And beside it, smaller, narrower -- a partial bare human footprint, toes splayed.

RUTHIE

Caleb. There's a footprint here. Human. Small enough to be hers.

CALEB

She was walking. On her own feet. That means she's conscious --

RUTHIE

It means we don't know what it means yet. But it's more than we had an hour ago.

(tracing the drag marks)

This isn't random. This is a path. I don't think it was taken off her. What if she left it. A marker. Grandma said Iva went quiet sometimes, listening to something nobody else could hear. What if some part of Maddie -- still herself -- left this on purpose. So we'd know which way she went.

The knock comes again -- close now, felt through the ground beneath their knees. Then silence, total, like the hollow inhaling.

CALEB

(fist closing around the bracelet)

Then we follow it. Whatever's up there. We follow it.

Ruthie's gaze fixes on a gap between two ancient hemlocks, sixty yards up the slope, where the gray light pools too deep, too still.

RUTHIE

(hand gripping his arm)

Don't move. Don't move -- but look.

The SHAPE stands there. Broad-shouldered, vast, unhurried. No aggression in its stillness. Just certainty.

Slowly, it raises one long arm. Not toward them. It points -- with an odd, almost courteous precision -- further up the slope, toward where the drag marks continue to climb.

Then it is simply gone. No rustle. No cracked branch. Only gray timber and silence.

CALEB

(hollow, something close to hope in it)

It wants us to follow. Ruthie -- it just showed us where to go.

RUTHIE

Or it showed us exactly where it wants us. Either way, we don't have a choice anymore. Not after that.

She checks the fading gray daylight overhead, doing the grim math of hours left.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

Stay close. Whatever's up there, we go together. No running ahead. No matter what we hear.

Caleb nods, eyes already fixed up the dark slope.

They start climbing, following the direction of that raised arm, into timber older and darker than anything behind them. Far below, the ordinary world of search grids and radios falls away, step by step, like a country they no longer belong to.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. TRUCK, GRAVEL PULL-OFF - NIGHT

CALEB sits behind the wheel, engine off, both hands white-knuckled, staring up at dark treeline they just fled. RUTHIE beside him, soaked through with sweat and creek water.

RUTHIE

We're going to the sheriff. Right now. Tonight.

He starts the truck without a word. The bracelet rides in his jacket pocket the whole drive, a small silver weight against his chest.

EXT. KIMBALL RIDGE SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT - NIGHT

A squat brick building, cornerstone dated 1947. Two vehicles in the lot. Fluorescent light bleeds sickly through the windows.

INT. SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT - FRONT ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Scarred linoleum. Dented filing cabinets. A community board with a missing-persons poster -- Maddie's senior portrait, her easy smile wrong under this light. Fluorescent tubes buzz, one stuttering toward failure.

SHERIFF DALE PRUETT looks up from his desk, unsurprised. Like he's been expecting exactly this.

PRUETT

You two look like you crawled up out of the hollow itself.

CALEB

(voice cracking)

We did. Past the chestnut stump. Two collapsed cabins, an unmarked grave, a rock the size of a house with claw marks cut four inches into solid stone.

He sets the bracelet on the desk, hand shaking.

CALEB (CONT'D)

We found her bracelet, Sheriff. And then it showed itself. Sixty yards, clear as anything. It pointed us further into the hollow before it vanished. Like it wanted us to keep following.

Pruett's face doesn't register surprise -- only grim confirmation.

PRUETT

Sit down. Both of you. I think it's past time I showed you something.

INT. PRUETT'S INNER OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Smells of cold coffee and old paper. A window behind the desk looks out at the dark ridge, close enough to feel like it followed them down off the mountain.

Pruett unlocks the bottom drawer -- the one three generations of Pruett's have passed down untouched by any deputy -- and pulls out a large folded topographic map, creases worn soft, corners water-stained.

He smooths it flat. Red pencil marks scatter the surface -- small circles, cramped dates. 1961. 1963. 1978. 1994. 2003. 2011. Thin straightedge lines connect distant circles into a single deliberate pattern.

RUTHIE

(whisper)

What is this.

PRUETT

My grandfather started it. Every sheriff who's worn this badge for the better part of eighty years has added to it. Quiet. Unofficial. Never once in a real department file. Every disappearance. Every sighting somebody was willing to report, and a good number more that never made it past a kitchen table.

Caleb's fury finds its shape.

CALEB

You knew. This whole time. Since the overlook. And you let us walk up into that hollow today with nothing.

RUTHIE

Caleb --

CALEB

(shaking her off)

He's had this for eighty years and didn't say one word.

PRUETT

(not flinching)

You're right. I told myself I was protecting the investigation.

That's the truth, and it's also a coward's truth. I've spent my whole career hoping I'd never have to be the sheriff who finally had to open this drawer for real.

CALEB

Say it now. Say what it is.

Pruett's eyes drift to the dark window, the black shoulder of ridge beyond the streetlights.

PRUETT

(low)

I've heard a dozen names for it. Wood-walker. The Tall One. My grandfather called it "the keeper" -- same as I understand your grandmother does, Ruthie.

RUTHIE

Not the name. What it actually is.

PRUETT

Something that's lived in these hollows longer than this county's had a name. Something that takes people. Not often. Not random, best I can tell from eighty years of red pencil. And something that keeps some of what it takes a good deal longer than others.

He's quiet a moment, then softer, more confession than testimony.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

My father took me up into that hollow exactly once. I was fourteen. Woke me before dawn, said we were going for a walk. We stopped maybe a mile past the stump. Made me stand still and quiet for twenty minutes. Then turned around and walked us out. I asked him why. He said: "I wanted it to see your face, so it knows whose boy you are. So if the day ever comes you've got business up here, it already knows you belong to somebody who respects this ground."

RUTHIE

He thought that would protect you.

PRUETT

I think he did. Same as your grandmother's cloth bundles at the tree line. Different shape. Same old fear.

CALEB

Did it work?

PRUETT

I've worn this badge eleven years without that hollow taking anything from me directly. Make of that what you want. I've stopped being confident I know the difference between protection and plain dumb luck.

He pulls a soft, furred manila folder from the drawer, opens it beside the map.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

Nineteen seventy-eight. A trapper found two distinct sets of tracks a quarter mile apart. One bigger than the other. Never set another line in that section again.

He draws another sheet.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

Ninety-four. A mother camping heard two things calling back and forth in the dark. Her words -- "like they were talking about us."

Packed up and left before dawn.

Another.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

A timber contractor watched something cross an open logging cut at a dead run. Forty yards in under four seconds. The sale got quietly rerouted around that hollow. No explanation given.

RUTHIE

(cold certainty)

There's more than one. I felt it today. A knock, answered by another, further off. It didn't feel like an echo. It felt like two things talking to each other.

Pruett's hand tightens on the map's edge.

PRUETT

That matches something else. Two boys, six years back, snuck in to see the old homestead ruins. Came out shaken, describing something pacing them step for step through the brush, never closing the distance, never falling back. Both used the same word, independent interviews. "Escorting." Like it wasn't hunting them. Like it was making sure they left.

He taps the folder.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

You know Otis Vance. His cousin Wendell ran that trapline back in '81. I asked Otis straight out, two years back, what he thought was up there. He said Wendell told him the thing wasn't cruel. Said cruelty would've almost been easier to carry. What haunted Wendell was how patient it was. Like it was waiting on something from him he never figured out how to give.

Silence. The fluorescent hum fills it.

CALEB

Why would it prop a rifle up neat against a tree instead of leaving it where it fell. Why point us deeper today instead of just making

us leave.

PRUETT

I don't know. I don't think there's a why a human mind's built to grasp. Intelligent enough to talk to its own kind across a mile of hollow. Patient enough to keep a pattern eighty years running. Deliberate enough to stand a man's rifle up instead of dropping it. That's not animal behavior. It's not human either. It plays by its own rules, and eighty years of watching's only taught us those rules aren't ours to understand. Only to respect.

RUTHIE

(studying the map)

The fabric we found at the den marker. Weathered gray, hand-spun. That's from one of these.

PRUETT

Likely. Or from one who came back, and left something of themselves up there without ever knowing why.

CALEB

Which ones come back. What decides that.

PRUETT

(long pause)

I don't have a clean answer, son. I wish to God I did.

He taps a circle from 1961 -- returned, unmarked, three weeks -- matches ridge pattern.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

This one came back. Whole, more or less, though he wasn't the same after. This one --

(a circle from 1932, no return notation)

-- didn't. Whatever decides the difference isn't cruelty, and it isn't mercy. It's closer to a judgment. A choosing. The pattern holds steady enough, generation after generation, that it's not random.

RUTHIE

(cold and still)

It's testing them. Deciding if they're worth keeping.

PRUETT

That's the shape my grandfather's notes always circled around. And if that's true -- the two of you walking up there today, following what it showed you, chasing a bracelet it left out -- that wasn't an accident either. It's still choosing. I don't know what it's testing you for, or what happens if either of you fails.

RUTHIE

What would failing look like?

Pruett draws out an older sheet, ribbon-faded, half the letters ghostly.

PRUETT

Nineteen fifty-two. A young couple went walking past the fire road. The wife never came back. The husband did, three days later, half out of his mind. Said he tried to follow when she wandered off. Said something put itself between them. Didn't attack him. Didn't chase him off. Just stood there, patient as a fence post, and made it plain that following any further wasn't a choice he'd be allowed to make.

CALEB

(raw)

He gave up.

PRUETT

He survived. There's a difference. The ones who push past what it's willing to allow -- those are the ones whose circles never got a return date. The ones who respect the line, even scared, even desperate -- those seem to get a chance, eventually, on whatever timetable it decides.

CALEB

(fury and fear braided together)

So we're supposed to just follow along. Do whatever it wants and hope that's enough.

PRUETT

I'm not telling you what to do. I gave up that right the day I decided procedure mattered more than warning you. What eighty years has taught this family is this: it rewards respect. It punishes disrespect, sometimes for decades before you even understand it as punishment. And it watches close to see which kind of person is standing in front of it when the moment comes.

CALEB

(hard)

Then we don't fail it. Not when Maddie's the one it's testing.

PRUETT

(not unkindly, but heavy)

That's exactly the kind of thinking that's gotten grown men killed up there since before my grandfather's time. I'm not talking you out of going back. But you go in with everything I can give you.

He walks them through the map for the better part of an hour -- seasonal clusters, heavier in late summer, near-quiet through winter, coordinates marked independently across decades by men who never saw each other's notes.

INT. SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT - HALLWAY - LATER

Ruthie steps out, calls her GRANDMOTHER, voice low.

RUTHIE

We're at the sheriff's station, Grandma. He's got a map. Eighty years of it. He thinks he knows where she is.

GRANDMOTHER (V.O.)

(over phone, quiet)

Dale Pruett's grandfather used to leave his own offering. A length of good rope, coiled neat, out past his property line, every spring. Never explained why.

RUTHIE

Do you think it's true. That it's testing people. Deciding who's

worth keeping.

GRANDMOTHER (V.O.)

I think a hundred and thirty-five years of leaving something at that tree line has taught this family one thing worth passing down. You don't get to know the rules going in. You only get to decide, every time, whether you walk in with respect or with nothing but your own grief and your own certainty. The second kind of walking in is the kind that gets people left behind for good. You tell that boy -- grief makes a poor guide through ground like that. Love might carry him partway. Respect is what decides whether that ground lets either of you back out.

RUTHIE

I'll tell him.

GRANDMOTHER (V.O.)

(sharper)

And Ruthie. You come back yourself. Whatever happens with that girl, whatever he decides to risk -- you come back to me. I don't aim to bury any more of this family's grief into that tree line.

RUTHIE

(quiet)

I will, Grandma. I promise.

She ends the call, wipes her eyes, squares her shoulders.

INT. PRUETT'S INNER OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Pruett taps a coordinate deep in the hollow, where the topo lines bunch into a steep-walled bowl.

PRUETT

Three different hands circled this exact spot, sixty years apart. My grandfather. My father. Me, eight years back, after a hunter swore he found some kind of shelter -- deadfall and stripped bark, almost deliberate. He wouldn't go near it a second time. We never found the spot again, three separate tries.

CALEB

That's where she is. That has to be it.

PRUETT

It's the best guess eighty years of quiet record-keeping can offer.
I won't pretend it's more than that.

RUTHIE

(cross-referencing in her mind)

That's the direction it pointed us. That's exactly the direction.

Something in Pruett's face settles -- the last flicker of doubt gone. He rises, crosses to a hidden bottom drawer in a filing cabinet, returns with a worn canvas kit.

PRUETT

If you're going back in -- and I can see plain nothing I say tonight changes that -- you're not going with a hunting knife and two dying phones.

He unzips it: first-aid kit, an old compass, paracord, a hand-copied section of the map at tighter scale.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

My father put this together. I've added to it. Never had cause to hand it over before tonight.

CALEB

Why now.

