

THE WATER MAN

By

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FADE IN:

SWEEPING ACROSS THE MONTANA WILDERNESS - DUSK

A CHILD SINGS:

CHILD (V.O.)
*One, two three, four / Close your
windows, lock your door --*

EXT. EDGE OF THE WILD HORSE FOREST - DUSK

Massive pine trees rise like gothic spires.

A group of BOYS (mid-teens) watch as a LANKY KID (15) inches closer to the forest.

CHILD (V.O.)
*Cuz you never know for sure / Who
it is he's coming for --*

The Lanky Kid's friends egg him on --

FRIENDS
Go on! Don't be a pussy! Do it,
dude!

CHILD (V.O.)
*Five, six, seven, eight / By the
time it's getting late --*

He disappears into the forest --

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - CONTINUOUS

Dark. Dense. Strange CARVINGS scar a few of the trees.

WHOOSH! A gust of ICE-COLD WIND hits him -- something deep within the forest SHRIEKS.

The Lanky Kid turns around and bolts out of the forest --

CHILD (V.O.)
*All you can do is wait / Til the
Water Man decides your fate.*

The boys jump on their bikes, pedaling down the dirt road.

EXT. WILLOW SPUR, MONTANA - MAIN STREET - NIGHT

A faded mom-and-pop antique store, two gas pumps with a general store behind, and Willow Spur Liquor Mart, the most modern and groomed of them all.

Small-town Montana, stuck decades in the past.

CHILD (V.O.)
*Nine, ten, eleven, too / Ain't a
 thing that you can do --*

FLASHES AROUND WILLOW SPUR

ONE OF THE KIDS on a bike finally makes it home -- he runs inside his house, locking every bolt on the front door.

CHILD (V.O.)
*If the Water Man comes through /
 And his hungry eyes're set on you --*

Two SISTERS (8-9) watch TV -- the WINDOW suddenly blows open -- the older one wraps her arms around the younger.

CHILD (V.O.)
 (slowing down)
*One, two three, four / Close your
 windows, lock your door --*

In the dark, a YOUNG BOY huddles under the covers, eyes glued to SOMEONE'S SILHOUETTE visible through the door frame.

DEEP IN THE FOREST

The trees are faintly outlined by the half-moon. A SHADOW passes through the trees.

Or was that just a trick of the eye?

CHILD (V.O.)
*Cuz you never know for sure / Who
 it is he's coming for.*

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. WILLOW SPUR - TOWN LIMITS - DAY

Angel-hair grasses. Emerald trees. Royal purple mountains. A sky so deep and blue it gives "infinite" real meaning.

A SIGN reads: "WELCOME TO WILLOW SPUR, MONTANA; POPULATION 728."

Something mechanical WHIRS out of frame --

GUNNER BOONE (10, a small boy always lost in his imagination) speeds past on his bike. A RED WAGON attached to the back CLATTERS over the dirt road, not meant for such high speeds.

Wherever he's going, he's trying to get there NOW.

EXT. FLATHEAD COUNTY CEMETERY - DAY

FUNERAL ATTENDEES gather around an open grave -- the coffin descends into the earth. The PREACHER (40s) gives his sermon.

PREACHER
... until you return to the
ground...

Gunner pulls up, red-faced and winded. He sets his bike-wagon against the cemetery fence and sneaks toward the funeral.

PREACHER (CONT'D)
... since from it you were taken...

He hides behind a tree, pulling out BINOCULARS. He focuses on the COFFIN going into the ground -- the widow's face, streaked with TEARS -- the preacher giving his sermon.

PREACHER (CONT'D)
... for dust you are and to dust
you will return.

Gunner watches the funeral, fascinated.

INT. GUNNER BOONE'S ROOM - DAY

The floor, bedside table, and bookshelf are filled with BOOKS -- stacked in a corner is a pile with "FLATHEAD COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY" STICKERS on their jacket covers.

Gunner is bent over a NOTEBOOK, filling in self-drawn COMIC BOOK PANELS --

GUNNER (V.O.)
"Detective Richard Knoxx floated
through the police tape, looking
around the crime scene..."

FLASH INSIDE GUNNER'S IMAGINATION

POLICE TAPE circles an old log cabin -- the investigation already underway. A TRANSPARENT GHOST, DETECTIVE KNOXX (40s, a film noir-esque detective) floats through the scene, eyes scanning the area.

GUNNER (V.O.)

"It was his third crime scene of the day and it wasn't even noon --"

MARY BOONE (O.S.)

Gunner?

BACK TO REALITY

Gunner's head snaps up -- MARY BOONE (late 20s, a loving mother, very thin) is in the doorway.

MARY

Wanna help me set the table?

Gunner nods, tucking the notebook away. He grabs a SHERLOCK HOLMES BOOK from the bedside table.

MARY (CONT'D)

What'd you do today?

GUNNER

Went to a funeral.

MARY

A funeral?

GUNNER

I have writer's block. My main character is investigating his own murder, but I don't know how to describe a dead body 'cause I've never seen one.

MARY

The detective is investigating his own murder?

GUNNER

Yeah, Detective Knoxx is a ghost.

MARY

You don't need to see a dead body to write about it. How would Sherlock Holmes describe a dead body?

GUNNER

I want to describe it in a new way,
not how Sir Arthur Conan Doyle did!

Their conversation fades as they leave the book-filled room.

PRELAP: A heavy, grating NOISE --

EXT. FLATHEAD COUNTY CONSTRUCTION SITE - LATE AFTERNOON

A BUZZSAW cuts through wood.

Gunner's father, AMOS BOONE (early 30s, too young to look so worn), walks through the site, CLIPBOARD in hand, marking off progress on a report.

INT./EXT. AMOS'S TRUCK - MOVING - DUSK

Amos drives his '74 Chevy, his mind a million miles away. He swerves, giving a wide berth to KIDS riding their bikes.

EXT. GUNNER BOONE'S HOUSE - DUSK

The Boone home is sagging and worn-down, but Mary's strict maintenance schedule keeps it tidy and presentable.

Amos parks in the dirt driveway.

His NEIGHBOR (30s) plays baseball with his SON (13) in his yard. A "PROUD PARENT OF A WILLOW SPUR WILDCAT" SPORTS SIGN is planted near their front door.

Amos watches the happy father-and-son scene before entering his own house.

INT. DINING ROOM - GUNNER BOONE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Amos, Mary, and Gunner eat a simple dinner of chicken, potatoes, and broccoli at the dining table. An antique RIFLE hangs ceremoniously above the fireplace nearby.

Gunner reads Sherlock Holmes, nestled covertly in his lap.

AMOS

No books at the table.

Gunner didn't hear. Or didn't listen.

AMOS (CONT'D)

Gunner --

MARY
Baby, put the book away.

Gunner closes the book.

AMOS
(to Gunner)
You go outside at all today?

Gunner stabs at a piece of chicken with his fork.

MARY
He did. Went to a funeral.

AMOS
A funeral?

MARY
It's research for a book he's
writing.

AMOS
Why the hell you goin' to funerals,
Gunner? Go outside and have fun.

MARY
Maybe you boys could do something
together this weekend?

Amos stares at his son -- Gunner keeps his eyes on his food.

AMOS
Yeah, sure. Maybe we could play
baseball.

GUNNER
I hate baseball. It's...
(enunciating carefully)
... sophomoric.

AMOS
We can drive out to the high school
field, toss a couple.

GUNNER
(challenging)
Do you even know what that word
means?

AMOS
It means lose the attitude or
you're goin' to bed hungry.

Gunner drops his gaze and OPENS HIS BOOK --

MARY

Gunner!

AMOS

That's the way it's gonna be, huh?
To your room, now.

Gunner looks at his mom, pleading.

MARY

Uh-uh, no soft eyes for me, mister.
Time for a time-out.

GUNNER

I'd rather read in my room, anyway.

Gunner skulks away, SLAMMING his door shut. Mary turns, giving Amos "the look" --

AMOS

What?! What did I do?

INT. GUNNER'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Gunner crouches by the side of his bedroom door, listening --

MARY (O.S.)

You made him feel weird about going
to the funeral.

AMOS (O.S.)

Well, it is weird. He can't be
filling his head with stuff like
that. 'Specially now.

Silence. Gunner frowns, jamming his ear against the door --

AMOS (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Oh, Mary. I'm sorry.

The scuffling of a chair being moved.

MARY (O.S.)

(voice wavering)
No, you're right... You're right...
Oh, Jesus... Amos...

Their voices fade to muffled whispers and consolations.

Gunner creaks his door open and peers out -- but Mary and Amos have retreated to their bedroom, the DOOR CLOSED.

Gunner jumps in bed.

In the stillness, Gunner's HEART BEAT starts to pound loudly. He puts his hand on his chest -- it QUICKENS.

Duh-duhn, duh-DUHN! Then -- it STOPS.

Gunner's eyes widen in terror. He balls his hands into fists and hits his sternum again and again.

But his heart is still -- his skin turns WHITE, like the blood is being sucked out of him.

He hits his chest harder --

MARY (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Gunner?

Gunner sits up straight in bed -- Mary stands in the open doorway, a PLATE OF FOOD in her hand. She comes over and sits next to him, setting the plate on the night stand.

MARY (CONT'D)

Gunner, baby, what are you doing?

