

EXT. - WILDERNESS - LATE AFTERNOON

SUPER: Montana 1995

A muddy 4x4 truck sits parked on the side of a hill. Empty beer cans litter the bed and a trickle of dark liquid runs along its tailgate down to the bumper, dripping red spots of gore onto the wildflowers that blanket the grassy slope.

Insects buzz around a hooped carcass under a blood-smeared tarp. A fly lands on the fixed pupil of the dead elk.

Two prone figures in camouflage gear and orange vests lay at the crest of a ridge. The hunters are focused on a herd of elk grazing in the valley below.

ALEXANDER STOWE, 29 and fair-haired, scans the grassland through a pair of binoculars. Cradling a bolt-action rifle, Franklin Fitzgerald 'FITZ' WOLCOTT is 35 with a brown crewcut.

Alex lowers the binoculars, points and whispers excitedly. Frank raises the gun to peer through the scope. He loads a cartridge with smooth, practiced ease before taking a series of deep breaths to focus and settle his nerves.

Frank takes aim at a bull elk with an impressive rack and tenses his trigger finger. Behind them, a green pickup approaches and honks its horn. The noise startles the men, prompting Frank to prematurely squeeze off a round.

The booming gunshot generates multiple echoes as the soundwaves bounce between the snow-capped mountains.

TITLE CARD - ASPEN GROVE: CHAPTER TWO

EXT. - WILDERNESS - CONTINUOUS

The bullet strikes the elk low on its flank. Mortally wounded, it staggers before bounding away with the herd to the safety of the nearby forest. Alex curses angrily as he peers through the binoculars.

ALEXANDER STOWE
Damn it! Gut shot.

EXT. - HILLSIDE - CONTINUOUS

The truck's battered door opens. It reads: US FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE. Grizzled Officer GEORGE HICKS puts on a well-worn cowboy hat and walks over to the hunter's vehicle. Taking note of the empties, he gingerly lifts the blue tarp. He frowns, adjusts his Stetson and shakes his head sadly.

Hicks cautiously approaches the hunters, silently sizing them up as they rise to stand. He motions for Frank to lower the rifle and trudges along the grassy incline with one hand resting on his holstered sidearm.

GEORGE HICKS
Gentlemen, I'm gonna need to see
some identification here.

Fitz reaches into his camo, pulls out a wallet and hands it over while the irritated Alex stands his ground.

ALEXANDER STOWE
I remember you. You're the same
park ranger who gave me a ticket
last year.

Taking note of Frank's military ID, the weathered lawman replies flatly:

GEORGE HICKS
I am not a park ranger, Mr. Stowe.

He points to the badge on his chest and reaches for a pen.

GEORGE HICKS (CONT'D)
I am a duly appointed agent of the
United States Department of the
Interior, with all the powers and
authority of a peace officer in the
state of Montana. You'd be well
advised to keep that in mind.

After studying Frank's photo, he returns the soldier's wallet and opens his ledger to begin writing a citation.

GEORGE HICKS (CONT'D)
Lt. Wolcott, I assume you are
staying at the Northwoods as well,
is that correct?

'FITZ' WOLCOTT
Yes sir.

The warden hitches up his belt and turns to face Alex Stowe.

GEORGE HICKS
I told you last year that does are
off-limits during the rut.

Stowe waves away the admonishment with a flippant grin.

ALEXANDER STOWE

We hit her with the truck. It was an accident.

Frank's eyebrows rise at the blatant lie.

ALEXANDER STOWE (CONT'D)

Besides, we're on private property.

George Hicks raises his flinty blue eyes to meet the green-eyed stare of the cocky younger man.

GEORGE HICKS

It seems you've somehow forgotten the particulars of our little interaction last year, so let me take this opportunity to remind you once again that out here, my jurisdiction has no borders.

Frank is chastened and embarrassed yet Alex remains defiant.

GEORGE HICKS (CONT'D)

In the course of faithfully executing my duties, I am empowered by the Federal Government to investigate violations of the law anywhere within the confines of these United States. If I find evidence of a crime I am legally obligated to follow wherever it may lead, regardless of whether that property is state-owned, privately held, or part of any tribal territory.

The retired Staff Sergeant stalks forward and stops uncomfortably close to Alex, who breaks eye contact and looks away.

GEORGE HICKS (CONT'D)

From here to Miles City, I am the Law.

Hicks tears out the yellow middle layer of the ticket and hands the summons to Stowe, who grudgingly accepts.

GEORGE HICKS (CONT'D)

Have a nice day.

ALEXANDER STOWE

We'll see about that.

His thankless duty fulfilled, the exasperated Game Warden softens his tone.

GEORGE HICKS

Listen fellas, I'm not trying to give you a hard time. Enjoy yourselves but do me a favor and take your empties and shell casings with you, okay?