PRUETT

Because official search protocol moves at the pace of paperwork, and whatever's up there doesn't wait on either one. Because you two already proved today you're capable of getting further into that hollow and coming back out than any search party this county's put together in eight years.

(sliding the kit across)

I'm not sanctioning this. If either of you gets hurt up there, there's no record this conversation happened. But I'm not going to sit here and pretend I don't understand why you're going back

regardless.

CALEB

(taking the kit)

How many people in this town knew. Not the specifics. Just knew, the way old men at a diner counter know something without saying it plain.

PRUETT

More than you'd want to know. This county's spent generations building a silence around that hollow. I won't pretend that silence hasn't cost people things it never should have.

CALEB

(rough)

I don't want to understand it. I want her back.

PRUETT

I know. That's the only thing in this room tonight I'm entirely certain of.

He takes up a pen, draws one more small circle beside the coordinate -- fresh black ink, tonight's date -- and writes three words beneath it.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

(tapping the circle, eyes lifting to Caleb's)

If she's alive -- she's there.

Silence. The wall clock ticks above the filing cabinets.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

First light. Not before. You go in exhausted and half-prepared in the dark, you're not helping her. You're just adding two more circles to a map that's already got more than any family should carry.

EXT. SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

They step out. The black shoulder of the ridge rises beyond the

streetlights, patient, indifferent.

PRUETT (V.O.)

(from the doorway)

Whatever you find up there -- whatever it seems to want -- you remember everything either one of us told you tonight. Respect over grief. Every single time.

Ruthie glances back once. Pruett stands silhouetted in the fluorescent doorway, eyes already lifted to the dark ridge -- watching it the way he told them he always does.

INT. TRUCK - NIGHT (DRIVING)

Headlights carve a narrow tunnel through a night that no longer feels ordinary. Caleb's hands stay locked at ten and two, knuckles pale. The canvas kit and folded map ride between them on the bench seat.

RUTHIE

Get some sleep tonight. Whatever's left of it. You go up that hollow running on fumes, you're not doing her any favors.

CALEB

(flat, unconvincing)

I'll try.

Ruthie lets it go. The last lights of Kimball Ridge fall away behind them. Ahead, the dark shoulder of the ridge waits -- patient as it has always been, patient as it will be tomorrow.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. FIRE ROAD, GRAVEL PULL-OFF - DAWN

Gray light easing over the ridge. CALEB and RUTHIE shoulder the canvas kit. A DEPUTY at the pull-off gives them a grim, professional nod as they start up the trail.

EXT. DEER TRAIL, LOWER HOLLOW - MORNING (MONTAGE)

-- They cross the chestnut stump, faster and more purposeful than the day before, the compass giving their steps discipline.
-- They pass the first den marker boulder by midmorning.
-- The second cabin foundation, shortly after noon.

Neither stops. Both grimly aware of the light they can't afford to spend.

EXT. STEEP RAVINES, DEEPER HOLLOW - AFTERNOON

The terrain refuses to cooperate -- narrow parallel ravines, sheer rock, deadfall forcing detours that eat the hours they didn't budget. Ruthie keeps losing her sense of direction, trusting only the compass's small luminous needle.

EXT. OLD-GROWTH TIMBER - DUSK

The canopy swallows what daylight remains. Gray timber shades toward true dusk.

RUTHIE

We should turn back. We're maybe a half mile out, best guess, but a half mile in this terrain, in this light --

CALEB

(not slowing)

We're close. Closer than we've ever been. I'm not turning back a half mile out.

RUTHIE

You heard what Pruett said. First light, out before dark, no exceptions --

CALEB

Pruett's not the one whose girlfriend is up here.

He keeps walking. Ruthie glances back at a trail already hard to distinguish from the undergrowth -- then follows.

The sun goes down behind canopy neither of them witnesses set. The silence arrives -- total, breath-holding, heavier than before. Anticipation instead of absence.

RUTHIE

(whisper)

We need to stop and think. Not keep pushing blind into full dark.

CALEB

(breathing hard, stopping)

Fine. We stop. We figure out where we are. But we're not turning around. Not this close.

EXT. ROUGH CLEARING, RINGED BY HEMLOCKS - NIGHT

Two flashlight beams sweep the clearing's edges. Ruthie's mind drifts to old stories -- a deer camp paced three nights running by something that never showed itself; a woman who felt something breathing outside her tent wall.

RUTHIE

Grandma used to talk about families hearing something pacing their property at night. Men sitting up with shotguns they never got to use, because whatever paced them never came close enough to give them a reason. I always figured that was fear taking a shape. Now I'm not so sure fear had anything to do with it.

A single, deliberate STEP lands somewhere in the dark -- heavy enough that Caleb feels it through his boots. The ground goes cold.

CALEB

(frozen)

Did you feel that.

RUTHIE

I felt it.

A second step. A third. Falling into a slow, measured rhythm -- too heavy for deer, too even for a bear's shuffle. Upright. Two legs. Unhurried.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

(counting the interval)

It's pacing us. Listen to the rhythm. That's not random. That's matching our stride.

Caleb sweeps his light toward the sound. The steps go silent all at once -- not fading, stopping.

CALEB

It's not moving. It's just standing there. Waiting for me to look away.

The cold pocket deepens. A musk rises beneath it -- wet fur, old earth.

RUTHIE

It's close. I can smell it.

Caleb's beam catches a shift in the dark -- mass sliding from one hemlock trunk to the next, gone in half a second.

CALEB

There! Tell me you saw that.

RUTHIE

I saw it. It's using the trees for cover. That's hunting behavior. That's not curiosity anymore.

Another slide of shadow, opposite side. A third, low to the ground. Working the whole perimeter.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

It's mapping us. Figuring out where our lights don't reach.

A KNOCK, close. Answered instantly by a second knock from a different direction -- bracketing the clearing.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

There's two. And they're not talking to each other anymore. I think they're talking about us.

Caleb's hand finds the tire iron at his belt.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

We need to move. Standing still, it's just going to keep circling until it decides --

CALEB

Decides what.

RUTHIE

I don't want to find out standing in a clearing with a flashlight for the only thing between us and whatever's out there. We backtrack. Slow. Together.

EXT. TIMBER, RETREAT TRAIL - CONTINUOUS

They move through the dark, flashlights crossing. Within fifty yards, footsteps resume -- paralleling now, close enough that a low, rumbling exhalation carries beneath them.

CALEB

(voice cracking)

It's breathing. I can hear it breathing.

RUTHIE

I know. Keep moving. Don't run, just keep moving --

(catching herself)

I don't actually know what Grandma said about two of them pacing you at once.

The breath comes closer. Caleb swings his light and catches, for half a second, two amber eyes at eight feet up -- the same shape from the ridge road.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)
(hauling him forward)
Do not stop moving.

They push through unrecognizable timber. The footsteps return from behind, closing now instead of pacing. They break into a stumbling run. Caleb goes down twice, scrambles up bleeding.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)
(catching sight of landmarks)
There -- the second cabin. We're on the right path --

A knock behind them. A second, close ahead. Bracketing the trail itself now.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)
We're not going to make it back to the truck. Not at this pace.

CALEB
What plan. There's no plan, there's just running --

A branch SNAPS overhead, far too high to be anything but reach.

RUTHIE
The rock. The den marker boulder -- it's got an overhang, remember?
Backs against stone, only one direction to watch --

CALEB
That's its rock, Ruthie.

RUTHIE
I know. But I'll take a bad position I can defend over a good one I can't see.

EXT. DEN MARKER BOULDER - NIGHT

A thin waning moon throws stark shadows through the canopy. They press their backs against the claw-scarred stone, gasping, sweeping their lights.

Ruthie's beam catches a SILHOUETTE seventy yards out, between two distant hemlocks -- broad-shouldered, motionless.

RUTHIE

Seventy yards, dead ahead. Don't move your light off it.

Both beams converge on it. It doesn't flinch. Head tilted, the same angle from the ridge road.

CALEB

(wonder and terror)

It's not attacking. It's just looking at us.

RUTHIE

I don't think it needs to. I think it already knows exactly how tired we are, how far from safe. I think it wants us to understand that running isn't an option. Not unless it decides.

The shape steps sideways into fuller moonlight -- fully visible for one terrible second. Nine, ten feet. Dark matted fur, light-absorbing. A long pale scar along one forearm. Five-fingered hands, disturbingly human in proportion. Breath visible, slow, deliberate. An expression that reads, unbearably, as something close to curiosity.

Then -- from behind them, through the stone itself -- a SECOND set of heavy footfalls begins.

Ruthie spins, catches a second shape at the edge of her beam -- smaller, quicker, more fluid, closing fast.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

Caleb, behind us --

They split their lights between two threats.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

It's not stopping. We need to move now --

They break from the boulder, sprinting blind. The pursuit crashes through timber behind them, gaining, close enough that Caleb feels displaced air against his neck.

Ruthie goes down hard over a hidden root. Caleb hauls her up -- and in that turn, the pursuing shape resolves into full clarity.

Leaner than the first. Rust-brown fur. Long sinewy arms, the same human-proportioned hands. A fresh pink scar across one side of its face. Amber eyes fixed -- with searing intensity -- on Ruthie.

It closes the last ten feet in a single stride.

Caleb throws himself between them, tire iron swinging wild, connecting with something solid. The creature recoils -- startled, affronted -- and lets out a low, guttural sound.

For one endless heartbeat it looms at full height over him, close enough to feel its heat, its stench.

CALEB

(bracing, certain of the blow to come)

The blow never comes. Amber eyes flick between the raised tire iron and Ruthie scrambling upright -- then it breaks away, crashing back into timber.

CALEB (CONT'D)

(hauling Ruthie up)

RUN. Ruthie, run --

EXT. TIMBER, DESCENDING TOWARD CREEK - CONTINUOUS

They run blind, branches clawing, breath tearing. The ground slopes down. Moonlight widens. Water sounds ahead.

RUTHIE

The creek. If we can reach it, cross it, get onto the trail we know --

EXT. CREEK BOTTOM - CONTINUOUS

They break into open ground, moonlight spreading silver across still water. For one instant they slow, certain the open ground means safety.

The footsteps behind them don't slow at all.

Caleb spins -- and there, silhouetted at the tree line, stands the FIRST CREATURE. Massive. Utterly still. Watching their flight with the same calm, terrible patience.

The nearest pool lies flat and glassy despite the chaos, reflecting the crescent moon with uncanny clarity.

It doesn't follow them across the open ground. It simply raises one long arm -- and sweeps it, slow, unmistakable, toward the fire road beyond the creek. Toward safety.

RUTHIE

(staring)

It's letting us go. Caleb -- look. It's letting us go.

CALEB

What about the other one --

Hot breath lands against the backs of their necks from directly behind -- then withdraws. A low, frustrated growl. Retreating footsteps, fast, back toward the tree line.

They cross the creek at a dead run, cold water to the knee, and don't slow until gravel crunches under their boots at the fire road.

EXT. FIRE ROAD PULL-OFF - CONTINUOUS

The truck's silhouette waits. Beyond it, a sheriff's cruiser's

parking lights. DEPUTY MARCUS DEEL steps out, flashlight already up, sweeping the tree line behind them.

DEEL

What happened. Sheriff said you two might come out running. Said if you did, I wasn't to ask questions till you'd had a minute to breathe.

CALEB

(sinking against the tailgate, gasping)

Two of them. One chased us. The other one stopped it. I don't understand what any of it means. I just know it was close.

Deel positions himself between them and the dark timber, radios ahead, keeps his light on the tree line.

RUTHIE

(sinking to the gravel, shaking)

It let us go. It could have taken us both, right there, and it didn't. It stopped the other one.

CALEB

(hollow, certain)

Then it's not done with us. If it let us go instead of taking us both right there -- that's not mercy. It's just not done deciding yet.

RUTHIE

(slowly)

I think we just watched it choose. Not whether to take us. Whether to let the other one take us instead. And it decided against that.

Tonight.

(wrapping her arms around herself)

I don't know if we passed some kind of test. Or if we just got lucky its hunting partner wanted the same thing badly enough to get overruled.

CALEB

I don't care which. I just know we're going back up there again. Tomorrow, or the day after, whenever we've got the strength for it.

I'm not leaving her up there with something that decides, on a whim, whether we live or die.

A soft compression of leaf litter sounds just past the reach of Deel's headlights. All three go rigid. Caleb swings his flashlight.

For one full second, the beam catches it -- the massive dark shape standing just inside the tree line, amber eyes throwing the light back, unhurried, unblinking, fixed on all three of them.

Then it steps backward, once, and the dark swallows it whole.

DEEL

(hand snapping back from his holster, voice unsteady)

I'm getting you both to the truck. Now. And I'm staying parked here till first light, whether the sheriff likes it or not.

INT. TRUCK - NIGHT (DRIVING)

Headlights sweep the gravel fire road. Ruthie watches the tree line recede in the side mirror until pavement finally hums beneath the tires, the terror in her chest loosening only by degrees, never fully unclenching.