Sweat beads on his forehead. He pants like he saw a ghost.

GUNNER

My heart stopped.

MARY

But that would mean you're dead.
And if you're dead, who's going to
eat this toast house?

On the plate are pieces of TOAST cut into strips and arranged like a log cabin. Smaller pieces of toast lean together on top like a roof.

Gunner wraps his arms around his mother, burying his head against her. She rubs his hair tenderly.

MARY (CONT'D)

You know, it hurts Dad when you're
rude to him at dinner. Just keep
his feelings in mind, okay?

He stares at a drawing of Detective Knoxx --

GUNNER

Do you think you actually go to
heaven or hell when you die?

MARY

I've always felt that you make your own heaven or hell right here on Earth.

GUNNER

How?

MARY

Say you're a bad person. You've spent all your life doing bad things, and after you die, that's how it is for eternity. So all you got to remember are those bad things you did. That sounds like hell to me.

Gunner absorbs this. Mary kisses the top of his head.

MARY (CONT'D)

You're not going to die for a long time, baby.

He nods, leaning against her. She rocks him back and forth, biting her lip to hold back tears.

INT. GUNNER'S ROOM - MORNING

Gunner is asleep, splayed across his sheets. The door opens --

Amos enters, carrying two BASEBALL GLOVES and a BASEBALL. He jostles Gunner awake.

AMOS

Hey...

GUNNER

(groggily)
What time is it?

AMOS

Quarter to eight.

GUNNER

It's summer!

Gunner tries to pull the covers over his head.

AMOS

Come on, let's toss a couple before I gotta go.

GUNNER
I'm not playing baseball.

Amos and Gunner glare at each other.

AMOS
Either way, you're getting up and
going outside.

Amos leaves, but keeps the door open -- SUNLIGHT floods
Gunner's room.

EXT. COUNTY ROAD 82 - DAY

Gunner bikes lazily down the county road. Up ahead, he spots
a LINE OF KIDS snaking down from something in the forest.

Through the trees, Gunner spots what they're looking at -- a
RAGTAG FORT -- DEER SKULLS and a faded AMERICAN FLAG adorn
the structure -- a CURTAIN obscures the entrance.

A kid's laborious efforts toward a kingdom of his own.

Gunner brakes as he approaches the last kid in a line -- a
PUDGY KID (9), eagerly craning his neck toward the front.

GUNNER
What are you guys waiting for?

PUDGY KID
Joseph Riley's telling about how he
got attacked by the Water Man.

A FRECKLED BOY (11) turns around in line.

FRECKLED BOY
Yeah, chargin' a dollar for it,
too.

PUDGY KID
A dollar?

GUNNER
How do you know he's not ripping
you off?

PUDGY KID
Crap, I only have fifty cents --

The curtain on the fort PULLS BACK -- a brooding boy with a
FRESH SCAR ON HIS FACE -- JOSEPH RILEY (12), the alleged
Water Man survivor, stands before the line of kids.

A YOUNG BOY (10) leaves the fort, visibly shaken. The kids in line watch in silent, fearful awe.

Joseph Riley motions for the next kid in line. They disappear into the fort.

Gunner plants his feet on his bike pedals and rides away.

INT. GROCERY STORE - NIGHT

Amos sets assorted GROCERIES on the check-out counter -- among them is a white paper PHARMACY BAG.

The PLUMP CHECKER (30s) scans the items. Amos watches the tally rise. The white pharmacy bag jumps the price up \$50.

PLUMP CHECKER
Any coupons?

Amos shakes his head "no."

PLUMP CHECKER (CONT'D)
One oh-nine eighty-five.

Amos digs through his wallet --

AMOS
I only got eighty...

He and the checker start putting things back. PEOPLE in line watch him -- judging, annoyed, amused.

INT. GUNNER'S ROOM - NIGHT

Gunner, in bed, writes in his notebook -- the ghostly DETECTIVE KNOXX floats through a crime scene.

GUNNER (V.O.)
"Detective Knoxx had searched eleven months and twelve days for his body -
- now, finally, he was going to see who, or what, killed him..."

From the bathroom, Mary COUGHS loudly. Gunner sets the notebook aside and jumps out of bed.

INT. AMOS AND MARY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Gunner knocks on his parents' bathroom door --

GUNNER
 Mom? Mom! Are you sick again?

Behind the door, we can hear Mary VOMITING.

MARY (O.S.)
 (shakily)
 I'm okay, baby... I'm okay...

The front door CREAKS OPEN --

AMOS (O.S.)
 Hello?

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Gunner runs out.

GUNNER
 Mom's sick again!

Amos drops the GROCERY BAGS he's carrying and sprints to his room. Gunner follows --

AMOS
 (sharply)
 Stay out here.

Amos closes the bedroom door, leaving Gunner alone.

Gunner turns -- sees the spilled groceries. The white pharmacy bag is among them. Gunner grabs it -- "500 MG KYTRIL FOR MARY BOONE."

Gunner looks to his parents' bedroom door -- silence. He grabs the phone, dialing the number on the pharmacy bag.

PHARMACIST (O.S.)
 (on the phone)
 Flathead County Pharmacy.

GUNNER
 Hello, can you tell me what...
 (reading the label)
 Kytril is for?

PHARMACIST (O.S.)
 Kytril... let me see here. "Nausea
 and dizziness following
 chemotherapy" --

Gunner, stunned, hangs up.

INT. AMOS AND MARY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Amos is helping Mary to bed. Gunner enters. He has an OPEN DICTIONARY balanced in his arms.

AMOS

I told you to stay out --

MARY

No, it's okay. Come here, baby.

She opens her arms, an invitation to jump in bed. Gunner instead reads from the dictionary --

GUNNER

Chemotherapy, "the treatment of disease by means of chemicals that have a specific toxic effect upon the disease-producing microorganisms or that selectively destroy cancerous tissue."

Amos and Mary exchange a glance.

GUNNER (CONT'D)

Chemotherapy is for cancer.

Mary swallows hard -- struggling to maintain composure --

MARY

Please, come here.

GUNNER

You said you were fine!

MARY

I... I have a certain kind of leukemia that is very hard to treat --

Tears brim in his eyes.

GUNNER

I can help you get better... I can make you toast houses and chicken soup --

MARY

Baby, listen to me...

Amos grabs Mary's hand. Her voice wavers.

GUNNER

-- I'll go to the library tomorrow and get all the books on leukemia --

MARY
 (losing it)
 Gunner! I'm not getting better!
 There's nothing anyone can do.

AMOS
 Do you understand, Gunner?

Gunner's chest rises and falls with short, panicked breaths.

GUNNER
 I can help you! I can make you get
 better! You can't die! You can't!

Mary rushes over to Gunner, holding him tight.

MARY
 I'm sorry, Gunner... I'm sorry...

Gunner wails into her chest. She rocks him back and forth, the tears streaming from her cheeks into his hair. Amos watches from across the room.

INT. WILLOW SPUR PUBLIC LIBRARY - DAY

MISSUS BAKEMEYER (50s, a plump, cheerful woman) carefully files books in the modest library.

The BELL on the front door RINGS -- Gunner enters with his bike and wagon.

MISSUS BAKEMEYER
 (to Gunner)
 I read to Chapter Twelve last night. Holmes and Watson just entered the abandoned house. Where did you leave off?

Gunner's WAGON is chock full of books. The librarian sees the Sherlock Holmes book "A STUDY IN SCARLET" on top.

MISSUS BAKEMEYER (CONT'D)
 (re: "Study in Scarlet")
 You finished already?

GUNNER
 No, but I need to trade these in for other books.

MISSUS BAKEMEYER
 But... what about your research for Detective Knoxx?

GUNNER

I'm doing new research. I need all the books you have on death. And cancer. Leukemia, specifically.

Missus Bakemeyer blinks at him.

INT. GUNNER'S ROOM - DAY

Gunner sits in bed, studying MEDICAL TEXTBOOKS intensely.

INT. GUNNER'S HOUSE - DAY

Gunner watches from the corner of the hallway as --

MEDICAL STAFF enter their house, setting up IVs and other medical equipment inside Mary and Amos's room.

Mary is in bed. Amos stands beside her, tense. A NURSE (40s) sticks an IV in Mary's arm. Gunner shudders and turns away as the needle pierces skin.

EXT. GUNNER'S HOUSE - DAY

The nurse is about to get in her car when Gunner approaches, MEDICAL BOOK in hand.

GUNNER

The medicine you're giving my mom isn't for treating cancer.

The nurse turns around --

NURSE

(like he's a toddler)
That's right, sweetie. It's medicine to make all her pain go away.

She slides inside the driver's seat. Gunner opens the medical book to a dog-eared page --

GUNNER

You could give her Methotrexate, that's specifically for leukemia. Or Doxorubicin Hydrochloride, that's used for a lot of different cancers.

NURSE

We're doing everything we can.

She reaches out to shut the car door --

GUNNER

Or Nelarabine. That's used for
cancer patients who haven't
responded well to chemotherapy.

He looks up at the nurse like she's guilty.

NURSE

I... I'm sorry, sweetheart.

The nurse shuts the car door and drives away. Gunner watches her go -- anger, fear, and frustration swirling in his eyes.

INT. AMOS AND MARY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Amos enters -- Mary eats soup in bed, propped up by pillows. An IV drips rhythmically beside her.