STOWE & WOLCOTT

Yes, sir.

GEORGE HICKS

Just abide by the state and federal hunting statutes, otherwise I'll be seeing you boys again in front of Judge Dunbar and nobody wants that.

Frank nods sheepishly while Alex rolls his eyes.

GEORGE HICKS (CONT'D)

Now, stay on this side of the valley. Over there, just past the creek--

Hicks points and motions broadly toward the Northwest.

GEORGE HICKS (CONT'D)

That whole area belongs to the Crow and Blackfoot, you understand?

'FITZ' WOLCOTT

We'll stay out, sir.

GEORGE HICKS

Be sure you do, the locals don't take kindly to poachers.

With the violation written up and in the books, Hicks heads back down the hill to his truck. Pausing, he shields his eyes and looks up to the sky before continuing.

GEORGE HICKS (CONT'D)

You know, I heard you say gut shot when I pulled up. It'll be getting dark soon, so I'm gonna need you boys to hurry up and find that elk.

ALEXANDER STOWE

Who cares? It's as good as dead.

GEORGE HICKS

Because if you don't--

ALEXANDER STOWE
I know, you told me last year.

GEORGE HICKS
If you *DON'T*--

ALEXANDER STOWE
(grumbles)
It's your fault he missed in the
first place.

GEORGE HICKS
You'll be getting another citation,
more fines, and possibly jail time.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT
Why is that, sir?

GEORGE HICKS
(to Frank)
I'm glad you asked, young man.

The Wildlife Official opens the dented green door and tosses
his citation book onto the bench seat.

GEORGE HICKS (CONT'D)
Predators who scavenge the carcass
risk serious injury by ingesting
lead from the bullets and buckshot.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT
Ten-four, that makes sense.

Hicks climbs into the rusty pickup and starts the engine. He
slams the door shut with a creak and leans out the window.

GEORGE HICKS
But mostly because leaving a
wounded animal to die out here is
cruel and inhumane.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT
Roger that, sir.

ALEXANDER STOWE
Oh give me a break. It's not a
person, it's just meat.

GEORGE HICKS
Well you see that's where you're
wrong. It's not just illegal, it's
unjustified, unsportsmanlike, and
downright un-American.

The hardened authority figure unexpectedly grins and speaks with a warm earnestness that twinkles his baby blues.

GEORGE HICKS (CONT'D)
 More importantly, Mr. Stowe: As a
 duly-appointed steward of this
 land, whose primary concern is the
 wellbeing of its inhabitants--

George's gentle folksiness is replaced by the solemn demeanor of a well-trained soldier who means what he says.

GEORGE HICKS (CONT'D)
 I simply won't allow it.

ALEXANDER STOWE
 Okay, whatever. Don't' feed the
 bears. Got it.

GEORGE HICKS
 Exactly right.

George tips his hat as he puts the truck in reverse.

GEORGE HICKS (CONT'D)
 Carry on, gentlemen.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT
 Thank you, sir.

George backs up and puts the old beater in drive. As he pulls away, the Vietnam Veteran grins wearily and raises a hand to salute his fellow serviceman.

GEORGE HICKS
Hooah!

The hunters smile and wave as Hicks drives off. As the dust settles, the truck crests a hill and disappears from view.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT
 He seemed pretty cool.
 I bet he's seen some crazy shit.

ALEXANDER STOWE
 Seriously?

Alex crumples the ticket and tosses it over his shoulder.

ALEXANDER STOWE (CONT'D)
 Fuck that guy. Dad plays golf with
 Amos Dunbar twice a month.

He grabs the rifle and strides down the hill to their truck.

ALEXANDER STOWE (CONT'D)
 Come on, let's go claim your trophy
 before the wolves do.

EXT. - GRASSY VALLEY - MOMENTS LATER

The men set off after the wounded elk in the pickup. They creep slowly through the waving sea of grass and soon Alex spots a splash of bright arterial blood. They follow the red smears to the edge of a brook near a densely wooded area. Unable to drive further, the men get out and take turns leaping across the narrow stream to track the elk on foot.

EXT. - ASPEN GROVE - CONTINUOUS

They follow the blood trail into the dense forest only to find themselves at a stand of gently swaying aspen trees. Frank hears a weak, raspy bleating, and stops abruptly. He taps Alex's shoulder and raises a finger to his lips. The elk's distress call repeats, beckoning the hunters deeper into the maze of slim white trunks.

In the brush ahead, Frank sights the bull elk collapsed on the ground, panting heavily as blood runs from it's nose and mouth. He raises the gun, but is stopped by Alex who instead offers him his Bowie knife.

ALEXANDER STOWE
 Here, do it the old-fashioned way.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT
 Really? What are we, savages?