EXT. FIRE ROAD, DEEP HOLLOW - NIGHT (CONTINUOUS, PULLING BACK)

Far up the dark road, deep in timber that has already swallowed every trace of the two creatures back into its ancient silence, a single knock echoes once through the hollow.

Low. Deliberate.

For the first time all night -- entirely unanswered.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. KIMBALL RIDGE - MONTAGE - FOUR DAYS

-- Search teams comb grid patterns that never reach the marked coordinate. A drone struggles against dense canopy.

-- OTIS VANCE and the old men sit a little longer each morning at the Ridgeline Diner, saying less, watching the door.

-- CALEB sleeps in fits on the Kessler couch, a tire iron propped against the armrest. He stares at Pruett's map until the coordinate burns behind his eyelids.

-- RUTHIE sits with her GRANDMOTHER, preparing offerings for both tree lines.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT (FOURTH NIGHT, PAST MIDNIGHT)

Caleb dozes on the couch. The crickets outside cut out mid-cadence. The refrigerator's hum seems to fade with them. Total, sudden silence drops over the house.

Caleb sits up, heart hammering before he understands why. Cold air pools across the floorboards. A faint mineral chill. A metallic taste at the back of his throat.

CALEB

(low, urgent)

Ruthie. Ruthie, wake up.

RUTHIE (O.S.)

(footsteps, alert)

She appears in the doorway, already sharp-eyed.

RUTHIE

What is it.

CALEB

The quiet just dropped. Same as always. And it's cold in here all of a sudden.

They cross to the front window. Moonlight thin across the yard. The tree line a solid black wall.

RUTHIE

(gripping his arm)

Caleb. There. By the garden gate.

A FIGURE stands at the yard's edge, barefoot in dew-silvered grass, low fog rising around her ankles.

Maddie.

Caleb moves for the door, a raw sound tearing loose. Ruthie catches his arm.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

Wait. Look at her. Something's wrong.

EXT. KESSLER YARD, GARDEN GATE - CONTINUOUS

Maddie stands motionless, arms loose at her sides. Her white nightgown -- the one she vanished in -- torn at the shoulder, stained dark at the hem. Her hair, longer than fourteen days should allow, tangled with leaves and small twigs woven deliberately into the strands.

A dark, symmetrical ring of small punctures circles one ankle.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

Her ankle. Caleb, look at her ankle.

Her gaze stays fixed on the tree line, head tilted at the same angle the creature showed at the ridge road.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

How did she get there. Look at the grass. There's no trail. No footprints.

The dew lies unbroken in every direction around her bare feet.

CALEB

Maybe the dew fell after she got here.

RUTHIE

That's not something that falls in five minutes. However she got here, it wasn't by walking across this yard.

CALEB

(breaking, pushing past her)

Maddie. Oh God, Maddie --

He crosses the yard. She doesn't turn. Doesn't flinch. Eyes wide, fixed, unblinking on the tree line.

He stops close enough to smell her -- unwashed, and beneath it, pine and cold stone and something musky and wrong. Scratches cross both forearms, some scabbed, some raw. Dirt packed dark beneath her fingernails. And along her throat -- bruises. Four small marks and a larger fifth. The shape of a hand.

CALEB (CONT'D)

(breaking)

Maddie, please. Please look at me.

Her head begins to turn -- slow, mechanical, lacking the small unconscious adjustments of a normal neck.

MADDIE

(flat, hollow cadence)

Caleb.

CALEB

I'm here. You're safe, you're home, I've got you --

She flinches at his touch. Small. Involuntary. Her eyes slide back to the tree line.

MADDIE

It followed me.

CALEB

What followed you. Maddie, what do you mean --

She doesn't answer directly. Her voice drops, almost conversational.

MADDIE

The quiet has a shape to it. Did you know that? It's got edges. A weight you can feel, if you learn to listen for it right.

(to Ruthie)

You've felt it too. I can tell. Same as your grandmother.

RUTHIE

(cold)

Maddie, how do you know about my grandmother.

MADDIE

She knows things. Everyone up there knows things. It's not just hungry, or angry. It's old. Older than knowing how to explain itself in words we'd understand. Like the ground itself decided, a long time ago, to grow a mind.

She traces the ring of marks on her ankle.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

There were nights it would just sit. Not close enough to touch, but close enough I could feel the weight of it through my feet. And it would make a sound, low, like a song made of nothing but the space between notes. I used to think it was trying to scare me. Now I think it was trying to teach me something.

CALEB

What lesson.

MADDIE

That the woods aren't empty. That they were never empty.

(eyes lifting, startling clarity)

It's not just one thing up there. I mean the whole hollow. The trees, the fog, the water going still. Like the hollow's the body, and it's just the part that decided to walk around and look at things.

Ruthie feels an old chill -- her grandmother's phrase, land-bound awareness, rising unbidden.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

(whisper)

It grabbed me once. Early on. Held my throat. Didn't squeeze. Just held on and looked at me, close, and I understood -- it wasn't trying to kill me. It was testing something. Whether I'd fight, or scream, or go still and let it happen.

CALEB

(shaking, hands on her shoulders)

Maddie, look at me. Tell me you're really here.

She turns fully toward him. For a moment, the old Maddie surfaces -- frightened, exhausted, human.

MADDIE

(cracking, present)

I'm here. Caleb, I'm so tired. I don't remember most of it. Just fragments. Cold, and dark, and something breathing close by that never quite touched me -- not until --

She stops, rigid, hands rising to touch her throat.

CALEB

What did you do.

MADDIE

I went still. I wasn't brave. I was just so scared that going still was the only thing my body would let me do. And it let go. Stepped back. Made a sound low in its chest, almost like --

She can't finish.

RUTHIE

(carefully)

Maddie, why won't you come inside? The door's right there.

Her whole body goes rigid.

MADDIE

(flat again)

I can't. Not yet. Not until I know it's actually let me go.

CALEB

What do you mean, let you go. Whatever it wanted, it's over now --

MADDIE

It's not over.

(voice dropping low)

It walks me to the edge of its ground and lets me see the lights of the house. Every time I think -- this is when it finally lets me all the way home. And every time, before I cross the fence line, it makes a sound, and I can't move another step until I turn and look at it. Like it's deciding, all over again.

(trembling)

Eleven times since the last full moon.

CALEB

(horrificed)

Eleven times. You're saying it's brought you this close, and taken you back every single one?

MADDIE

The first few times I fought it. Screamed. Tried to run. It always caught me before ten feet. Not roughly. It just stopped me. Carried me back making this low, sorrowful sound, like it was disappointed I'd tried.

(quieter)

After the fourth or fifth time, I stopped fighting. I think that's when it started letting me get closer each time. Like patience was the thing it actually wanted to see.

A KNOCK sounds, distant, deep in the hollow. Maddie flinches violently, grabbing the garden gate for balance.

RUTHIE

Maddie -- you heard that.

MADDIE

(shaking)

I always hear it. Under every other sound. Like a second heartbeat that isn't mine.

She turns toward the tree line. Ruthie follows her gaze --

A SHAPE stands there. Sixty, seventy yards out. Tall. Broad-shouldered. Motionless. Watching.

RUTHIE

(gripping Caleb's arm)

Don't move fast. Don't shout. It's right there.

Fog rises in earnest now, curling low, moving with the same wind-defying purpose from the overlook. It wraps tight around Maddie's ankles and knees, ignoring Caleb and Ruthie entirely -- marked out, specific, deliberate.

CALEB

(steady, low)

Maddie. Come inside. Please. Just a few more steps.

MADDIE

I can't. Not while it's watching. It has to look away first.

RUTHIE

(gently)

That's not real. You can walk away from it.

MADDIE

(anguish breaking through)

You don't understand. It's not fear. Something happened up there -- I don't have words for it. But it's real. It's in me now, somehow. I don't know how to make it stop.

She begins to cry -- quiet, controlled, almost apologetic.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. I don't understand what you want from me. I just want to go inside --

The shape at the tree line shifts. Not advancing -- withdrawing. A single step back into deeper shadow, fading until only two points of dull amber remain, still fixed on the three of them.

The fog withdraws with it, loosening, curling back toward the tree line. The cold begins, for the first time, to lift.

Maddie's body sags. She stumbles forward -- real, unconstrained movement -- and Caleb catches her against his chest.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

(gasping, clinging)

It's letting me go. Caleb, I can feel it, the pull's gone, I can move --

They half-carry her up the porch steps. Ruthie sweeps one last flashlight arc across the yard, pulls the door shut, throws the deadbolt.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

MADDIE'S MOTHER appears at the top of the stairs. The sound she makes at the sight of her daughter tears through the house -- raw, joyful anguish.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - DOORWAY - LATER (SHERIFF ARRIVES)

PRUETT arrives inside twenty minutes, cruiser lights dark, sweeping his eyes across the yard and tree line before stepping inside.

PRUETT

How is she.

CALEB

Alive. Different. She's saying things -- about the hollow, about what it wants --

PRUETT

(quiet)

I need you to understand something before I go in there. What she tells me tonight isn't going to fit neatly into any report I can file. The ones who come back don't come back with clean testimony. They come back with fragments. I need to hear whatever she's willing to give me tonight.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Pruett crouches at a respectful distance from the couch.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

Maddie. I'm Sheriff Pruett. I know this is hard. Can you tell me -- when it had you, did it ever take you somewhere specific?

MADDIE

(distant, flat)

There was a place. Not a cave. Walls that grew that way on purpose. Deadfall, stacked and woven, moss grown clean over most of it. I never saw the sun clear enough to keep track of direction. But it felt deep. Past a bowl-shaped clearing, down some kind of slope, near water that never quite froze.

PRUETT

Did you see the other one. The smaller one.

MADDIE

(rigid)

Yes. It came around more. Faster. Hungrier. The bigger one kept it away, most nights. Not kindness. Territory. Like I belonged to the bigger one's claim.

PRUETT

Do you know why it claimed you.

MADDIE

(long pause, whisper)

I don't think it was about me. I think it was recognition. Like recognizing a stray dog that reminded you of one you used to own.

(quieter still)

Sometimes I think it wasn't testing me at all. I think it was testing whether this whole town still remembered how to be afraid of it properly.

(eyes lifting, clear)

I think maybe I was just the easiest way to remind everybody.

EXT. KESSLER HOUSE - PORCH - LATER (PRUETT LEAVING)

Pruett pulls Caleb and Ruthie aside, voice low.

PRUETT

I want a doctor to see her first thing tomorrow. Not just the physical injuries. Someone who understands trauma, because what she just described matches too closely with fragments in my file. The husband from 1952 said something almost identical about his wife, before she stopped talking about it and the family moved on. I don't like the pattern.

RUTHIE

What pattern.

PRUETT

The ones who come back don't always stay all the way back.
(looking back at the house)
Some of them never quite finish coming home.

He drives off, headlights dark until he clears the property line.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING

DR. ANNE HALLORAN, brisk and no-nonsense, addresses the family.

DR. HALLORAN

Physically, she's remarkably intact. Malnourished, dehydrated, scrapes and contusions consistent with two weeks outdoors. The bruising on her throat shows no damage to the trachea -- considerable pressure without intent to cause lasting harm, which is unusual. The mark on her ankle I genuinely can't explain. The spacing and depth don't match any dentition I know. And it's healed at a rate

that doesn't align with a wound that fresh.

CALEB

What does that mean.

DR. HALLORAN

I don't know. I've practiced in this county thirty years, and I know better than to pretend I have a clean explanation.

(hesitating)

There's something in her eyes I've only seen once before -- a patient who survived a near-drowning as a child and spent the rest of her life only half-convinced she'd actually come back up out of that water. A doubled awareness. Present in the room, and somewhere else, at the same time.

(lower)

The psychological piece concerns me more than the physical. I'd like a referral to a trauma specialist in Columbus. Sooner rather than later. But I don't know that conventional treatment is going to be enough here.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - LATER (RUTHIE AND MADDIE'S MOTHER)

Maddie's mother sits with an untouched coffee, hands trembling.

MADDIE'S MOTHER

She used to talk in her sleep. When she was little. Ordinary nightmares. She did it again last night. Not screaming. Just talking, low and steady, like she was having a conversation with somebody standing right there.

(voice cracking)

Near dawn, right before she went quiet, I heard her say one thing clear as anything. She said, "I'm not ready yet." Like she was answering somebody.

Ruthie sits with that, cold settling into her chest.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Maddie sits wrapped in a blanket, eyes drifting to the dark window. Ruthie watches her closely.

RUTHIE

Maddie. You don't have to talk about it. But whatever's still pulling at you, we're not going to let it take you back. Not without a fight.

Maddie's eyes settle on Ruthie's face -- real fear, clear and human, breaking through.

MADDIE

(whisper)

It's not done with me.

RUTHIE

Maddie? What did you say?

MADDIE

(louder, shaking)

It's not done with me. I don't think it's finished. I think it just brought me here to show me what I'd be giving up, if I stay quiet, if I don't come back.