MARY

(re: Gunner)
Has he come out?

AMOS

No. I set his dinner by the door.

Her face wrinkles -- she starts to cry --

MARY

I-I don't know what's going to
happen to you boys...

Amos sits beside her, gently rubbing her neck.

AMOS

Don't worry about us, focus on you
right now.

MARY

Amos! That's all I worry about!
What happens to you boys after I'm
gone, it's the only thing I have
left to deal with.

She takes Amos's hand, squeezing tight.

MARY (CONT'D)

It's no secret you two don't get
along. But he had me. You had me.
It was going to be okay. But now...

She closes her eyes.

MARY (CONT'D)
I don't know anymore.

Amos hangs his head, guilt weighing on his shoulders...

INT. GUNNER'S ROOM - NIGHT

Gunner's bedroom door OPENS -- Amos steps in.

AMOS
Gunner?

He looks around the room, his eyes widening.

AMOS (CONT'D)
(under his breath)
Jesus...

Gunner sleeps in bed, surrounded by books. The WALLS are covered with PAGES AND PAGES OF NOTES. The work of someone obsessed.

Amos closes the door, a tense expression across his face.

INT. LIVING ROOM - EARLY THE NEXT MORNING

Amos takes the prized HUNTING RIFLE down from its mantle. Gunner stands nearby, his eyes puffy from exhaustion.

AMOS
Life is the most unfair part of living. Either you can hide under your bed and cry or face it like a man.

He hands Gunner the rifle. Gunner reluctantly takes it.

AMOS (CONT'D)
I think you're ready to face it like a man.

Gunner looks more and more miserable by the second.

EXT. FOREST - MORNING

Amos and Gunner pad through the forest.

Something GLINTS in the early morning light, catching Gunner's eye -- he stops, scanning the forest.

Everything is still, almost lifeless -- a hazy morning FOG swallows the trees in the distance.

Through the haze, there's MOVEMENT -- something BLACK, seeming to levitate off the ground...

GUNNER
(screaming)
Dad!

Gunner sprints for Amos --

AMOS
(hushed tone)
Keep your voice down.

He demonstrates how to check that the gun is loaded.

Gunner turns around, staring into the woods -- whatever it was that he saw, it's now GONE.

AMOS (CONT'D)
A gun is a dangerous tool. But if you use it right, it can mean the difference between death or survival.

Amos inspects PAW PRINTS in the dirt.

AMOS (CONT'D)
Life and death go hand in hand, Gunner. Something you got to accept.

Amos jams the butt of the gun against Gunner's shoulder. Gunner winces.

AMOS (CONT'D)
Look through the sight here. Close one eye. Find your target.

Gunner brings the sight of the gun up to his eyes. He closes one shut, aiming with the other.

AMOS (CONT'D)
Finger 'round the trigger.

GUNNER
I don't want to do this.

AMOS
Finger on the trigger.

Gunner wraps his finger around the trigger.

GUNNER'S POV: A faded CONVERSE SNEAKER ENTERS THE RIFLE'S SIGHTS.

Amos shouts in the distance and pulls the gun away.

AMOS (CONT'D)
What the hell are you doing?

Joseph Riley, holding an armful of CANNED FOOD, freezes in the clearing -- his scar even more menacing in the early light.

Joseph looks at Gunner -- then to the rifle.

AMOS (CONT'D)
Hey! I said, what the hell --

Joseph takes off running, balancing the canned food in his arms.

AMOS (CONT'D)
Crazy kid.

Gunner watches Joseph disappear between the trees.

INT. AMOS AND MARY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Mary is asleep in bed -- the IV drips by her side. More hospital than home.

INT. DINING ROOM/LIVING ROOM - SAME

Amos scrapes CHARRED MEAT off a frying pan, BLACK SMOKE spurting off the burnt food --

AMOS
Goddammit.

INT. DINING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Gunner and Amos eat CHEERIOS with milk.

Amos watches TV from the table -- Gunner reads a book. It's awkward. It's unpleasant. They both feel it.

Gunner pours more cereal in his bowl -- a PRIZE falls out of the box into the milk. He picks it up -- a RED COMPASS.

INT. GUNNER'S ROOM - NIGHT

Gunner reads in bed. Amos enters --

AMOS

Hey, bud.

Gunner looks up as Amos sits down beside him.

AMOS (CONT'D)

Things... aren't looking good with Mom...

GUNNER

She has type A-L-L leukemia. There's a thirty percent survival rate --

AMOS

Just... listen to me, okay?

He takes a deep breath --

AMOS (CONT'D)

There's gonna be changes around here. I work long hours, sometimes six days a week. Means you gotta learn to take care of yourself.

GUNNER

I can help her.

AMOS

If the doctors can't, no one can. It's unfair, but that's how life is. You have to become a man sooner than --

GUNNER

You might have given up. But I haven't.

Gunner returns to his book, dismissing Amos. Amos stares at his son for a moment, then stands up and heads for the door.

LATER

Gunner is halfway through the book "TALES OF RESURRECTION" --

GUNNER (V.O.)

(from the book)

"In Virginia, 1932, a groundskeeper was patrolling a cemetery late at night..."

FLASH INSIDE GUNNER'S IMAGINATION

An OLD CEMETERY IN VIRGINIA -- the GROUNDSKEEPER (50s, scruffy) wanders along the GRAVESTONES.

GUNNER (V.O.)

"He passed by a grave of a man who was buried not two days before and heard scratching."

The groundskeeper STOPS -- EYES WIDE at the sound of SCRATCHING. He takes a SHOVEL and starts to dig.

He opens the coffin -- a very much ALIVE MAN gasps for air.

BACK TO REALITY

A NOTE is scrawled in the margins -- Gunner squints, bringing the book close to his nose.

The words come into focus --

"The Water Man."

Gunner gasps, setting the book down. The PAGES flip over, exposing the inside jacket cover. The name "J.M. BUSSEY" is written on the flyleaf.

INT. LIBRARY - DAY

Gunner shows Missus Bakemeyer the book with "J.M. BUSSEY" written on the front jacket cover.

MISSUS BAKEMEYER

That's Jim Bussey, lives over in Columbia Falls. Retired mortician, don't know what he's up to now.

Gunner considers this, the gears turning in his head.

EXT. COUNTY ROAD 82 - DAY

Gunner bikes down the highway. A TRUCK PASSES, kicking DUST up. Gunner perseveres.

EXT. OLD VICTORIAN HOUSE - DAY

Gunner sets his bike beside the gate. He grabs the book from the wagon and goes to the front door.

He RINGS THE BELL -- JIM BUSSEY (80s, a reclusive, prickly man) peeks out from behind the screen door --

JIM BUSSEY
Can I help you?

GUNNER
Is this yours?

Gunner holds up the "TALES OF RESURRECTION."

MR. BUSSEY
At one point. It's the county library's now. Why exactly are you here, young man?

GUNNER
You have a note in here, about the Water Man. I... I want to know more about this.

MR. BUSSEY
About what?

GUNNER
If it's possible to stop someone from dying.

A long beat.

MR. BUSSEY
Who are you?

GUNNER
My name's Gunner. Gunner Boone.

MR. BUSSEY
Seems we share a common interest, Mister Boone.

Mr. Bussey opens the screen door --

INT. MR. BUSSEY'S OFFICE - DAY

A SKELETON stands in the corner, DIAGRAMS of the human body hang on the walls, SKULLS adorn the shelves.

The man is obsessed with death.

Mr. Bussey sits behind his cluttered desk, Gunner facing him on a sunken floral chair.

MR. BUSSEY

Death is a strange thing, Gunner Boone. One instant, you're alive. Regenerating cells. Forming memories. Interacting with the world around you. Then, in the blink of an eye, your heart stops beating. Your organs, your blood, it all begins to decay. Cookie?

Mr. Bussey offers Gunner a PLAIN SUGAR COOKIE from a half-empty box. Gunner takes one.

GUNNER

But people have come back from the dead.

MR. BUSSEY

I've spent my whole life researching the dead, looking for an answer. I've never come close to anything real.

(chewing a bite of cookie)

Except for the Water Man...

Gunner leans forward.

GUNNER

He isn't just a ghost story?

MR. BUSSEY

The Water Man is real, Gunner. Name's Edward Schaal. He was killed by a flood when the Wild Horse dam failed...

Gunner stares at Mr. Bussey, entranced, horrified --

PRELAP: WOOD CRACKING --

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - DAY - FLASHBACK

As a wooden dam breaks -- water erupts through, rushing fast.

EXT. WILD HORSE, MONTANA - DAY - FLASHBACK

A small mountain town in the early 1920s. Quiet and peaceful.

MR. BUSSEY (V.O.)

Wild Horse started as a mining town.

(MORE)

MR. BUSSEY (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 But the only rocks in those
 mountains were igneous rock,
 obsidian. Worth less than iron.

EDWARD SCHAAL (mid 20s, a burly, bearded man) sits by a
 simple cottage, sanding down a piece of OBSIDIAN ROCK into a
 necklace pendant.

He pauses, ears pricked by a thunderous noise --

MR. BUSSEY (V.O.)
 The flood came suddenly. No
 warning. No time to escape.

The ground under Edward trembles. He looks up to see the
 flooding water careen down the river.

MR. BUSSEY (V.O.)
 He and the whole town were
 swallowed up.