ALEXANDER STOWE
 No, but I'm pretty sure we're
 trespassing. We need to be quiet so
 we don't piss off the natives.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT
 You got a point there. We'll
 probably have to field-dress him
 here too, and it's getting dark.

ALEXANDER STOWE
 To hell with that, Kemosabe. Just
 take the head and leave the rest
 for the Injuns.

Frank frowns and reluctantly swaps the gun for Alex's knife.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT
 What about the slug? The Wildlife
 officer said--

ALEXANDER STOWE

Who, Ranger Rick? Fuck that guy.
Wait till I tell Dad.

The dying elk spasms, breathes its last and falls still. A tree limb snaps with a crunch somewhere close by. The men fall silent. Frozen in place, they tactically scan their surroundings in the sun-dappled forest.

From a nearby thicket, the rustle of dry leaves is followed by a low rumbling growl. The hunters stand in shock and awe as something huge rises to its feet. Standing seven feet tall, the massive grizzly lurches forward to claim the kill with a roaring bellow and a shake of its slobbering maw.

ALEXANDER STOWE (CONT'D)

You gotta be fuckin' kidding.

Alex tenses up and prepares to turn and run when a cool-headed Frank grips his friend's elbow. He cups a hand over his mouth and calmly delivers a hushed order.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT

Don't.

The curious bear sniffs the air with a series of woofs and drops back on all fours. Uninterested in the puny humans, the giant saunters over to the elk. Alex slowly raises the rifle barrel but Frank intervenes with an urgent whisper.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT (CONT'D)

DON'T.

The bear grunts and raises its broad head. It looks back at the men for a long intense moment and returns to its meal. Following Frank's lead, the men cautiously back away with eyes locked on the feeding bear. They retreat in unison, no sound but the cadence of quiet footfalls in the dry leaves.

Frank's heel catches on an aspen root and he tumbles backward, awkwardly landing on his rear with a thud. The bear stops gnawing on entrails and lifts its blood-soaked muzzle to glare menacingly at the men. Frank scrambles to his feet when the irate grizzly suddenly pivots and charges at them full bore.

Alex panics, drops the rifle, turns and hauls ass. With Frank hot on his heels, the men run for their very lives. The bear's bluff proves effective. It soon abandons the chase with a snort and returns to its free lunch.

EXT. - EDGE OF FOREST - MOMENTS LATER

At the brink of exhaustion, the intrepid hunters break free of the trees and almost tumble into the shallow creek. Frank turns and peers into the forest anxiously to confirm that the danger has passed. Bent over with hands on hips, his adrenaline rush subsides.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT
I'm getting too old for this shit.

Alex grins and claps his winded buddy on the back.

ALEXANDER STOWE
Almost had me worried for a second.

Frank points to a dark patch on Alex's trouser leg and confirms that his friend has wet his camo.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT
I'd say you were more than a little worried there, Davy Crockett.

The men cross the stream and head for the waiting pickup.

ALEXANDER STOWE
Not me. Wasn't scared for a second.

Alex jogs ahead to the truck, reaches into the bed to flip open a cooler and grabs two beers. He cracks one open and sips at the foam before he tosses the other. Fitz catches it, pulls the tab, and they toast.

ALEXANDER STOWE (CONT'D)
I didn't have to outrun the bear, I just had to outrun you.

INT. - TRUCK - MOMENTS LATER

With the sunlight quickly fading, the hunters' beers are jostled and tossed about as the lifted truck crests a hill. A frustrated Frank tries to navigate by using the built-in compass on the end of his combat knife.

ALEXANDER STOWE
You sure? I mean, the sun still sets in the West doesn't it?

'FITZ' WOLCOTT
Weird. Must be iron deposits or something that's throwing it off.

ALEXANDER STOWE

Who knows *what* they left down there
after the silver dried up.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT

Should have brought a map or a GPS
unit. I thought this place had its
own private communications network?

ALEXANDER STOWE

Oh it does, but that's just it.
It's private.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT

Members only, huh?

ALEXANDER STOWE

They gave me a satellite phone when
I got here but I can't use it yet.
Dad said they won't assign me a
number until after the ceremony.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT

Which means you'd better not get us
lost or we'll be late.

ALEXANDER STOWE

It's alright, I'm pretty sure I
know where we are.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT

That's what you said in Basra.

ALEXANDER STOWE

Hey, we made it back to Kuwait City
in one piece.

Frank opens another brew and smirks as he takes a swig.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT

Barely.

ALEXANDER STOWE

'Barely'?

Fitz motions with his beer to the dark stain in the crotch
of Alex's fatigues.

'FITZ' WOLCOTT

By the seat of our pants, even.

ALEXANDER STOWE

Ha ha, very funny. There weren't
any grizzly bears in the desert.