(terrible certainty)

I think it's going to want me to come back.

Outside, far up the dark hollow, a single knock echoes once through the still night. Not urgent. Not aggressive. Almost gentle. Almost patient.

It simply arrives, once, and waits to see if anything answers back.

Ruthie reaches across the table and takes Maddie's cold, trembling hand in both of her own, and holds on.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING (MONTAGE, DAYS PASSING)

MADDIE picks at meals with a distracted, mechanical politeness. She sits at the table, hands folded, eyes fixed on nothing, still for ten, fifteen minutes at a stretch. Her mother folds laundry beside her, filling silence that no longer fills back.

Even her laugh, when it comes, arrives a beat delayed.

EXT. KESSLER HOUSE - PORCH - EVENING (SIXTH NIGHT)

CALEB and RUTHIE watch the last light fail behind the ridge.

CALEB

She does that a lot now. Just goes away. Right in the middle of a sentence. Her eyes go somewhere else and I can't tell if she's still listening.

RUTHIE

What does she look at.

CALEB

The trees. Always the trees.

(rubbing his face)

I asked her yesterday. She said she was listening to them think.

Ruthie feels an old, inherited cold settle into her stomach.

RUTHIE

I need to see her. Tonight.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - LATER

Maddie curls in the armchair, a book open, unread, in her lap. Ruthie sits across from her, easing into it.

RUTHIE

You said something to Caleb. About listening to the trees think.

MADDIE

(a flicker of the old sharpness)

It sounds crazy when he repeats it. It's not words, or a voice. You know how you can tell what someone's about to say just from how they're breathing? It's like that. Except it's the whole hollow. The trees and the fog and the water breathing together, slow. If you learn to read the rhythm, you can tell what's coming.

RUTHIE

What's coming.

MADDIE

Change, usually. Weather shifting.

(quieter)

Sometimes it's simpler. Just attention. Like the whole hollow turns to look at the same thing at once.

RUTHIE

And right now. What's it turned toward.

MADDIE

(direct, unsettlingly clear)

Me. Since the day it let me through the fence line. I don't think it's ever going to point anywhere else again. Not while I'm still standing this close to its ground.

EXT. KESSLER BACKYARD, FENCE LINE - DUSK

They find Maddie barefoot in the cooling grass, staring at the dark timber. Her pupils are blown wide -- far more than the fading light can explain.

RUTHIE

(soft, careful)

Maddie. Hey. It's me.

Maddie's head turns, slow. A beat of no recognition. Then a tired smile surfaces.

MADDIE

Ruthie. You came back.

RUTHIE

I never left, honey.

MADDIE

I know. I meant --

(losing the thread)

Never mind. I don't know what I meant.

CALEB

(gently)

You were out here a long time. Your mom was starting to worry.

MADDIE

Was I? Time's strange out here at night. It doesn't move the same way it does inside.

(head tilting, the same unsettling angle)

Do you hear that?

RUTHIE

(going still)

Hear what.

MADDIE

The trees. When the wind moves through them right, before a storm -- like breathing. Something enormous, breathing slow. I never used to notice that. Now I can't stop hearing it. Like the whole ridge has a pulse.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - LATER

Caleb and Ruthie sit alone.

RUTHIE

Her eyes. Caleb, did you see her eyes?

CALEB

I've seen it before. A few times this week. Always right before

she says something strange.

(staring at his hands)

The doctor said it could be stress. I wanted to believe that. I still want to.

RUTHIE

But you don't.

CALEB

(cracking)

No. I think something's still in there. Watching through her.

Listening. I don't know. I just know it's not stress that makes a person's eyes go like that.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT (ANOTHER EVENING)

CALEB

(setting down his phone, screen dark)

I keep waiting for her to just snap out of it. Like the flu.

Something with an end point. But there's no end point, Ruthie.

Every day I think today's the day, and every day she drifts a little further instead. I don't know how to keep loving someone who's disappearing right in front of me while her body stays exactly where it's always been.

RUTHIE

You're not failing her by feeling that.

CALEB

(jaw tightening)

It doesn't matter how I feel. It matters what I do about it. I'm not giving up on her. Whatever's got its hook in her -- I'm not letting it win just because I don't understand what I'm fighting.

INT. PHARMACY, MAIN STREET - DAY (RECOUNTED)

Maddie freezes mid-aisle under fluorescent light, body rigid, eyes fixed on nothing. The PHARMACIST watches, uneasy, as Maddie's mother hurries her out.

MADDIE (V.O.)

(to her mother, overheard)

It's breathing wrong. The delivery truck. It's breathing wrong.

INT. RIDGELINE DINER - DAY (GOSSIP SPREADING)

OTIS VANCE sets his coffee down, quiet and still.

OTIS

That's how it starts. Same as it started with my cousin Wendell, though Wendell never came all the way back the way this girl has. First it's small things. Flinching at nothing. Talking strange. Then it gets bigger, and most families learn it's easier just to stop taking that person into town.

EXT. KESSLER HOUSE - PORCH SWING - DAY (NINTH DAY)

Maddie goes rigid, eyes locked on the tree line. Twenty seconds later, a faint knock sounds, distant.

RUTHIE

How do you hear it before we do.

MADDIE

(worrying at her sleeve)

It's not that my ears are better. It's like some part of me is still listening to something out there all the time, even when I'm trying not to, and that part hears it first and tells the rest of me to brace.

RUTHIE

That's not a normal thing to feel.

MADDIE

(fear flickering through)

I know. I'm not stupid. I know something's wrong with me. I just don't know how to make it stop.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - MADDIE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT (ELEVENTH NIGHT)

Maddie stands at the window, curtain held aside, staring at a yard gone silver under a near-full moon. Caleb watches from the doorway, careful not to startle her.

CALEB
Can't sleep?

MADDIE
(flat, distant cadence)
The moon does something to the ridge. The shadows fall different. Longer. Sharper. Like the whole hollow's holding its breath, waiting to see what the light shows it.
(turning, pupils blown wide)
I can see so much more of it now than I used to. I don't know if that's a gift or something else. I haven't decided yet.

EXT. KESSLER HOUSE - PORCH - EVENING (TENTH EVENING, RUTHIE TIMING HER)

Ruthie watches her own watch. Twenty minutes of ordinary conversation. Then Maddie's breathing slows to half its rate, eyes drifting to the tree line. Ninety seconds later, a distant knock.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - LATER

RUTHIE
She's starting to move like it. Not exactly. But close enough that it scares me every time. The quiet way she walks. The way her breathing changes right before something happens.

CALEB
(voice cracking)
Don't say that.

RUTHIE
I'm not trying to scare you worse. I'm trying to make you see what I'm seeing. Something happened to her out there. Something beyond fear, beyond trauma. I think it left something behind. Some piece of itself. And I don't think either one of us has any idea how to get it back out.

EXT. RUTHIE'S GRANDMOTHER'S PORCH - DAY (TWELFTH DAY)

RUTHIE

She's changing, Grandma. It's getting worse every day, and I don't know how to stop it. I don't even know if stopping it is something anyone can do.

GRANDMOTHER

(grave)

Tell me what you're seeing.

Ruthie describes it all -- the pupils, the stillness, the flinching before sound arrives, the talk of trees carrying thought.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)

Iva was like that too. Toward the end, especially. Orpha wrote it down.

She rises, returns with a small, cloth-bound book, soft and dark with age.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)

I don't let this leave the house, as a rule. But you need to see it yourself.

She opens it to a ribbon-marked page. Ruthie reads aloud, voice quieting with each line.

RUTHIE

(reading)

"Iva does not startle at the ordinary sounds of the house the way she once did, but flinches now at silences most would never notice, and twice this month has spoken of hearing the ridge itself breathing, of a pull she says settles in her chest before any sound reaches the rest of us. I do not know how to help her fight what I cannot see. I only know to keep leaving what's asked of me at the tree line, and to pray it buys her a little more time among the living each season it's left there."

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

(hands shaking)

Grandma, that's exactly what Maddie's describing. Almost word for word.

GRANDMOTHER

I know. That's why I kept it. Not for sentiment. For warning.

RUTHIE

What happened to her? At the end?

GRANDMOTHER

(old, complicated sorrow)

She went for a walk one evening, out past where the old orchard used to stand. Told her husband she just needed some air. Never came back. They found her dress folded neat at the tree line the next morning. Nothing else.

(quoting)

Orpha's book says, right at the end: "The hollow finally called her home, and this time she went without being made to."

EXT. KESSLER HOUSE - PORCH - DUSK (RUTHIE RETURNS)

Caleb, tense and pale, meets her before she's out of the car.

CALEB

She won't come inside. She's been at the fence line almost an hour. I tried twice. She's saying things I don't know how to respond to.

EXT. KESSLER HOUSE, FENCE LINE - CONTINUOUS

Maddie stands in deepening dusk, eyes wide and dark, fixed on the timber.

RUTHIE

Maddie. Talk to me.

MADDIE

(flat, dreading cadence)

It's close tonight. Closer than it's been since I came back. I can

feel it the way you feel a storm building before the clouds show.

CALEB

What does it want.

MADDIE

(rawer now, more present)

I don't think it wants anything from either of you. I think it's decided what it wants from me. I just don't know yet whether I have any say in the matter.

She wraps her arms around herself. The strange calm cracks -- underneath it, the terrified twenty-three-year-old from the ridge road.

Fog rises out of the low ground, deliberate, wind-defying. The temperature drops in a wave. The musk arrives -- pine, cold earth, something wrong beneath it.

Maddie's breathing slows to that long, deliberate cadence. Her eyes track something in the shadow beyond the fence.

CALEB

(urgent, positioning himself between her and the tree line)

Maddie, look at me. Please.

She doesn't. A distant knock rolls down off the ridge.

Maddie flinches -- not with fear, but recognition.

MADDIE

I used to be so afraid of that sound. The first time, up there, I thought my heart would stop. I used to press my hands over my ears.
(voice dropping)

I don't feel that fear the same way anymore. Part of me's forgotten how to be simply afraid of it. I don't know when that happened, or how to get that simple fear back.

RUTHIE

(quiet, making sure Maddie hears)

That's what scares me most. Not the knocking. Not the fog. That you're describing losing your fear like weather happens to you, instead of something you're fighting against.

Maddie turns, anguish breaking through fully, tears spilling.

MADDIE

(cracking)

I am fighting it. Every single hour of every single day. You don't see the fight because I'm winning it, most of the time, when there's people and noise and light to hold onto. But at night --

CALEB

At night what.

MADDIE

At night it gets harder to remember why I'm supposed to be fighting it at all.

(wiping her eyes)

I don't want you to think I don't want to stay. I do. More than anything I've ever wanted. But wanting to stay and being able to stay start to feel like two very different things around two in the morning, when the house goes quiet and I can hear it thinking again.

CALEB

(fierce, tears standing in his own eyes)

It's worth it. Every single fight, every single night, for as long as it takes. You're not a burden for needing help holding on. You're the reason any of the rest of us are still standing here at all.

A small, watery, genuine smile.

They get her inside. The fog thins. The door locks. Curtains drawn.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - LATER

RUTHIE

We need to talk to Pruett again. Tonight. This is getting worse,

not better.

CALEB

(quiet)

What if we moved her. Somewhere further out. Columbus. Get her away from the ridge entirely.

RUTHIE

Would she go?

Neither answers.

EXT. KESSLER HOUSE - PORCH - LATER (PRUETT ARRIVES)

Pruett listens without interrupting as they lay out everything -- dilated pupils, unnatural stillness, the flinching before sound.

PRUETT

I need an honest answer. Do either of you believe she's still fully herself? Or has something changed in her, something more fundamental than trauma?

RUTHIE

(after a long pause)

I don't think she's gone. I don't think it's replaced her. But something's been added. Some awareness, some connection to that hollow that wasn't there before. And it's not fading. I think it's getting stronger.

PRUETT

(grim, grieving)

That matches the old accounts closer than I'd like. There's a note in my grandfather's hand, from the forties, about a young man who came back much the same way -- quiet at first, then quieter, then gone again entirely. Walked off one evening, never seen again, three months to the day after he came home.

(quoting)

He wrote: "It doesn't let go all at once. It lets go by degrees, testing each time whether the pull's still strong enough to bring them back on its own, without ever needing to come fetch them

itself."

He tells them of a woman in the seventies who exhibited the same symptoms for the better part of a year, then slowly, incrementally, returned to herself -- so gradual nobody noticed the exact moment it finished.

CALEB

(fragile hope)

So it's possible. She gets all the way back. Eventually.

PRUETT

It's possible. I won't pretend it's a guarantee -- the same file's got as many entries where it went the other direction. But it's possible. And that's worth holding onto as tight as either of you can manage.

CALEB

(raw)

What do we do. Sheriff, what do we actually do to stop this.