Edward jumps to his feet and starts to run --

MR. BUSSEY (V.O.)
 Some bodies made it downstream.
 Others disappeared.

The water overtakes the town, the log cabin, then Edward
 himself.

EXT. WILLOW SPUR, MONTANA - DAY - FLASHBACK

The SHERIFF (40s) inspects dead, waterlogged bodies -- Edward
 Schaal among them.

MR. BUSSEY (V.O.)
 My father was just a boy, right
 about your age. Lived in Willow
 Spur.

JOEL (10, Bussey's father), sneaks up to the gruesome scene.
 He wanders past the bodies --

MR. BUSSEY (V.O.)
 All the bodies were officially
 declared "deceased." That is...

Joel stops in front of Edward Schaal's body --

MR. BUSSEY (V.O.)
 ... until Edward Schaal woke up.

Edward's EYES OPEN -- Joel SCREAMS. The sheriff and other townspeople rush toward Edward, helping him up.

MR. BUSSEY (V.O.)
But his wife... eight months
pregnant... she never turned up.

EXT. LAKE - DAY - FLASHBACK

Edward, remarkably hallow, stares across a LAKE.

MR. BUSSEY (V.O.)
Edward returned to Wild Horse, but
the whole town was underwater.

VIEW FROM UNDERWATER

Edward dives in the lake to the submerged town below.

MR. BUSSEY (V.O.)
Found his wife's body still in
their house.

EDWARD'S WIFE (20s) hovers in their underwater cottage. He SCREAMS in agony, bubbles erupting from his mouth.

INT. MR. BUSSEY'S OFFICE - DAY - BACK TO THE PRESENT

Gunner is on the edge of his seat.

MR. BUSSEY
Last anyone heard, he was living
out there, alone in the woods.

Mr. Bussey strenuously pushes himself up and goes over to a cabinet. He sifts through papers --

MR. BUSSEY (CONT'D)
I've heard the rumors that he's
still alive. Tried to go to Wild
Horse myself, but there's no clear
trail in. Got spooked being in that
forest after just two days.

Mr. Bussey pulls out a folded PIECE OF PAPER -- he hands it to Gunner. Gunner opens --

It's a PHOTOCOPIED MAP, dated 1920. WILD HORSE is circled.

MR. BUSSEY (CONT'D)
You can keep it. Wild Horse won't
appear on any other map.

Gunner's eyes dance across the map.

INT. GUNNER'S ROOM - NIGHT

Gunner is in bed, studying Mr. Bussey's old map. He fiddles with the RED COMPASS CEREAL PRIZE in his hand. He puts the map and compass aside and turns OFF his bedside lamp.

LATER THAT NIGHT

Gunner stirs awake -- something CREAKS under his bed.

Gunner bolts up, pushing himself against the corner. From the shadows, a GNARLED HAND reaches up --

Gunner SHRIEKS then leaps out of bed, scrambling from his room before the clawed hand can get him.

INT. GUNNER'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Gunner dashes out of his room --

GUNNER
Mom!

EXT. AMOS AND MARY'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Mary's side of the bed is EMPTY. The IV hangs limply. Amos is asleep, snoring gently.

Gunner peers in. The door to his parents' bathroom is open.

Gunner can barely make out a figure standing up in the bathroom, looking in the mirror.

INT. PARENTS' BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Gunner gently pushes the bathroom door open --

A bald, thin FIGURE is in front of the mirror. It's spindly fingers hold a clump of HUMAN HAIR.

Its fingers grow claws at an unbelievable rate.

Spidery blue veins appear over the monster's skull, pulsing, growing larger --

THE WATER MAN!

Gunner SCREAMS.

The figure turns --

It's MARY -- in her underwear and sickly thin. She drops her WIG, swings her BATHROBE around herself, and runs over to him.

MARY

Gunner, baby, what's wrong --

Gunner drops to the ground, screaming bloody murder.

Amos rushes in from the bedroom --

AMOS

What is it? What happened?

MARY

He saw me... I-I think I scared him...

Amos kneels down and grabs Gunner's shoulders --

AMOS

Stop screaming! You're upsetting your mother!

Mary cowers in the bedroom door frame, ashamed. Gunner keeps screaming.

AMOS (CONT'D)

I SAID STOP!

Amos pulls his hand back and SLAPS GUNNER ACROSS THE FACE.

The stinging pain silences Gunner. He blinks through the tears and looks up at his father.

Amos's face is full of horror, like he's party to a gruesome crime.

AMOS (CONT'D)

I... just wanted you to be quiet...

And then Gunner sees it - his father is terrified.

MARY

What have you done, Amos...

Mary rushes over to Gunner, examining his quickly swelling cheek. Gunner's eyes never leave his father's.

INT. GUNNER'S ROOM - NIGHT

Gunner is in bed but his eyes are wide open. His parents' MUFFLED VOICES come through the door --

 AMOS (O.S.)
 I'm sorry, Mary... I wasn't
 thinking, I just reacted...

Their conversation tapers off. Silence descends.

TIME SPEEDS UP -- the hours pass like seconds. Gunner lays in bed, unmoving. Soon, it's --

EARLY MORNING

Gunner pushes himself up to gaze outside the window. The horizon is tinged with light.

He grabs the compass and map.

INT. AMOS AND MARY'S ROOM - MORNING

The door opens -- a SLIVER OF LIGHT cuts across the bed.

Gunner goes to Amos's bedside table -- opens the drawer -- extracts his father's WALLET. Takes all the cash inside -- FIVE TWENTIES.

Gunner pads over to Mary's side -- he stares at his mother for a moment, then sets a NOTE down on the bedside table.

INT. LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Gunner carefully takes the hunting rifle down.

He knocks over a PICTURE FRAME on the mantle -- he spins toward his parents' bedroom nervously.

But all is quiet. He bolts from the house.

EXT. WILLOW SPUR MAIN STREET - MORNING

Gunner -- a dark BRUISE across his cheek -- bikes through the sleepy town. His wagon totes a LARGE PACK, the FAMILY RIFLE, and various SUPPLIES.

The COMPASS hangs around his neck.

EXT. EDGE OF THE FOREST - MORNING

Gunner parks his bike the side of the road, facing something with grim determination --

Joseph's RAGTAG FORT.

Gunner sits down in front of the fort, waiting patiently.

INT. GUNNER'S HOUSE - AMOS AND MARY'S BEDROOM - DAY

Amos wakes up groggily.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Amos pops bread in the toaster, suited up for work. He turns his gaze to the living room -- his eyes narrow --

The RIFLE IS MISSING from its usual mantle.

INT. GUNNER'S ROOM - DAY

The door swings open -- Amos steps in.

AMOS

Gunner?

There's only an EMPTY BED to greet him.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Amos runs back into his room -- spots a FOLDED NOTE on Mary's bedside table.

Amos opens it -- "I know how to make you better. I hope you won't get mad. Love, Gunner."

Mary stirs -- Amos quickly pockets the note.

INT. GUNNER'S HOUSE - DAY

The PHONE CORD snakes from its hook to the hallway, where Amos talks quietly on the phone --

AMOS
 (into the phone)
 Jim? Yeah, it's Amos... I know,
 first day in seven years I've been
 late... listen, I need today off...

He glances into his bedroom -- Mary is still asleep.

EXT. JOSEPH'S FORT - DAY

Gunner has his map splayed across his lap, studying it intently.

VOICE (O.S.)
 You steal that gun from your dad?

Gunner's head snaps up. Joseph Riley stares at him from the fort's curtained entrance -- his cheeks are sallow and gaunt, his clothes a size too big.

GUNNER
 I, I have a question about the
 Water Man...

A hint of a smirk spreads across Joseph's face.

JOSEPH
 Cost ya a dollar.

Gunner digs the twenties out of his pocket. Joseph's eyes widen -- that's a FORTUNE.

GUNNER
 (holding out a single
 bill)
 Got any change?

JOSEPH
 We'll figure something out.

He pushes the curtain back further, inviting Gunner inside --

INT. JOSEPH'S FORT - MORNING

Gunner and Joseph face each other on faded lawn chairs. The fort is cluttered with clothes, cigarettes, playing cards with sexy women on the back. Empty CANS OF FOOD are stacked in tower in a corner.

GUNNER
 Whoa... do you live here?

JOSEPH
For now. So, the money?

Gunner holds out a twenty note -- as Joseph reaches for it, Gunner pulls back.

GUNNER
I need change to buy supplies, though.

JOSEPH
Supplies?

GUNNER
Why I need to know your Water Man story. I'm going to find him.

Joseph's expression turns dark -- he leans close to Gunner -- SHADOWS from the wooden slats backlit by the sun ripple across his face -- highlighting the SCAR ALONG HIS CHEEK.

JOSEPH
Ever been alone in these woods, kid?

GUNNER
No.

JOSEPH
Ever seen anything supernatural?

GUNNER
No...

JOSEPH
(standing up and pacing)
Let's say you survive the woods, make it all the way past the river, the cliffs... the wolves...

Gunner's grip on his pack tightens.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
You'll find yourself face-to-face with the devil himself. Look in his eyes'n you'll go crazy. Keep your eyes closed...

He turns his cheek, indicating his SCAR --

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
Not many of us around to tell that side of the story.

Gunner considers -- weighing the threat of danger against his goal...

GUNNER

I'm paying you a dollar. That means you owe me.

(fearlessly)

What do you know about the Water Man?

JOSEPH

I'll do you one better. Give me all the money you got and I'll take you to him myself.

GUNNER

Seriously?

JOSEPH

I know where he is. If I guide you, you won't get lost.

GUNNER

But I have to buy supplies.

Joseph grabs a CIGARETTE from a half-empty pack and lights up.

JOSEPH

Sure, sure, we'll buy supplies.

Then I keep the rest, my fee for leadin' you. Fair warning, kid...

(exhales a cloud of smoke)

Woods'll scare the shit outta you.

I keep the money even if you back out.

Joseph extends his hand to shake on it.

Gunner looks in Joseph's eyes -- then to his hand, considering.

He reaches forward and shakes.

INT. AMOS'S TRUCK - MOVING - DAY

Amos drives around town, scanning the streets for his son.

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

Amos's truck rumbles past the general store.

As he turns down another street --

GUNNER AND JOSEPH

approach the general store from the woods behind. Gunner pushes his bike by his side, the RIFLE sticking out of his pack.

INT. GENERAL STORE - DAY

Gunner and Joseph enter --

CHUCK (50s), the stringy, sun-weathered general store owner, watches a BASEBALL GAME on a mini TV at the front counter. He barely looks up as the kids enter.

GUNNER
(handing Joseph a list)
Here's everything we need, but for
two of us we'll need double.

JOSEPH
Jesus, you planning on being out
there for a month? Only need half
this shit.

Joseph takes items off the shelf, placing them in Gunner's arms.

Gunner spots a number of HEADLAMPS on a shelf --

GUNNER
These, too.

Joseph shrugs and grabs the two headlamps off their hook.

The boys set their wares on the front counter. Chuck reluctantly looks away from the game and tallies up the supplies.

As Gunner hands him the money, Chuck nods over Gunner's shoulder --

CHUCK
That what I think it is?

GUNNER
What?

Gunner cranes his neck -- the RIFLE pokes out above his shoulders. He turns around -- face reddening.

CHUCK
I know that ain't your gun.

JOSEPH

It's mine. I mean... my father's.
We're meeting up with him now.

Chuck looks at the bounty of supplies on the counter.

CHUCK

Any reason I should be concerned
'bout you boys?

Chucks seems to loom over them -- Gunner gulps, unsure of what to do -- he's frozen with fear...

JOSEPH

(menacing)
We're fine, man.

Joseph elbows Gunner -- they gather the supplies and head out of the store.

Chuck shakes his head and returns to the game.

EXT. EDGE OF THE WILD HORSE FOREST - DAY

Joseph and Gunner step off the dirt road and toward the forest. Gunner pushes his bike/wagon.

JOSEPH

(re: bike/wagon)
Can't take that in there.

GUNNER

How're we going to carry all the
supplies?

Joseph slings his own BACKPACK around --

JOSEPH

Load up.

The boys take everything from the wagon and stuff it inside their backpacks.

Gunner nestles the bike inside a dense bush, hiding it from view. They walk inside the woods, ignoring a SIGN --

"FOREST FIRE DANGER TODAY: HIGH."

EXT. WILD HORSE WOODS - LATER

The boys weave between stout pine trees, the sun now high in the sky. It's quiet. Serene.

Joseph, in the lead, stops and turns to face Gunner, holding his hand out --

JOSEPH
Okay, so where's my money?

Gunner reaches into his pocket and pulls out two twenties, handing them to Joseph.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
You owe me another thirty-five.

GUNNER
The rest after we find the Water Man.

Joseph shakes his head, pocketing the bills. They resume their trek.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
You wanna check my map?

JOSEPH
That's what amateurs do, kid.
You're with somebody who knows
where the Water Man is. Without me,
you'll never find him or your way
out.

Joseph glances over his shoulder at Gunner -- Gunner's eyes are on the ground, navigating the tangled forest floor cautiously.

EXT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - DAY

Amos pulls his truck into the parking lot.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - DAY

SHERIFF ROGER GOODWIN (50s, a good ol' boy) and his deputy, STEPHANIE GRAY (early 30s, eager and optimistic), face Amos.

SHERIFF GOODWIN
What's your boy's name, Mr. Boone?

AMOS
(tense)
Gunner Boone.

SHERIFF GOODWIN
Age?

AMOS

Ten. He, he took my rifle, too.

Deputy Gray has a PAD OF PAPER and a PEN, scribbling notes.

SHERIFF GOODWIN

Your rifle? He know how to use it?

AMOS

Not really. Took him hunting for the first time a couple days ago.

SHERIFF GOODWIN

Did he take anything else?

AMOS

Some cash out of my wallet.

SHERIFF GOODWIN

Sounds like a run-away. Any reason you know of why he'd run?

Amos freezes -- a guilty look crossing his face --

SHERIFF GOODWIN (CONT'D)

Mr. Boone?

AMOS

(recovering)

No, no reason.

SHERIFF GOODWIN

This happens with kids. Most of the time, they run to someone else's house. Usually back home by dinner, too spooked to be out alone after dark. Any family in the area?

AMOS

No, no one close.

SHERIFF GOODWIN

Any friends he may have gone to?

Amos shakes his head.

SHERIFF GOODWIN (CONT'D)

Any... anywhere you think he could've gone... teacher's house maybe, or a coach?

AMOS

I, uh, I'm not sure.

The sheriff leans forward.

SHERIFF GOODWIN
Can't think of anyone in this whole
town he may have gone to?

AMOS
I don't know.

For Amos, it's a sad realization.

SHERIFF GOODWIN
Well, keep us updated. And bring in
a recent photograph of Gunner.
Chances are he'll be back by
tonight, sleeping with the lights
on.

Amos nods, forlorn.

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - DAY

Gunner and Joseph gnaw on BEEF JERKY as they hike. Joseph
tosses the wrapper out onto the ground. Gunner stuffs his
wrapper inside his pack.

GUNNER
What's he like?

Joseph jumps on a fallen log, walking precariously across it.

JOSEPH
Who, the Water Man?

Gunner nods, staring up at Joseph.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
You know what mountain lions do
when they hunt? Stalk their prey.
Follow whatever animal around til
it's worn out, then, once it's at
its weakest, they attack.

Joseph swipes his hands like claws.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
Same with the Water Man. He'll
drive you in circles 'round the
forest, til you think you're going
crazy -- then BAM!

Joseph jumps down from the log in front of Gunner.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
You'll be too tired to even scream.

GUNNER
I heard he's a real person. Name's Edward Schaal.

JOSEPH
(defensive)
You heard this from someone who actually saw him?

Gunner shakes his head, "no." Satisfied, Joseph continues with his story, using his hands to add extra theatrics --

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
People can say whatever they want. But 'til you've seen him up close and he's comin' after you, you're no expert.

GUNNER
How'd you escape?

JOSEPH
The Water Man didn't realize I know this forest better'n even him.

Joseph picks up the pace. Gunner follows behind, looking after Joseph in awe.

SERIES OF SHOTS

Gunner and Joseph trek through the woods under canopies of white-trunked aspens -- lush meadows speckled with yellow wildflowers -- they're boys on a mission.

LATER

Joseph holds his arm out, halting Gunner. He puts his finger to his lips.

Joseph points in the distance --

Two HIKERS (20s) pack up their tent into large backpacks, their conversation just out of earshot.

JOSEPH
(whispering)
We gotta go around, can't risk trouble.

Gunner nods -- the boys give the hikers a wide berth as they continue on their journey.

LATER

Joseph has his shirt off and wrapped around his head like a tribal warrior.

Gunner has a piece of straw in his mouth, taking in the open woods.

A sense of hope permeates the air.

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - DUSK

MOSS carpets the ground. The trees seem bigger, thicker -- the waning light gives them an eerie BLUE TINGE.

Gunner, now somberly nervous, pulls a JACKET from his backpack and puts it on. Up ahead, Joseph inspects the area.

GUNNER

What is it?

JOSEPH

We should set up camp.

GUNNER

(suddenly embarrassed)

Oh...

Joseph looks at Gunner -- "what?"

GUNNER (CONT'D)

I didn't bring a tent.

JOSEPH

(scoffing)

First rule of camping is that you sleep outside.

Joseph plops down where he's standing.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

See? A perfect place to sleep.

Gunner sits down next to him, wiggling out of his pack.

GUNNER

Can you make a fire?

JOSEPH

Second rule of camping is know how
to make a fire.

Joseph pulls a LIGHTER out of his pocket.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

Rule number three: whoever makes
the fire doesn't have to get
firewood.

(pointing at Gunner)

That means you, kid.

GUNNER

Really? You're not going to help
me?

JOSEPH

You think the Water Man is gonna
care if your feet hurt when he's
trying to eat you for a snack?

Gunner sighs -- Joseph wins. This time.

GUNNER

This fire better be big.

As Gunner rises, he looks around the dark, isolated forest.
Danger seems to lurk in every shadow.

Gunner gulps hard and grabs the rifle from his pack, holding
it close. He ventures off in the dark forest, scanning the
ground for suitable logs.

Joseph watches him go, a subtle smirk forming on his lips.

EXT. GUNNER'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Amos's truck rumbles into the driveway.

INT. GUNNER'S ROOM - NIGHT

Amos quickly enters --

AMOS

Gunner?