PRUETT

I wish I had a clean answer. Eighty years, and nobody in my family's ever found one. Distance helps some, according to the old accounts. Others suggest the opposite -- that yanking someone too suddenly off ground they're tied to only tightens the pull instead of loosening it. I don't have certainty. I have eighty years of fragments.

CALEB

(cracking)

That's not good enough.

PRUETT

Some have tried bolder things. None of those attempts ended well enough that I'd recommend repeating them.

RUTHIE

Then what do we do tonight.

PRUETT

Watch her. Every hour. Don't let her out of sight after dark. And pray whatever's pulling at her loses its grip before it finishes whatever test it's still running.

(at the steps, leaving)

Whatever happens from here -- you didn't fail her. Either of you. You went further into that ground than any search party this county put together in eleven years. Don't let the hard part still coming make you forget that.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - HALLWAY OUTSIDE MADDIE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Caleb sits with the tire iron propped against the wall, listening to Maddie's breathing settle. RUTHIE relieves him past two in the morning.

INT. MADDIE'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Maddie sits up, wide awake, eyes fixed on the moonlit window.

RUTHIE

(whisper)

Maddie. You okay?

MADDIE

(quiet, terrible certainty)

It's calling me again.

RUTHIE

(cold)

What does that feel like?

MADDIE

Like a sound only I can hear. Not a knock. Not a footstep. A pull that starts low in my chest and works its way out until my whole body wants to answer it. The way you'd answer your own name called from another room.

(swinging her legs off the bed)

I've been fighting it since Caleb sat down out there. I don't know how much longer I can keep fighting it tonight.

RUTHIE

(crossing to the bed, taking her hands)

Then we fight it together. You're not doing this alone. Not tonight, not any night.

Maddie's grip tightens.

MADDIE

(sudden, urgent)

Tell me something ordinary. Please. Anything.

RUTHIE

Remember prom junior year. When your dress caught on the gym door and you ripped the hem clean off in front of half the football team, and instead of crying you just laughed so hard you had to sit down right on the gym floor.

A small, rusty, real laugh.

MADDIE

I forgot about that.

RUTHIE

I think about it all the time. That's who you are, Maddie. Not just what happened to you. Not just whatever's still pulling at you. I am not going to stop reminding you of that for as long as it takes.

Maddie's eyes drift to the window, tracking the ridge. A long, terrible moment. Then her grip tightens again -- fierce, human.

MADDIE

(eyes still on the window)

Okay. Help me fight it. Please. Because it's calling me again, Ruthie, and some nights I'm not sure I want to keep saying no.

Ruthie holds on through the rest of the night, refusing to loosen her grip even after Maddie's breathing finally settles into real sleep.

EXT. KESSLER HOUSE, RIDGE BEYOND - NIGHT (CONTINUOUS, PULLING BACK)

Far up the dark ridge, a branch shifts in timber that carries no wind to move it. Patient. Listening. Unwilling, as it has always been, to simply let go.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - MADDIE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT (THIRD TIME IN FIVE)

CALEB wakes to an empty bed. The sheets thrown back, hurried. Her door stands open at its usual careful angle. The hallway carries a new chill, and beneath it, the mineral tang he's come to dread.

He checks the bathroom, the stairs landing -- nothing. He wakes RUTHIE.

EXT. KESSLER HOUSE, FENCE LINE - CONTINUOUS

Flashlights sweep a yard gone silver under a near-full moon. They find MADDIE at the fence, barefoot, angled toward the tree line like something drawn magnet-true.

CALEB

(careful, low)

Maddie, honey. You're outside again.

She turns. Her eyes are wide, dark -- and unnervingly focused. Not confusion. Intent.

MADDIE

I didn't mean to come out here. I don't even remember deciding to. One minute I was in bed, and the next I was standing right here, like I'd walked the whole way without ever choosing a single step.

RUTHIE

(cold settling in)

How many times has this happened. Since you came home.

MADDIE

This is the fourth. Maybe fifth. Some nights I catch myself before I make it outside -- standing at the door, hand on the knob, no memory of crossing the room.

(voice dropping)

It's getting harder to catch myself in time.

She wraps her arms around herself, shivering.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

I keep trying to figure out what's still mine. Which thoughts are my own, and which are borrowed. Or worn into a groove so deep I can't tell choosing from just following the path of least resistance.

(pleading)

How do I fight something I can't even always tell apart from myself?

CALEB

(rigid)

You're sleepwalking toward the woods. That's not just a symptom. That's it pulling you. Even in your sleep.

MADDIE

I don't know how much of it is choosing and how much is just being carried along by something that doesn't much care whether I'm conscious for the ride.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - MADDIE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT (MONTAGE, NIGHTS PASSING)

Caleb sleeps on the floor across her doorway. She wakes twice more, startled, standing over him instead of the yard. By the ninth night, even that fails -- he sleeps too deep to feel her step over him.

EXT. KESSLER HOUSE, EDGE OF FENCE LINE - NIGHT (NINTH NIGHT)

Caleb finds her closer to the tree line than ever before, bare feet already in dew past the mowed grass. She doesn't react to his approach until he blocks her path.

CALEB (V.O.)

(next morning, to Ruthie)

She's getting quieter. Not quiet like before. Last night there was nothing. No warning. She just went, like she'd learned how to move without disturbing a single molecule of air.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT (ELEVENTH NIGHT)

Ruthie finds Maddie at the back door, one hand flat against the cold glass, lips moving in a low murmur. Fog has swallowed the yard outside -- a solid silver-gray wall pressed close to the window.

RUTHIE

(whisper)

Maddie. What are you saying?

MADDIE

(flat, distant)

I'm answering it. It asks the same question every night now. And I keep telling it not yet, not yet, please not yet. I don't know how many more times it's going to accept that answer.

RUTHIE

What question.

MADDIE

(turning, eyes catching the light unnaturally)

Whether I'm ready to come home. Its home. Not this one. I don't think it understands the difference the way we do.

(wistful, frightening)

Sometimes I try to imagine what it means by home. Whether it thinks of that hollow the way I think of this kitchen. I don't have an answer. I just know the question keeps getting louder, and I keep getting more tired of shouting back the same word every night.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT (FOURTEENTH NIGHT)

Caleb and Ruthie sit across from each other, both exhausted past sleep.

CALEB

What if it's not really taking her. What if this whole time it's just been waiting for her to decide to come back on her own. What if that's the actual test -- not whether she can survive being taken, but whether she'll eventually choose it.

RUTHIE

Don't. Don't let yourself go there.

CALEB

I've watched the fight get harder every single day, not easier.

(hands flat on the table)

My dad used to say water doesn't need to be strong to win against stone. It just needs to be patient, finding the same crack over and over until the stone gives way on its own.

(raw)

That's what this feels like. We're the stone. It's just water, patient water, finding the same crack in her every night. I don't know how much longer any of us can hold.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - MADDIE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT (FIFTEENTH NIGHT)

Ruthie wakes to absolute silence. Caleb's pallet in the doorway is empty. The window stands open -- cold air pouring through, carrying the mineral chill and musk.

EXT. KESSLER HOUSE, DEEP IN THE YARD - CONTINUOUS

Ruthie rounds the house and finds Caleb gripping Maddie's wrist, both of them locked in a silent struggle, closer to the tree line than Maddie has ever gotten. Thick, syrupy fog glows faint silver in the moonlight.

MADDIE

(flat, terrible calm)

Let me go. Caleb, please. It's not going to hurt me. I need you to let me go.

CALEB

(cracking)

I'm not letting go. I don't care what it's telling you. I am not letting you walk into that hollow. Not tonight, not ever.

Ruthie reaches them, flashlight sweeping the tree line -- and there, in the fog, the CREATURE waits. Massive. Patient. Not advancing.

Watching.

RUTHIE

It's right there. It's just watching.

CALEB

I know. It hasn't moved once. Like it already knows how this ends.

MADDIE

(voice dropping, carrying strangely clear)

It's not going to come any closer. Not unless I actually cross the tree line myself. That's the rule. I don't know how I know it. I just do.

RUTHIE

(adding her grip)

Then we wait it out. Maddie, listen to me. You get to choose to stay, every single time, no matter how many times it asks.

MADDIE

(anguish breaking through, crying)

Do I, though. It feels less like a choice every night, and more like water finding the lowest point in a hill. Like eventually, gravity's just going to win.

They hold the tableau. The creature stands, weight balanced, head tilted, arms loose -- like something waiting on a verdict it has already decided.

A single KNOCK sounds deep in the timber. The creature's head tilts further, acknowledging some signal. Maddie's whole body goes rigid.

CALEB

(tightening his grip)

Maddie, no. Whatever that sound means -- you fight it. The same way you've fought it every night before this one.

A long, agonizing moment. Then, slowly, the tension in Maddie's arm eases.

MADDIE

(raw, shaking, present)

Okay. Not tonight. I'm staying. I'm staying.

The creature holds a moment longer -- then steps back into shadow, gone. The fog thins and retreats with it.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - MADDIE'S BEDROOM - LATER (SAME NIGHT)

Caleb sits up the rest of the night, both arms around Maddie, refusing to release his grip even after her breathing settles. Ruthie keeps watch from the corner chair.

EXT. RUTHIE'S GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE - MORNING (PHONE CALL)

RUTHIE

(the moment the call connects)

It's getting worse, Grandma. Last night it nearly -- she almost walked right into it. Caleb had to physically hold her back, and even that barely worked.

GRANDMOTHER (V.O.)

(long pause, grave)

I was afraid this was coming. The pattern always moves this direction, once it starts. The first weeks, it takes them by force, testing what they're made of. If they survive, it sends them home, but it doesn't let go -- it just changes tactics, from taking to calling. And calling is crueler, because it makes the person feel responsible for their own eventual walking back.

RUTHIE

How do we stop it. There has to be something.

GRANDMOTHER (V.O.)

(after a long pause)

There might be one thing. A passage in Orpha's book I never showed you, because I hoped to God we'd never need it. About what happens if the family goes to the hollow itself.

RUTHIE

(cold)

What do you mean, go to the hollow?

GRANDMOTHER (V.O.)

Orpha did it once. After Iva came back the first time and started showing the same signs your Maddie's showing. She walked up into that hollow herself, alone, unarmed, carrying an offering and about as much courage as any grieving mother's ever had. She found whatever was calling her daughter. And she made it a bargain.

RUTHIE

What kind of bargain?

GRANDMOTHER (V.O.)

The book doesn't say exactly. She describes a cold that settled into her bones and never fully left, even in summer. And speaking, at the very end of that walk, to something she never once names plain. A promise, of some kind. What exactly, and to whom, she never wrote down clear enough for anyone after her to fully understand.

RUTHIE

That's not much to go on.

GRANDMOTHER (V.O.)

It's more than nothing. And nothing's exactly what we've had every day since your friend came home changed. Whatever she offered, it worked -- at least for Iva. The pull eased, gradually, over months, until it stopped enough that she lived out her life without fully losing the fight.

(firm)

I'll come with you. Though I expect it'll need to be her mother making the actual bargain, if blood's what matters most. But I won't let you carry the next part of this without me standing beside you.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON

Caleb listens to Ruthie relay the plan, disbelief cycling into grim resolve.

CALEB

We need to talk to her mother. Today.

INT. RUTHIE'S GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE - LATER

The GRANDMOTHER folds a small cloth bundle with slow reverence.

GRANDMOTHER

Blood matters in this kind of trade. Not just whose hands make the offering -- whose intention sits behind it. The bargain only holds if the person means every word, without reservation, without a secret hope of taking it back once the danger's passed.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - LATER

MADDIE'S MOTHER sits with a cold coffee, listening to the whole plan without interrupting.

MADDIE'S MOTHER

(steady despite visible fear)

I'll do it. Whatever it takes. I am not going to spend the rest of my life wondering if there was something I refused to try because it frightened me too much.

CALEB

It's dangerous. We can't promise you'll come back out.

MADDIE'S MOTHER

(voice cracking, then steadying)

I understand. But I also understand that if I don't try, and my daughter walks into that hollow one night and never comes back -- I don't think I could live with knowing I had a chance and chose safety instead.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - EVENING (PRUETT ARRIVES)

PRUETT listens to the whole proposal with grave attention.

PRUETT

I won't pretend I like this plan. Walking a civilian up into ground that's swallowed grown men who knew these hollows better than any of us -- that goes against every instinct eleven years of this badge has taught me.

(looking to the dark window)

But I don't have a better plan to offer you either.

RUTHIE

Will you help us.

PRUETT

Everything within my power. Deputies at the fire road. I'll walk the lower trail with you as far as the chestnut stump. Past that, it needs to happen without a badge present.

(rubbing his face)

My grandfather's notes mention twice a family that tried something comparable -- going up voluntarily instead of waiting to be summoned. Both times, the attempt seemed to matter to whatever's up there. Not always in the way the family hoped. But it mattered.

(grave)

I want you to understand -- if this doesn't work, I don't have a plan B. None of us do. This might be the only real chance any of us gets.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - LATER

Maddie curled in her armchair. Caleb explains the plan gently. Her reaction is immediate, sharp terror.

MADDIE

No. You can't. Mom, you can't go up there. It's not like a person you can bargain with the way you'd bargain with another human being. It's old, and patient, and doesn't think about consequences the way we do.

MADDIE'S MOTHER

(kneeling, taking her hands)

Baby, I have to try. I can't just keep watching you disappear a little more every single night.

MADDIE

(pulling free, shaking)

I've felt what it does to people who cross it wrong. I don't want to find out which rule applies to you, Mom. I would rather go back myself than risk that.

MADDIE'S MOTHER

(fierce, tearful)

You are not going back. Not while I have breath left in my body. I carried you inside my own body once already, baby girl, and I will walk into hell itself before I let something else carry you away from me a second time.

They embrace. Maddie pulls back, a fragile new resolve settling.

MADDIE

Okay. If you're doing this no matter what I say, then I want to help prepare the offering myself. I don't want to just sit here waiting to find out if it worked.

RUTHIE

Then we go carefully. With everything your grandmother's family has ever learned about respect over grief.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT (PLANNING, LATER THAT EVENING)

The four of them work through the plan by lamp light, settling on the following evening. Exhaustion finally catches up all at once.

Ruthie notices Maddie has gone quiet, eyes drifting to the window. Fog has filled the yard without anyone noticing.

RUTHIE

Maddie? You still with us?

Maddie rises, drifts to the window with that same eerie silence, presses a hand to the glass.

MADDIE

(quiet)

It knows. About the plan. I don't know how, but it already knows.

CALEB

How could it possibly know that.

MADDIE

Because I can feel it. It's not happy.

(turning, eyes gone wide and dark)

I think it's decided it doesn't want to wait for me to choose anymore. I think it's decided to make the choice easier.

A KNOCK sounds -- closer than it has ever sounded reaching the house. Maddie flinches hard, swaying.

MADDIE'S MOTHER

(rising fast)

Maddie, stay with us. Stay right here.

But Maddie is already moving toward the front door, bare feet silent, eyes fixed on something beyond the walls. The room's temperature drops. Cold air pools at her ankles. The smell of pine and cold earth and musk bleeds through the ordinary smells of the house.

Caleb catches her after three steps, both arms locked around her. She struggles with a strength that has nothing to do with her own exhaustion. Ruthie adds her weight. Even together, her progress toward the door barely slows.

MADDIE

(flat, distant)

Let me go. It's calling louder now. I have to answer. I have to go back.

CALEB

(breaking)

No. Maddie, no, you don't have to do anything it wants. You fight this. You fight this the same way you've been fighting it every single night --

Maddie's mother joins the struggle. All three bodies locked around the girl in the dim lamplight, straining against a door that seems, impossibly, to be growing closer despite their combined weight.

Maddie's struggle slows. Recognition flickers back through her wide, dark eyes. Her body sags against Caleb's grip.

MADDIE

(tears spilling)

I'm trying. Caleb, I promise I'm trying. But it's not asking anymore. I don't think it's ever going to ask politely again.

She turns her head, slow and helpless, toward the dark window and the fog-choked yard beyond it.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

(raw, terrible certainty)

I have to go back.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - PRE-DAWN

The offering sits half-finished on the table. RUTHIE wakes on the couch to the soft click of the back door.

She's on her feet instantly, shaking CALEB awake. They move fast through gray light toward the kitchen -- the back door stands open to a yard thick with fog.

MADDIE'S MOTHER appears at the top of the stairs, hand to her mouth, seeing the empty space where the bundle sat.

MADDIE'S MOTHER

She took it. She took it and she left without any of us.

CALEB

(pulling on boots, hard resolve)

We're going after her. Right now. Ruthie, grab the flashlights.

MADDIE'S MOTHER

I should come --

RUTHIE

Someone needs to call Sheriff Pruett. Someone needs to be here in case she comes back on her own. Please. Trust us. We'll bring her home.

Maddie's mother presses a second, smaller cloth bundle into Ruthie's hand, tears spilling.

MADDIE'S MOTHER

Bring her home. Whatever it takes.

RUTHIE

(staring at the empty table)

She took the offering herself, Caleb. She's not sleepwalking. She's going up there on purpose.

EXT. KESSLER YARD - CONTINUOUS

A pale, distant figure crosses toward the fence line at a steady, unhurried walk. Caleb breaks into a run, Ruthie a half-step behind, both sprinting through dew-heavy grass.

CALEB

(voice tearing across the yard)

Maddie!

She stops at the fence, one hand on the rail, and turns -- weary, resigned, something like relief in her face.

MADDIE

I knew you'd catch up. I wasn't trying to leave without you. I just couldn't wait for the whole plan to come together. I could feel this morning was the morning.

(steady)

I have to do this myself. I heard everything you planned. I love you for it. But I've spent five weeks watching everyone else fight this on my behalf. I think it has to be me. I think it's always had to be me.

RUTHIE

(falling into step)

Then we're coming with you. You are not doing this alone.

Maddie nods once. The three of them cross into the timber together as night gives way to fog-choked dawn.

EXT. DEEP TIMBER - MORNING

The temperature drops the moment they pass beneath the canopy. Fog thickens with every step, moving with what feels like intention -- reaching, testing.

RUTHIE

(unable to hold it back)

You're not scared. Maddie, how are you not scared right now?

MADDIE

I am scared. More scared than I've ever been. But I've spent five weeks fighting the pull every night, and it never once got easier. This is different. This isn't fighting anymore. This is choosing to answer it on my own terms.

(glancing sideways)

I'd rather walk toward this with my eyes open than keep getting dragged toward it every night with my eyes half-closed.

Caleb walks a half-step behind, hand near the tire iron at his belt, eyes sweeping the timber.

A KNOCK rolls down from high on the ridge -- closer than usual for this point on the trail.

CALEB

That's closer than usual. Isn't it?

MADDIE

It knows we're coming. It's known since we crossed the fence line. Maybe since last night, when I decided.

They push deeper, Maddie navigating with an unsettling, instinctive certainty, bypassing the longer route Caleb and Ruthie once broke.

A branch SNAPS off to their left, far too high to be anything but reach. None of them stop.

RUTHIE

(third glimpse of shifting shadow at the treeline's edge)

It's with us. The whole way. Never more than fifty yards off.

CALEB

(jaw set)

Let it watch. I'm not turning back, and I'm not letting either of you turn back either.

A sudden CRASH of underbrush. All three spin. Rhododendron parts --

The SMALLER CREATURE lunges into view, rust-brown fur, scarred

face, amber eyes fixed with hungry intent.

CALEB

(already moving, tire iron raised)

Get behind me --

The creature freezes mid-lunge. Ears pin back. A low, submissive whine escapes it, and it begins backing away, straining against something unseen.

MADDIE

(steady despite the fear)

It's being held back. Same as before. It wants me, probably, more than either of you. But it's not allowed. Not yet.

The creature vanishes into the brush.

CALEB

(lowering the tire iron, hands shaking)

That's twice now it's been called off.

RUTHIE

I don't know if that should make me feel safer or more frightened. Being protected by something that dangerous doesn't feel like protection. It feels like being reserved for something else.

MADDIE

(quiet, working something out)

I think they're not equals. The bigger one considers the smaller one something closer to kin -- and kin doesn't always mean equal footing. The smaller one obeys because it has to.

They push on, pace jumpier now, hypervigilant.

EXT. FIRST COLLAPSED CABIN FOUNDATION - LATER

Maddie slows, recognition plain on her face.

MADDIE

I know this place. I walked past it, when it had me. I used to

wonder about the people who lived here.

(hand on the blackened chimney stack)

There was a night it brought me here. Just to show me things, the way you'd walk someone through a house you were proud of. I felt sad for whoever used to live here. Not scared. Sad.

RUTHIE

Do you think it felt sad too. Or was that just you.

MADDIE

I don't know. Sometimes I think it doesn't feel anything the way we understand feeling. Other times I think it's lonelier than any of us could understand.

EXT. UNMARKED GRAVE - LATER

Maddie crouches at the edge of a blank, weathered stone.

MADDIE

There are more of these. Deeper in. I saw at least three, when it had me. No name, no dates. A stone somebody cared enough to place and not enough courage to mark.

(tracing it without touching)

I used to think that was cowardice. Now I understand it better.

Carving a name is admitting the person's not coming back.

RUTHIE

My grandmother's family kept a different kind of record. A book.

I used to think that was healthier. Now I'm not so sure there's any healthy way to carry something like this.

MADDIE

(rising)

I don't want my mom to have either kind. That's most of why I'm out here, if I'm honest. Somebody in this whole equation needs to finish the story, one way or the other.

CALEB

(ache in his voice)

We're not leaving your stone blank. Whatever happens up there today

-- we're not letting this be one of those stories nobody finishes.

They pass a second unmarked grave a quarter mile on. None of them stop this time.

EXT. MOSS-COVERED OUTCROPPING - LATER (BREAK)

The three rest, breathing hard. Ruthie checks her phone -- no signal.

CALEB

He'll come if we need him. But I don't think a badge and a service pistol are going to mean much where we're headed.

RUTHIE

I know. I just keep thinking about what Pruett said -- bold action against something none of us fully understand tends to cost more than patience does.

MADDIE

(a small, tired smile)

If we are proving him right, at least we'll have tried something instead of watching the pull win by default. I've had enough of watching.

She pulls a worn photograph from her jacket -- her and Caleb at the county fair, laughing.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

I brought this too. Not for the offering. Just for me. Something to hold onto if I need reminding what I'm actually fighting for.

CALEB

(throat tight)

We're getting you home. Both versions of you. All of it, coming home together, today.

They rise, continue on.

EXT. DEEP TIMBER - MIDMORNING

Fog thickens into a perpetual dusk. Knocks come more frequently now, sometimes overlapping. A low, guttural VOCALIZATION rumbles up through the ground -- not a growl, not quite a moan.

CALEB

(stopping dead)

That's not the knocking. What is that?

MADDIE

I don't know. I heard it sometimes, when it had me. Territory marking, maybe. Deeper. Older, somehow.

The sound comes again, longer, holding nearly five seconds.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

(head tilting, the familiar angle)

It's answering something. Or asking something. There's a shape to it, if you learn to listen.

They cross a shallow stream skinned with impossible ice, cold enough to burn.

CALEB

(scanning the terrain)

Past here, the trail opens up. Bowl-shaped clearing. The place the old hunter described to Pruett.

MADDIE

That's exactly where we're going. I can feel it getting closer. Not the creature -- the place itself.

(searching for words)

It's like hearing your name called from another room, and then actually walking into that room.

EXT. SECOND DEN MARKER BOULDER - LATER

The knocks stop entirely. Maddie halts, angled toward something unseen.

MADDIE

We're close. This is where the trail actually starts. Where it becomes its trail, not just the woods anymore.

Total stillness drops over them -- no birdsong, no wind.

RUTHIE

(a fragment surfacing)

The crossing. Grandma called it that once. A point where the land changes character. I always thought that was just poetry.

MADDIE

It's not poetry. You'll feel it in a minute.

They step through an invisible boundary -- a resistance like walking through thicker air, gone the instant they're through.

The musk hits hard now, close and animal, threaded with cold stone and standing water.

RUTHIE

(needing to fill the silence)

My grandmother used to talk about hunters who came up this far and never came back out.

MADDIE

They're not just stories. I think every one of those accounts happened almost exactly the way the storytellers described. That's the horror of it. Not exaggeration. Softened truth.

EXT. BOWL-SHAPED CLEARING - CONTINUOUS

The trail opens into a wide depression ringed by ancient hemlocks. A DEADFALL SHELTER rises at the far edge -- dome-shaped, moss-grown, built with unmistakable, deliberate architecture. A dark opening gapes at its base.

RUTHIE

(unable to hold it back)

It built this. Caleb, look at how it's put together. That's not a

den. That's architecture.

MADDIE

I used to lie inside it, staring up at the way the branches crossed. Whatever we're facing, it thinks. It plans. It builds things meant to last.

The cold hits harder than anywhere yet. The fog here doesn't drift -- it hangs, thick and unmoving, glowing faint silver with no clear source.

Ruthie scans the clearing -- old bones scattered in the leaf litter, deep claw gouges in the hemlock bark, and near the shelter's mouth, a scattering of relics: scraps of fabric, a rusted belt buckle, a single weathered boot.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

(coming to a stop at the clearing's center)

This is it. This is where it kept me. Where I actually am, most nights, when I'm sleepwalking toward the fence line.

RUTHIE

(barely a whisper)

We need to leave the offering. Maddie, at the edge of the clearing. Leave it, and step back, and see what happens.

Maddie kneels at the clearing's edge, sets the bundle down with careful reverence, lips moving in a low murmur. She presses both palms to the cold earth, head bowed, then rises and rejoins them.