The room is vacant.

Amos sits on the floor, sifting through the mess of papers
and books, searching for any clues.

He spots a SHOEBOX under the bed -- Amos pulls it out.

He opens, finding SKETCHES of Detective Knoxx and other characters. Amos looks through the drawings, surprised and impressed.

A BOY'S SCREAM rings out from the window. Amos jumps to his feet and hurries out of the room --

EXT. GUNNER'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Amos steps onto the front porch as two BOYS (12) barrel down the street on their bikes, laughing hard.

AMOS

Hey!

The boys brake hard and stop, facing Amos.

AMOS (CONT'D)

You know a kid named Gunner Boone?

One of the boys shakes his head. The other boy considers --

BOY #1

Is he that kid in fifth grade?
Kinda quiet?

AMOS

Yeah.

BOY #1

I know who he is. Haven't seen him
around though.

BOY #2

Maybe The Water Man got him.

They laugh and continue biking. Amos glances around the street, but there's not another soul in sight.

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - NIGHT

The forest is a collage of silhouettes and shadows.

Gunner's pile of FIREWOOD is big -- Joseph kneels by a makeshift campfire ring, holding the LIGHTER under a pile of KINDLING. The kindling catches -- the wood burns.

Gunner shivers. He holds his hands out to the fire.

Joseph focuses his dark eyes on Gunner --

JOSEPH
That's your dad's gun, right? He
just let you take it?

Gunner pauses -- thinking of an excuse. He pauses too long.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
You did run away!

GUNNER
Did not. I left a note.

JOSEPH
(laughing)
You left "a note." Cute.

Gunner stares at the fire, cheeks flushing red.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
Don't you think your dad's gonna
come after you?

GUNNER
My dad? No. He doesn't care. He's
probably happy I'm not home
anymore. One more thing off his
plate.

He pokes the fire with a stick.

Joseph looks at Gunner -- small, innocent -- alone.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
(looking up to Joseph)
What about your dad?

JOSEPH
My dad?

Joseph fiddles with his sneaker lace.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
Well, he, uh...

GUNNER
You don't have to talk about it. If
you don't want.

SOMETHING HOWLS in the distance. Gunner pulls his knees close
to his chest. Joseph concentrates hard, ears pricked.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
Is that --

JOSEPH
That's a wolf, alright. You got
your gun loaded?

Gunner struggles to open the barrel. When he finally gets it open, he checks -- a couple ROUNDS are tucked inside.

GUNNER
Yeah.

JOSEPH
We'll take turns keeping watch. You
see anything move, don't think --
shoot. You only got a few seconds
'fore a wolf tears your face off.

Gunner gulps hard.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
You take first watch.

Joseph snuggles close to the campfire, nuzzling his arm under his head like a pillow.

Gunner looks around the forest --

The darkness is suffocating. The once-quiet forest seems ALIVE WITH NOISES -- scratching, scuffling, chirping, howling, twisting, ripping.

Gunner claws for his backpack, pulling out the HEADLAMP. He secures it to his head, then hugs the rifle.

INT. GUNNER'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Amos prepares Mary's MEDICINE in the kitchen.

INT. AMOS AND MARY'S ROOM - LATER

Amos hands Mary a few pills with a glass of water -- she takes her medicine, then lies back down.

MARY
(woozy)
Thanks, Amos...

Amos lovingly strokes her head, a SCARF replacing the wig.

AMOS
How you feeling, baby?

MARY
Is Gunner okay?

Amos stiffens, fear eclipsing his face --

AMOS
He, uh...

MARY
(noticing his fear)
What, what is it?

She tries to push herself up.

AMOS
No, Mary, it's fine. He's fine.

MARY
(worried)
Where is he? What happened?

AMOS
Nothing. We talked things over.
He's asleep now.

Mary stares at him, unsure.

MARY
Should I check on him?

AMOS
You need rest.

She nods, settling onto her pillow.

MARY
I'll check on him in the morning.
(squeezing his hand)
I'm glad you two made up.

Amos's eyes fall to a FRAMED PICTURE of Gunner on her bedside table -- younger but no less melancholic.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

The campfire is reduced to smoldering embers.

Joseph snores softly beside it. Gunner is awake, drawing in his notebook, illuminated by the headlamp.

GUNNER (V.O.)
"Detective Knoxx saw the mangled
corpse..."
(MORE)

GUNNER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

(erasing)

"Detective Knoxx saw the chalk
outline..."

(erasing again)

"What Detective Knoxx saw made his
ghostly jaw drop --"

A TWIG SNAPS -- Gunner's head shoots up.

He scans the dark forest -- immense yet claustrophobic at the
same time.

Something REFLECTS the headlamp's light -- two little ORBS
glow in the dark.

Gunner's breath stops short... his eyes bulge...

He shines the light back to where the two orbs were.

There they are AGAIN -- the only other light in the entire
forest.

Gunner stares at them... his heart racing...

The orbs BLINK -- they're EYES!

Gunner drops the drawing pad and stands.

He gropes for the gun, then pulls the hammer back, locked and
loaded.

He takes a few tentative steps forward. The eyes stare at
him.

EXT. DEEPER IN THE FOREST - NIGHT

Gunner slowly inches forward, his campground swallowed in
darkness behind him...

GUNNER

Hello?

The EYES TURN -- and DISAPPEAR.

Gunner halts, terror-stricken.

He tilts his head up -- shining the light deep into the
forest -- the eyes SHIMMER and turn the other way...

They're not eyes. Gunner exhales and steps forward,
illuminating --

TWO ORNAMENTS hang from a tree.

Gunner inspects them -- twine wrapped around OBSIDIAN ROCKS -- the "eyes" reflecting his light.

A CARVING is etched onto the two tree trunks -- two squiggly lines that faintly resemble a river.

Gunner reaches out and touches one of the necklaces.

SOMETHING MOVES behind him --

Gunner spins around -- the headlamp light REVEALS --

A GHOSTLY FACE

White-washed and ethereal.

Gunner SCREAMS -- he reflexively PULLS THE TRIGGER.

BOOM!

The rifle goes off.

JOSEPH (O.S.)

What the hell?!

Gunner reaches for his headlamp, aiming it toward the voice -- Joseph on the ground, ducking for cover.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

What the hell is wrong with you, man?!

GUNNER

I thought I saw a ghost...

JOSEPH

You're crazy, you know that?!

Joseph shakes his head, pushing himself to his feet.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

Last time I ever check on you.

Gunner also rises. Joseph storms back for the campsite, Gunner hurrying to keep up.

GUNNER

I'm sorry, Joseph, you scared me --

JOSEPH

You want to survive these woods?
Rule number four: don't shoot your guide.

Gunner trails sheepishly behind. He turns around, taking one more look at the strange ornaments behind him.

The orbs stare back at him in the dark.

INT. GUNNER'S HOUSE - AMOS AND MARY'S ROOM - MORNING

Amos grabs the FRAMED PHOTOGRAPH of Gunner on Mary's bedside table.

He leaves a NOTE: "Took G to library -- A."

EXT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - MORNING

As Sheriff Goodwin approaches the office, he spots Amos already there, waiting beside the front door.

INT. SHERIFF GOODWIN'S DESK - MORNING

Sheriff Goodwin and Amos take seats at the sheriff's desk as the DESK OFFICER (40s) opens up the office and turns on the lights.

SHERIFF GOODWIN

No sign yet?

AMOS

He didn't come home last night. And I asked a few kids around town, no one's seen him.

SHERIFF GOODWIN

You got a recent photo?

Amos hands the sheriff the framed photograph of Gunner.

SHERIFF GOODWIN (CONT'D)

We'll distribute posters around, start askin' if anyone's seen him. Anything else you can tell us?

Amos shakes his head, crestfallen.

EXT. FOREST - MORNING

Joseph blinks awake and pushes himself up. He spots Gunner's quivering shoulder just behind a tree trunk.

Gunner clutches the gun, WHIMPERING. TEARS run down his cheeks. Joseph comes around the tree to face him.

JOSEPH
Hey, man, you okay?

Gunner, ashamed, wipes his nose.

GUNNER
I... I can't do this. I thought I
could, but I can't.

His head falls against the crook of his arm.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
I wanna go home.

Joseph watches Gunner cry, an awkward, pitiful expression on his face.

Then, suddenly, Joseph freezes, ears pricked, intensely listening...

JOSEPH
You hear that?

Gunner snuffles.

GUNNER
No, what?

JOSEPH
RUN!

Joseph stands up, running for a tree.

Gunner jumps to his feet, panicking.

GUNNER
What? Why!

Joseph starts climbing the tree as he responds --

JOSEPH
Wolves!

Joseph disappears between the branches.

GUNNER
Joseph, wait!

Gunner is totally and utterly alone. He spins around frantically -- the shadows of the forest seem like snarling, feral wolves.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
Help me!

A BRANCH SNAPS in the woods -- Gunner freezes.

"AWOOO" -- the HOWL of a WOLF echoes through the forest. And it's close.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
(cracking with fear)
Joseph...

"AWOOOOO!" It's getting louder.

Gunner runs to the tree Joseph climbed and grabs the first branch he can. He struggles to pull himself up.

"AWOOOOOOOOO!"

He SCREAMS and scrambles up the tree.

EXT. TOP OF TREE - DAY

TEARS streak Gunner's face as he ascends the branches --

His left hand grabs a dying branch -- he puts his weight on it -- the branch SNAPS.

He dangles by one hand -- seconds away from falling --

GUNNER
(screaming)
AHHH! Help, Joseph!

Gunner catches his balance, grabbing another branch -- he's made it, for now.

He spots Joseph's worn CONVERSE SNEAKER through the leaves.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
Joseph! Help!

"AWWWOOOOOOO!"

The wolf's howl is close... too close. It's like it's in the tree...

Joseph sticks his head through a branch, grinning at Gunner.

JOSEPH
(cupping his hands over
his mouth)
AWOOOOOOO!

Gunner glares through tear-streaked eyes.

GUNNER

I almost fell! I could've died!

JOSEPH

Okay, but you didn't! Look, you wanna find the Water Man, you can't be a sissy about anythin' --

GUNNER

The deal's off! You can't come with me anymore.

Gunner starts to descend, sniffing. Joseph's grin disappears, replaced with concern --

JOSEPH

Hey, hey, hey! Hold on! I also came up here to scout where the Water Man is. Wanna see where we're going?

Gunner pauses -- can Joseph be trusted?

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

No bullshit. Come on.

He extends his hand.

Gunner climbs back up, pushing Joseph's hand out of the way.

Gunner tops out by Joseph -- a completely unobstructed view of the entire forest before them.

Green trees blanket rolling hills -- blue MOUNTAINS form a spinal column along the horizon -- a RIVER BED cuts a path through the trees.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

(pointing)

See there?

Gunner squints his eyes -- BLACK SMOKE rises from a distant hill.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

The Water Man's hut.

Gunner takes it in -- physical evidence of The Water Man -- a long hike yet visibly close -- attainable.

GUNNER

That's... that's really The Water Man? He's there? Alive?

JOSEPH
Yep, and hungry as ever.

Gunner nods -- the fierceness of a warrior in his eyes.

GUNNER
We're wasting daylight. Come on,
let's go.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Gunner and Joseph hike through the thick forest, deep in
debate --

JOSEPH
C'mon, man. Everybody curses.

GUNNER
Not me.

JOSEPH
Never in your life?

GUNNER
Cursing is for lowlifes and dirt
bags.

JOSEPH
Who told you that, your mommy?

Gunner spins around.

GUNNER
Don't talk about my mom. Ever.

JOSEPH
I won't. If you curse.

Gunner scowls at him. He turns around and continues walking.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
(pretending to be a mom)
"Don't you ever, ever curse, Gunner
boo-boo --"

Gunner whips around and PUSHES Joseph.

GUNNER
Shut up!

JOSEPH
Make me, shithead!

Joseph pushes back.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
Mommy's not here to save you!

GUNNER
I said SHUT UP!

Gunner tackles Joseph -- they wrestle on the ground.

Joseph, bigger, older, and stronger than Gunner, pins him down in a headlock.

JOSEPH
Say "shit!" Say it!

GUNNER
Get offa me!

JOSEPH
(squeezing harder)
SAY IT!

GUNNER
SHIT! Get off me! Get off!

Joseph lets go -- Gunner, red-faced, pops back on his feet, backing away from Joseph.

Gunner seethes while a grin spreads across Joseph's face.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
Don't you ever, EVER, talk about my
mom.

Joseph stands up, proud of his pupil. He extends his hand.

JOSEPH
You got yourself a deal, bitch.

Gunner looks at Joseph's hand --

GUNNER
Okay, asshole.

They shake. Joseph pulls him up, and the boys keep walking. The roar of RUSHING WATER sounds in the distance.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
Whoa!

He starts to run --

GUNNER (CONT'D)
You hear that?!

JOSEPH
What? What is it?

Joseph chases after him --

Gunner leads -- they jump over fallen logs -- scramble over a pile of rocks -- weave through thorny shrubs.

Finally, they come across a RIVER -- it churns fast, white rapids foaming above rocky crags.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
You're freaking out over a river?

GUNNER
Look!

He points -- the WOODEN REMAINS OF AN ANCIENT DAM lay just a stone's throw upstream.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
A broken dam! That's how the Water Man almost died! We have to be near Wild Horse, then, right?

JOSEPH
Sure...

Gunner looks at him, worried --

GUNNER
Isn't that where he is?

JOSEPH
I mean... I don't know about a dam, but, yeah, I knew about following the river. I... I was leading us here.

Gunner nods excitedly --

GUNNER
Come on, we can get a bit farther before the sun sets.

Gunner keeps walking, a newfound hope in his step. Joseph follows, skeptical.

INT. FLATHEAD COUNTY LIBRARY - DAY

Missus Bakemeyer sits in front of her PC. The BELL over the front door PINGS as a patron enters. She looks up --

MISSUS BAKEMEYER
How can I help you?

Amos approaches her desk, a few MISSING PERSON POSTERS in hand.

AMOS
Could you post these flyers?

MISSUS BAKEMEYER
Sure thing.

He hands her a few flyers. Her face falls as she reads them.

MISSUS BAKEMEYER (CONT'D)
(devastated)
Gunner... is missing?

AMOS
I'm Amos. His father. Please let me know if you hear from him or anything.

MISSUS BAKEMEYER
Oh, Amos, of course I will!

She reaches for scotch tape to hang the flyers up.

A COMIC BOOK on her desk catches Amos's eye -- the same drawings he saw in Gunner's room.

Missus Bakemeyer notices --

MISSUS BAKEMEYER (CONT'D)
He's good, isn't he?
(re: the comic panel)
Gunner's detective story. I've been helping him with his research.

Amos picks up the comic book --

MISSUS BAKEMEYER (CONT'D)
I've never met a child so smart.
We're reading Sherlock Holmes' "Study in Scarlet" together. He always out-reads me.

Gunner's words and drawings captivate Amos.

MISSUS BAKEMEYER (CONT'D)
Let me know if there's anything,
anything at all, that I can do.

His eyes water, taking in this new side of his son.

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - DAY

Gunner, still in the lead, suddenly stops, examining the compass around his neck. Joseph comes up beside him.

JOSEPH
What now?

GUNNER
I don't get it.

Gunner shows Joseph the compass -- the NEEDLE is going haywire, erratically moving around the circle.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
Why is it doing that?

JOSEPH
Holy shit...

Joseph stares at the compass, disturbed.

GUNNER
(looking at the sun)
C'mon, we gotta keep moving.

The boys continue hiking along the river.

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - DUSK

The sun glimmers between the pine trees. Gunner and Joseph walk side by side.

A SNOWFLAKE falls from the sky, drifting in front of Gunner.

Gunner stoops to pick it up. He smiles with amazement.

GUNNER
Joseph! Look!

Joseph inspects the snowflake.

JOSEPH
No way it's snowing...

Gunner breathes on the snowflake. It doesn't melt.

He looks up -- SNOWFLAKES float down from the sky. Some are small -- some are bigger, like torn-up pieces of paper.

GUNNER
This is amazing!

Gunner spreads his arms wide -- spinning under the falling flakes.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
Snowing in July! It's magic!

Gunner is filled with glee and hope. Joseph watches, too perplexed to know how to react.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
We have to be getting close!

JOSEPH
We should set up camp soon.

Joseph continues hiking. Gunner follows after, still in awe.

VIEW OF THE SPRAWLING WILD HORSE FOREST

SMOKE billows up, choking out the sky. The horizon above the trees GLOWS RED.

EXT. WILLOW SPUR - EVENING

Amos hangs up MISSING CHILD FLYERS around town -- on wooden telephone poles, by the church, near the post office.

EXT. GENERAL STORE - NIGHT

Amos's truck pulls up in front of the store. Chuck, the general store owner, is outside, locking up the front doors --

AMOS
Excuse me?

Chuck turns.

CHUCK
I'm closin' for the day, mister.

AMOS
I'm just wonderin' if you could hang this poster in your store?

CHUCK
Sure, sure thing.

AMOS
Much obliged.

He hands Chuck a few POSTERS.

AMOS (CONT'D)
Case you need extras.

He returns to his truck. Chuck glances over the posters as Amos starts his engine.

CHUCK (O.S.)
Hey! Wait!

Amos rolls down his window as Chuck approaches --

CHUCK (CONT'D)
I saw this boy.

He points to the photocopied picture of Gunner.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Chuck sits with Amos, Sheriff Goodwin, and Deputy Gray.

CHUCK
-- A day ago, early morning. This boy, Gunner, and another kid.

DEPUTY GRAY
Another kid? Can you describe him?

CHUCK
Yeah, long dark hair. Kinda... I don't know, what's the word, "rock and roll," maybe.

SHERIFF GOODWIN
(to Amos)
Sound like anyone your son knows?

AMOS
I've never seen Gunner hanging out with a kid like that.

CHUCK
One more thing.

All eyes on Chuck --

CHUCK (CONT'D)

This kid, he had a big scar across his cheek.

AMOS

A scar?

SHERIFF GOODWIN

Something ringin' a bell?

AMOS

Told you I went hunting with Gunner last week. We saw this kid in the woods. Think he had a scar.

SHERIFF GOODWIN

Know the kid's name?

AMOS

Not a clue.

Amos leans back in the office chair, bone-weary.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

The boys trudge through the woods, illuminating their path with the headlamps. Joseph stops Gunner, shining his light on something in the distance.