The three stand together. The silence stretches -- one minute. Two. Far above the canopy, muffled, the ordinary cry of a hawk.

Then -- from the deadfall shelter, something SHIFTS.

Not sound. A displacement. Shadow resolving into mass, into intention.

A shoulder emerges first -- broad, dark, matted fur catching what thin light reaches the corner. Then an arm, long and heavy, ending

in a hand whose five fingers flex once against the cold.

The CREATURE ducks low through the entrance and unfolds to its full height in open ground -- nine feet, chest broad, old scars crossing its torso in pale healed lines. Its fur thins in places to reveal weathered, calloused skin. A body that eats, sleeps, bleeds, and has survived far longer than any of them can estimate.

Its head turns, slow and deliberate, until its amber eyes find Maddie across the clearing. It does not look at Caleb. It does not look at Ruthie. Its entire attention fixes on her with the weight of five weeks of patient waiting.

Nothing happens for a long, suspended moment.

RUTHIE

(whisper)

It's not moving. Why isn't it moving?

MADDIE

(steady despite visible terror)

It's deciding. The same way it's been deciding every night since I came home. I think this is it. I think whatever choice it's been circling for five weeks, it's finally close enough to make.

The creature takes a single step forward -- unhurried, deliberate. The fog curls and parts before its massive legs like water before the bow of some ancient, patient ship.

Every eye in the clearing tracks that one step. Caleb's grip tightens on Maddie's hand. Maddie stands motionless -- neither retreating nor advancing -- caught in whatever silent reckoning has carried her this entire impossible distance.

It has been waiting for exactly this moment.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. BOWL-SHAPED CLEARING - CONTINUOUS

The CREATURE'S first step displaces the whole clearing at once -- fog curling from its legs, the ringing hemlocks motionless as stone. RUTHIE feels the vibration of each footfall travel up through the soil into her own trembling legs.

The temperature drops one final degree. The musk hits full force -- musk, wet fur, old earth, undeniable and close.

MADDIE

(quiet, almost relieved)

It's here. I felt it before either of you. Every day since I came home. This is just the first time I've let myself stop running from the feeling.

CALEB

(angling between her and the creature)

Maddie, whatever you're feeling right now -- don't trust it.

MADDIE

I'm not planning to. I just need you to trust me. I know this ground better than either of you ever could.

The creature closes half the distance in unhurried strides. Full daylight reveals it entire -- nine feet, shoulders broad enough to blot the tree line, fur dark and matted, thinning to weathered skin. Its face resolves from shadow -- not quite ape, not quite human, an ancient synthesis carrying unmistakable intelligence in its deep-set amber eyes.

Its gaze tracks the group -- lingers on Caleb, longer on Ruthie -- and settles, finally, on Maddie, with a focus that presses down like physical weight.

RUTHIE

(gripping Caleb's arm)

Oh God. Caleb, look at the size of it.

(panic breaking through)

RUN! We need to run right now, this is too close --

Neither moves. Maddie doesn't flinch.

MADDIE

Ruthie, I need you to trust me. I know how this looks. But running is what got us into a five-week nightmare in the first place. I don't think it's ever worked, for anyone, in a hundred and fifty years.

RUTHIE

(cracking)

I can't just stand here and watch you walk toward that thing.

MADDIE

Then don't stop trying to keep me safe. Just trust that this is what keeping me safe actually looks like today. Not running. Not fighting. Just finally letting it see me choose.

(steady)

I'm not running. I didn't walk all this way to run at the last possible moment.

The creature closes more distance. A low, resonant undertone rolls from its chest -- not a growl. Something closer to grief.

RUTHIE

Do you hear that. That's not a threat sound. That's something else.

CALEB

I hear it. I don't think any of us can know what it means.

Maddie steps forward, breaking gently free of Caleb's grip.

CALEB (CONT'D)

(voice cracking)

Maddie --

MADDIE

I have to. I've spent five weeks running from this moment, fighting

it every single night, and winning never meant the pull went away.
It just meant I survived one more night of fighting.
(glancing back once, eyes bright)
I have to face it instead. On my own terms. That's the only kind of
winning that might actually last.

He lets his hands fall. Something in her voice -- clarity, settled
certainty -- stops him from pulling her back.

RUTHIE

(urgent)

Maddie, stop. Please. We don't know what happens if you actually
reach it --

MADDIE

I know enough. I've known since the fourth week. It's not going to
hurt me. I think it's been testing something else this whole time,
and the only way to pass that test is to stop running from it.

She continues forward, mirroring the creature's own unhurried pace.

CALEB

(raw)

I can't just stand here.

RUTHIE

(shaking, but firm)

You have to. Look at it. It's not advancing any faster, even though
she's walking straight toward it. If it wanted to grab her, it
could've closed this in two strides. It's letting her come to it.

They hold their ground, hands finding each other, bound in shared
terror and fragile hope.

At ten feet, the creature moves again -- one massive arm lifting,
palm turning outward. Not pointing this time. Something closer to
offering.

CALEB

(barely audible)

Maddie. Whatever you're about to do -- please, be careful.

Maddie stands still, facing it at a distance with no safety margin left at all.

MADDIE

(quiet, steady)

I know you. I know you've been waiting. I know you've been patient with me in ways I still don't fully understand. I'm not running anymore. I'm not fighting anymore. I just need you to hear me, the way I think you've been trying to make me hear you this whole time.

The creature goes very still. The whole clearing holds its breath.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

I can't stay. Not here. Not the way you want me to. I have a life. People who love me. A whole world outside this hollow I'm not willing to give up, no matter how much of myself you've already changed.

(tears spilling, posture unwavering)

But I don't think you actually want to hurt me. I think you've been testing something else this whole time -- whether I'd come back on my own, whether I'd choose respect over fear. I'm choosing it now. Right here. I'm asking you, as clearly as I know how -- let me go. Not because you have to. Because I'm asking, as someone who understands, now, exactly what you are and exactly what this ground means to you.

She holds its gaze.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

I think you've been alone up here longer than anyone can measure. I think that's part of what this has actually been about -- not hunger, not territory, but loneliness so old it doesn't have a proper shape anymore. I felt that, some of the nights it had me. I'm sorry for that. I really am. But I can't be the thing that fixes it. All I can offer is exactly what I'm offering now -- to be seen, honestly, once, by someone who isn't running. And then to go home.

Absolute silence. The whole clearing -- ancient hemlocks, fog,

ground -- holds it.

Slowly, the creature's raised arm lowers.

The fog begins, for the first time, to actually drift. Somewhere high overhead, muffled by canopy, a single bird calls -- the first ordinary sound of wildlife since they crossed the threshold.

The creature tilts its head -- not predatory curiosity now, but genuine consideration. A low, complex, rising-and-falling sound rolls out of its chest. Longer than any knock or growl before it. Sorrow, maybe. Or hard-won acceptance.

CALEB

(not daring to move)

What's it doing.

RUTHIE

I don't know. But look at Maddie. Look at her face.

Maddie stands in the creature's shadow, her expression carrying grief and aching gratitude rather than terror.

MADDIE

(quiet, to the creature alone)

Thank you. For bringing me back the first time. For not taking more than you needed to. For letting me try to understand you, even when I was too scared to actually listen.

The creature makes no further sound. It simply holds her gaze.

Then, with the same silent economy it has shown every time, it takes a single step backward.

CALEB

(disbelief, fragile hope)

It's retreating. Ruthie -- look, it's actually retreating.

A second step. A third. Its eyes never leave Maddie's face.

At the clearing's edge, just before the fog and shadow swallow it, it pauses one final time. It raises a massive hand and presses it flat against its own chest -- over where a heart would beat -- and holds the posture a long moment before letting it fall.

Then it turns, steps into the timber, and is gone.

The silence that follows is different -- not tense, not watchful. Ordinary. The hush of empty woods.

Maddie sways. Her legs give out. Caleb catches her, both arms wrapping tight. Ruthie reaches them a heartbeat later. The three of them sink together into the cold grass.

CALEB (CONT'D)

(voice breaking, tears spilling)

It's over. Maddie, oh God, it's actually over --

MADDIE

(muffled against his chest, peace in her voice)

I don't know if it's over. I don't think it's ever going to be fully over. But I think something changed. I think it actually heard me, this time. I think that's the most any of us could have hoped for.

Ruthie wraps her arms around both of them. They hold on.

EXT. BOWL-SHAPED CLEARING, EDGE - MOMENTS LATER

They rise, cross back toward the trail. The offering bundle Maddie left at the tree line is gone -- no drag marks, no disturbed grass.

RUTHIE

It took it. Maddie, look -- the offering's gone.

MADDIE

(quiet)

I think that means something. Whatever bargain we struck here today, it's been accepted. At least for now.

CALEB

(crouching, finding nothing)

There's no trail. It's like it just wasn't there anymore. Same as Maddie appearing at the fence line without footprints.

RUTHIE

Maybe that's the point. No explanation. No proof. Just the absence, and whatever meaning you're willing to trust in it.

EXT. DEEP TIMBER - WALKING BACK (MONTAGE)

The terrain feels lighter on the return. Fog thins with each mile. They pass the second den marker boulder, the second cabin foundation, the unmarked grave -- all somehow less oppressive in returning daylight.

They cross the frozen stream, thawed now, ordinary temperature again, as if the impossible cold existed only for the crossing.

EXT. FIRE ROAD PULL-OFF - MIDDAY

SHERIFF PRUETT paces beside his cruiser, breaking into visible relief at the sight of them emerging whole.

PRUETT

Thank God. Maddie's mother called the second she realized you'd gone up without waiting. I've had a deputy watching since before dawn.

CALEB

We're okay. Something happened up there. I think -- I think it might actually be over.

Pruett studies Maddie's face, careful hope warring with professional caution.

PRUETT

Tell me everything. Every detail you can remember.

Maddie describes it, haltingly, then with growing steadiness. Pruett listens without interrupting, his expression shifting from

skepticism to unguarded wonder.

PRUETT (CONT'D)

My grandfather kept that map forty years. My father, twenty-five more. I've had it eleven years myself, adding notes to a hundred and thirty entries, none of which ever ended the way yours just did.

(to Maddie, sincere)

You did something today eighty years of this county's collective fear never managed. I don't fully understand what that means yet. But I know it matters.

MADDIE

I hope it means something for whoever comes after me too.

PRUETT

I intend to make sure it does.

EXT. KESSLER HOUSE, DRIVEWAY - AFTERNOON

MADDIE'S MOTHER meets the cruiser before it's fully stopped, pulling Maddie into her arms.

MADDIE

I'm okay, Mom. I'm actually okay. I think it's really okay now.

MADDIE'S MOTHER

(cupping her face)

Your eyes. Baby, your eyes look different. They look like yours again.

Ruthie watches, sees it too -- Maddie's pupils, in ordinary afternoon light, settled into something reassuringly normal for the first time since her return.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON (LATER)

Maddie sleeps on the couch, unwatched for the first time in weeks. Caleb sits beside her, one hand on her shoulder, watching her breathe in a steady rhythm free of its old, unsettling cadence.

EXT. KESSLER HOUSE - PORCH - LATER

Ruthie stands alone, looking at the ordinary shape of the ridge against a clear autumn sky. Something eases in her chest -- not relief exactly. The first fragile possibility of it.

EXT. RUTHIE'S GRANDMOTHER'S PORCH - EVENING

RUTHIE

It's over, Grandma. I think it's actually over. She walked right up to it, close enough to touch, and she talked to it, and it listened. It backed away.

GRANDMOTHER

(quiet, then intent)

Tell me exactly what she said to it. Word for word, best you can remember. This matters more than you might think.

Ruthie recounts it. The grandmother listens, eyes distant.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)

That's more than Orpha's book ever recorded her saying.

(wonder)

This girl offered it something Orpha never thought to offer.

Recognition. She looked at that thing and saw something worth naming -- loneliness, worth grieving -- instead of only danger worth surviving.

RUTHIE

Do you think that's why it worked?

GRANDMOTHER

I think it's part of why. I won't pretend to understand the whole shape of it. But I'm glad.

(looking to the tree line)

It backing away today doesn't mean it's gone. Orpha's bargain held for Iva, mostly, for the rest of her life. But it never fully released her. She still went still sometimes. Right up until the day she finally walked off for good.

RUTHIE

What have we won, then.

GRANDMOTHER

Time. Respect, in whatever currency that old thing trades in. A chance for that girl to live something closer to an ordinary life. That's not nothing. That's everything, measured against how this county's watched these stories end for a hundred and fifty years.
(taking her hand)

Think of it like an old debt between neighbors. Renegotiated today, on fairer terms than anyone in this family's ever managed. But not erased. I don't think either one of us should walk away believing the connection's fully broken.

RUTHIE

(slowly)

I think it meant something. That gesture, right before it left.

GRANDMOTHER

No. I don't imagine it was nothing.
(softer, reflective)

I've spent my whole life half-believing my own family's stories, half-hoping I'd never have cause to fully test whether they were true. I got my answer this year, watching you carry a fear I always thought I understood, until I watched you live the real shape of it yourself.

(fierce, proud)

You did something today too, granddaughter. You stood at that girl's side through every single terrible night, and you never once let fear talk you into abandoning her. I'm proud of you. I don't say that near enough.

RUTHIE

(tearful)

I couldn't have done any of it without everything you taught me.

GRANDMOTHER

(faint, weary smile)

That's how it usually works, with the things that matter most. You don't always know they matter until the day you need them.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY (THREE DAYS LATER)

Pruett spreads his hand-copied map across the table -- a fresh circle added, dated, marked with a single word: RETURNED.

PRUETT

First one of those I've ever gotten to write. Eighty years of this family's careful watching, and this is the first entry that ends the way everyone who ever made this walk was hoping it would.

(tracing older circles)

I called Columbus this morning. Asked, careful as I could, whether any other county kept anything like this. Got laughed off the phone, mostly. But the woman did admit a few rural counties have similar "informal historical notes" nobody officially discusses.

Maybe Kimball Ridge isn't as alone in this as eighty years of silence has always made it feel.

CALEB

Does that mean it's really done. For good?

PRUETT

(long pause)

I don't know. I want to tell you yes. But I've learned not to trust easy answers where that ground's concerned.

(folding the map)

What I can tell you is this. Whatever changed up there, it changed because Maddie chose something none of the old accounts ever quite managed -- she walked toward it instead of away, offered it honesty instead of fear, and asked for what she needed instead of simply enduring. That's new. I don't know what it means for the future.

But I know it matters.

(at the door, warmer)

Whatever this county ends up making of the story -- you two did something today that deserves to be remembered honestly. I intend to make sure of that.

EXT. KIMBALL RIDGE - MONTAGE (WEEKS PASSING)

-- Maddie makes tentative trips into town, each one easier than the

last. Her eyes settle, gradually, toward ordinary.

-- DR. HALLORAN examines her three weeks out: the ankle mark fading like ordinary scarring now, the throat bruising long gone.

-- The pharmacy trip becomes unremarkable. CAROL DEATON chats with Maddie about allergy medication, old unease fading.

-- OTIS VANCE sits a little straighter at his usual table, some decades-carried weight easing in his shoulders.

-- Caleb still checks the tree line every night before locking up -- an old habit he'll likely carry the rest of his life.

-- The knocks still come, some nights, distant and faint. Maddie still flinches -- but a beat slower now, less immediate.

EXT. RUTHIE'S GRANDMOTHER'S PORCH - DUSK (ONE MONTH LATER)

Ruthie stands at the rail, watching the same deepening dusk that has marked so much of this whole ordeal. She thinks of Orpha Combs at a tree line a hundred and thirty-five years before. She thinks of Maddie -- healing, tempered now with a hard-won gravity that wasn't there before.

A single KNOCK echoes once through the gathering dusk, far up the ridge. Not urgent. Not threatening. Simply present.

Ruthie doesn't flinch this time. She watches the dark timber where the sound came from and understands: whatever waits out there hasn't gone anywhere at all. Still watching. Still patient. Still connected, in whatever ancient way it understands connection, to a girl who finally learned how to answer it -- and to a family, and a county, and a hollow that has carried this same quiet vigil for a hundred and fifty years, with no sign of ever fully letting it go.

Her GRANDMOTHER rises and crosses to stand beside her at the rail.

GRANDMOTHER

You'll carry this too, you know. Not the way Maddie carries it. But you were there for every single day of it, start to finish, and that kind of witnessing leaves its own mark.

RUTHIE

I know. I think I've known that since the ridge road.

GRANDMOTHER

Then you already understand more than most people in this county ever will.

(hand on her shoulder)

That's its own kind of inheritance too. Not one either of us would have chosen. But an inheritance all the same. And one I trust you to carry as carefully as every woman in this family's carried it before you.

They stand together at the rail, two generations bound by the same old fear and the same old resolve, watching the ridge hold its silence the way it always has -- patient, ancient, utterly indifferent to how small a measure of human courage has, against every reasonable expectation, finally earned it a night's peace.

The woods, dark and unbroken beyond the fence line, simply watch.

FADE OUT.

THE END

FADE IN:

EXT. KIMBALL RIDGE - COUNTY ROAD - DAWN (LATE NOVEMBER, MONTAGE)

Frost silvers the fields three weeks early. Fog lingers past noon in the low hollows, reluctant to lift. Farmers remark on it in passing, never quite naming why.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - MADDIE'S BEDROOM - MORNING

MADDIE stands at the window, watching fog curl across the yard. A listening stillness that never fully leaves her.

INT. FEED STORE, MAIN STREET - DAY

Maddie works the counter, part-time hours. Customers treat her with careful, gentle awkwardness -- kind, but unable to look past what happened to her.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - EVENING (EARLY DECEMBER)

MADDIE and RUTHIE sit with cooling tea.

MADDIE

They go careful around me. Like I might break. I understand it. But it's lonely, Ruthie. Lonelier than I expected, being safe again.

RUTHIE

(taking her hand)

You're not alone. Not with me. Not with Caleb.

MADDIE

(tired smile, eyes drifting to the window)

I know. I just wish that was the only thing I still had to carry.

EXT. KESSLER HOUSE - PORCH SWING - NIGHT (NOVEMBER)

CALEB and Maddie sit together. A KNOCK rolls down off the ridge, distant. Maddie goes still, head tilting.

MADDIE

It's just checking. Not pulling. Making sure I'm still here, still choosing to stay. I don't think that's ever going to fully stop. I've made my peace with that, mostly.

CALEB

Have you. Really.

MADDIE

(watching the tree line)

I don't know if peace is the right word. More an understanding. I don't think anybody who stood as close to that thing as I did ever gets something as simple as peace. But I've stopped being afraid of the checking. That's something.

INT. RIDGELINE DINER - DAY (NOVEMBER, DALE FERRIS)

DALE FERRIS, a weathered hunter who's never credited a single old story, sits shaken at the counter.

DALE FERRIS

Took a stand at first light, same as I've done a hundred times. Watched, through the scope, something move along the far ridge. Tall. Upright. Unhurried. Gone before I could process it. (quiet)

Didn't fire. Didn't even consider it. Some part of me knew shooting was never the right response. Packed up before the sun was even full up. Don't plan on hunting that ridge again anytime soon.

INT. RUTHIE'S GRANDMOTHER'S KITCHEN - DAY (DECEMBER)

The GRANDMOTHER folds a fresh offering bundle, hands steadier than Ruthie remembers.

RUTHIE

You're not as frightened as you used to be.

GRANDMOTHER

No. Something eased in me, watching what your friend managed. A hundred and thirty-five years of this family leaving offerings and

hoping, and here comes a girl with no family history of any of it, walking straight up to the thing and asking for what she needed.
(setting the bundle aside)

She taught this whole county something, whether it's ready to admit it yet or not. That the old fear doesn't have to be the only response. That respect and courage aren't opposites.

RUTHIE

Do you think it'll hold. For the next family, whenever that day comes.

GRANDMOTHER

I hope it does. But even if it doesn't -- I'm glad this county got to see, once, that another kind of ending is possible.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY (SHORTLY BEFORE CHRISTMAS)

SHERIFF PRUETT stands with a mug of coffee, barely touched.

PRUETT

Quietest stretch this county's had in years. No unexplained tracks, no strange reports, nothing worth adding to the file since the day you three came back down.

RUTHIE

Do you think it's really settled.

PRUETT

(careful)

I think it's holding for now. I think Maddie changed the shape of something this county's carried for a hundred and fifty years, and I think that's real. But that ground's patient in ways none of us fully understand. A quiet season isn't the same as a resolved one. I'd rather you all stayed watchful a while longer yet.

(glancing at the dark window)

Eighty years of this family's watching taught me that much. The quiet ones are sometimes the ones you need to watch closest of all.

EXT. KIMBALL RIDGE - MONTAGE (FIRST SNOW)

Deep, undisturbed white transforms the county. Smoke curls from chimneys. Children sled the gentler slopes.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY (TWO DAYS AFTER CHRISTMAS, WEDDING)

A small, intimate ceremony around a modest fire. MADDIE, radiant despite lingering shadows in her eyes, marries CALEB. RUTHIE stands beside her as maid of honor.

INT. KESSLER HOUSE - LIVING ROOM WINDOW - LATER (RECEPTION)

Ruthie stands alone, wine glass forgotten, watching fog rise low across the snow-covered yard, curling toward the house with its old, patient quality. She waits for the dread to return.

It doesn't, quite. Something more complicated arrives instead -- recognition. A weary respect for a danger survived and, imperfectly, learned to live alongside.

Maddie joins her at the window, still in her wedding dress.

MADDIE

It's out there. Right now. I can feel it, the same way I always can.

RUTHIE

Does it scare you. Tonight, of all nights?

MADDIE

(considering seriously)

A little. I don't think that fear ever fully goes away. But it's a different kind of scared now. Not the kind that makes me want to run, or fight, or hide. Just an awareness. Like a neighbor you don't fully trust, but have learned how to live near.

(turning, smiling)

I chose this life today. All of it. Caleb, this house, this town, even whatever's still out there watching the tree line most nights. I think that choosing is the whole difference, in the end. Between surviving something and actually living alongside it.

INT. RIDGELINE DINER - DAY (JANUARY)

OTIS VANCE stirs his coffee, slow and deliberate.

OTIS

Never thought I'd live to hear somebody talk about that hollow with anything close to hope. Wendell went to his grave without believing anybody could face that thing and come away whole. Wish he'd lived to hear this girl's story. Might've eased something in him, at the end.

EXT. SMALL HOUSE, CALEB AND MADDIE'S - NIGHT (EARLY MARCH)

Caleb stands at the back door well past midnight, watching the dark yard. The last snow is retreating. Maddie finds him there.

MADDIE

You still watch it.

CALEB

I don't think I'll ever stop. I know it's probably not healthy. But I watched you almost slip away too many times last autumn to just let that instinct go quiet.

MADDIE

(resting her head on his shoulder)

I watch it too, most nights, even when I don't tell you.

CALEB

Do you think it's still out there. Right now, tonight, watching this exact house?

MADDIE

(long pause)

I think it's always somewhere. I don't know if it's watching this house every single night -- it doesn't need to be anymore, the way it needed to be during those first terrible weeks. But I think it's out there, the same patient, ancient presence it's always been, and I think some thin thread still runs between us, however far apart

we stay.

(looking up, moonlight in her eyes)

I've made my peace with that thread existing. I don't know if I'll ever fully cut it. But I've learned to hold it without it pulling me anywhere I don't choose to go. That has to be enough.

EXT. SOURWOOD CREEK - DAY (SPRING, MONTAGE)

Meltwater runs high and loud, ordinary, unremarkable -- the same water that once went unnaturally still now carrying nothing but spring runoff.

-- A hunter reports fresh tracks along the creek bottom in April, smaller, but unmistakably shaped the same.

-- A hiker two ridges over describes something breathing just beyond her tent one May night.

-- A branch turns up snapped clean, too high for deer or bear, fresh pale wood at its center.

-- A schoolteacher reports a tall silhouette at the tree line at dusk, gone in a blink. PRUETT drives out the next morning, finds nothing but adds a small pencil mark to his map regardless.

None of it draws search parties. None of it makes the news. Pruett adds each one quietly beside the single word he wrote in October -- RETURNED.

EXT. CALEB AND MADDIE'S HOUSE - BACK PORCH - EVENING (LATE JUNE)

Ruthie, Caleb, and Maddie sit together after dinner, dishes cleared, watching the last light fail behind the ridge. Maddie looks well -- color back, laughter easier, her eyes settled into something ordinary.

The old stillness returns. Her head tilts.

A KNOCK rolls down off the ridge -- distant, faint, the first in nearly three weeks.

Nobody speaks for a long moment. The warm June evening holds its breath the same way it always has.

MADDIE

(quiet, unafraid)

Still there.

RUTHIE

(watching the darkening tree line)

Still there.

Caleb says nothing. He simply reaches for Maddie's hand in the gathering dark -- the same gesture from the worst nights of the autumn before, now made not out of fear but steady, unbroken devotion.

EXT. KIMBALL RIDGE - NIGHT (CONTINUOUS, PULLING BACK)

The ridge holds its silence beyond the porch light, patient and ancient, indifferent to the small, warm gathering of three people who found their way back to something resembling an ordinary life.

Somewhere deep in ground that has swallowed generations before this one -- and given back, this time, more than it ever gave back before -- something tall and old and endlessly patient keeps its vigil. Watching. Waiting. Connected by a thin, unbreakable thread to a girl who learned, finally, how to be seen by it without ever again being lost.

The woods keep their secrets. The creature keeps its distance. The girl keeps listening. And the land keeps watching -- as it has for a hundred and fifty years, as it will for a hundred and fifty more.

FADE OUT.

THE END