JOSEPH

See that?

A FALLEN TREE is held a couple feet off the ground by its roots and a clump of rocks. It's SPLAYED OPEN, providing a roof-like structure.

The boys walk over, inspecting the tree.

GUNNER

Whoa, what happened?

A burnt-black SCAR runs down the tree trunk.

JOSEPH

Lightning strike. Never hits the same place twice.

GUNNER

Looks like it was set on fire.

JOSEPH

Looks like a fort.

He nestles underneath it.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

See?

Gunner sets down his pack and sits down next to Joseph -- shredded bark hangs down in front of the boys like a hairy canopy.

LATER

A little FIRE burns in front of the boy's fallen tree fort. The boys huddle close to its warmth, wearing every bit of clothing they have. Their breath form puffs of vapor.

Gunner draws another PANEL in his graphic novel story. Joseph leans over, catching a glimpse of Gunner's drawing.

JOSEPH

You take classes or something to learn how to do that?

GUNNER

No. I just draw a lot.

JOSEPH

You're pretty good.

Gunner erases Detective Knoxx's face -- can't quite get it to look right.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

That's like a comic book or something?

GUNNER

It's a graphic novel, about a ghost detective who's investigating his own murder.

Joseph nods, impressed --

JOSEPH

That's a pretty cool story. What happens at the end?

GUNNER

I don't know yet.

JOSEPH

You don't know yet? It's your story, how do you not know the ending?

Gunner looks up --

GUNNER

(condescending)

Writing a story is hard. You can't just make anything up, it has to all relate to the beginning and middle.

JOSEPH

You should know the ending before you start writing the whole thing.

GUNNER

Read Sherlock Holmes. Then you might understand.

The boys glare at each other for a moment -- then Joseph's eyes go wide, a horrified expression on his face --

JOSEPH

Holy shit!

GUNNER

What?

JOSEPH

(whispering)

Don't. Move. A. Muscle.

Gunner freezes, terror-stricken. Joseph's hand reaches out toward Gunner's ear.

GUNNER

(also whispering)

What is it?

Something CLICKS over and over again near Gunner's ear. Gunner whimpers.

JOSEPH

Shit, man, don't move.

Gunner MOANS -- terrified, about to get sick with fear...

Joseph's hand curls around SOMETHING -- he FLINGS IT AWAY. Gunner SCREAMS.

Joseph laughs, pointing -- a MASSIVE BEETLE scurries up the side of the dead tree, disappearing into the cavernous insides.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
 (laughing)
 You were scared shitless!

Gunner wipes down his hair, checking for more bugs.

GUNNER
 Why would you joke about that?!

JOSEPH
 It's just a bug. Calm down.

GUNNER
 No! You always mess with me. I'm
 sick of it!

Gunner crawls to the far side of the tree fort, away from Joseph.

He grabs a STICK and draws a line in the dirt.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
 This is my side. Don't cross it.

JOSEPH
 Are you kidding me?

GUNNER
 Don't cross my line!

JOSEPH
 Fine.

He turns the opposite way -- the boys hunker down in their respective corners underneath the dying tree.

INT. GUNNER'S HOUSE - AMOS & MARY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Amos enters, dragging his feet. He notices Mary's side of the bed is EMPTY.

AMOS
 (worried)
 Mary?

He rushes out of the room --

INT. GUNNER'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Amos peers inside --

Mary sits on Gunner's bed, staring at the crazed research taped on the walls.

AMOS

Jesus Christ, Mary, you shouldn't be up! Doctors said --

MARY

Why didn't you tell me Gunner was missing?

A beat.

AMOS

I... I was gonna tell you, I promise...

MARY

I called the sheriff. He told me everything.

Mary's eyes water as she looks over Gunner's copious notes on death.

MARY (CONT'D)

I remember when Gunner first learned about death. He was five years old. There was that stray cat... she'd always come right outside his window. He asked me to put some milk out for it. I didn't, said it'd never leave then.

Amos wrings his hands nervously.

MARY (CONT'D)

A couple weeks later, he saw the cat's body on the road. Hit by a car. He didn't understand why it wouldn't move. I had to explain to him... that it wasn't going to ever move again...

She angrily brushes a TEAR off her cheek.

MARY (CONT'D)

Sometimes I think... I think that it was my fault. That I was the one that scared him, that I told him about death too early.

AMOS

No, baby, it wasn't your fault --

MARY

I never wanted to treat him like a child. Like he was too stupid or too young. I always wanted to tell him the truth.

She looks at Amos -- there's a dark despair to her gaze.

MARY (CONT'D)

But I didn't trust Gunner could handle knowing that I have cancer. And I think not knowing is worse than the truth itself, no matter how devastating.

Amos reaches for her --

MARY (CONT'D)

Don't touch me!

(softly)

I guess in a way I deserve it. I lied to him about the truth same way you lied to me. You didn't think I could handle it.

Her lip quivers.

MARY (CONT'D)

If anything happens to him or, or if I die before he's back safe...

Mary holds her head in her hands.

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - NIGHT

Gunner and Joseph are fast asleep.

A MASSIVE BEETLE clicks its way out of the split-open tree. It crawls along the top of the burned wood.

It climbs up Gunner's pant leg.

It rises over Joseph's shoulder... then crawls on the top of the tree canopy...

Wait -- it's not the same beetle.

From deep in the belly of the tree, DOZENS OF BEETLES crawl out, silhouetted in the moonlight.

Gunner groans and sleepily opens his eyes.

He stirs -- the entire ground seems to move.

BETTERLES ARE EVERYWHERE!

Gunner tries to stand -- but that startles the bugs -- the calm of the beetles is sent into an uproar.

They swarm the boys -- Joseph snaps awake.

GUNNER

Joseph! HELP!

Huge beetles IN THE HUNDREDS skitter down from the tree. They cover the boys' faces, WAVES OF WIGGLING BLACK.

Gunner's mouth clamps shut -- they swarm his lips. His fingers grope -- shoving beetles out of the way.

JOSEPH

Run!

Gunner scrambles blindly out from under the tree --

BUGS SQUISH under them -- the wet sound of insides CRUNCHING.

Gunner reaches for his gun and SLIPS -- his ARM GOES THROUGH THE TREE.

Like a waterfall, even MORE BEETLES CASCADE out of the hole.

It's a nightmare that would make Stephen King shudder.

The boys run away from the tree -- but the beetles FOLLOW.

Gunner's HEADLAMP bounces light across the skeletal trees.

GUNNER

There's too many! What do we do?!

The beetles start to gain on them.

JOSEPH

There!

RUSHING WATER sounds from further in the forest.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

We swim!

GUNNER

What about my pack?

JOSEPH

What?!

The boys run toward the river -- WHITE RAPIDS churn against huge river rocks.

GUNNER
I LEFT MY PACK!

They stop by the side of the river and turn around --
The whole forest floor is ALIVE WITH BEETLES.

JOSEPH
SCREW YOUR PACK!

Joseph wraps his arms around Gunner and the rifle --
The beetles reach them -- the first dozen latch onto their shoes and start to climb --
Joseph pulls Gunner into the water with him.
They disappear in the churning rapids.

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - MORNING

Dew coalesces off rigid pine needles. Water in a river eddy gently laps over rocks. Not a soul in sight.
Almost peaceful -- the sky full of thick, black smoke.

INT. GUNNER'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

The PHONE RINGS -- Amos runs to answer it.

AMOS
(into the phone)
Hello?

He peeks into his bedroom -- Mary is just waking up.

EXT. EDGE OF WILD HORSE FOREST - CONTINUOUS

Sheriff Goodwin ambles by the shoulder of County Road 82 --

SHERIFF GOODWIN
Amos, it's Sheriff Goodwin. Your boy have a blue bike with a wagon attached to it?

INTERCUT

Amos grips the phone hard -- lips pursed tight.

AMOS

Yeah, that's his, all right.

The sheriff passes by Deputy Gray, who's snapping PHOTOS of Gunner's bike.

SHERIFF GOODWIN

Looks like he may have gone into the Wild Horse forest. Any idea why?

AMOS

Only time I know he's been in there was when I took him hunting. He doesn't like the woods much.

Mary comes out of the bedroom, her face tense with fear.

SHERIFF GOODWIN

I got some real bad news. There's a wildfire growin' in the Wild Horse forest...

AMOS

What does that mean?

SHERIFF GOODWIN

Means we got about thirty homes that need evacuating. I already should be on the road headin' their way.

AMOS

What about Gunner? Is he near this fire?

On hearing "fire," Mary grabs the remote and turns the TV on --

SHERIFF GOODWIN

We gotta deal with these evacuations first. Then we'll get to Gunner --

AMOS

This is my goddamn son you're talking about!

SHERIFF GOODWIN

I wanted to give you the heads up, we're doin' everything we --

Amos hangs up. Mary lowers onto the couch, her trembling hand covering her mouth. Amos comes over, eyes on the TV.

A LOCAL NEWS STATION shows footage of the FIRE --

NEWSCASTER (O.S.)

(from TV)

-- the Wild Horse forest fire is growing by the second after strong winds picked up and blew the fire toward Willow Spur and the surrounding towns. All residents in the area should check with their local fire or police station for evacuation details --

MARY

Oh, Jesus...

Amos rushes away from the TV, heading into his bedroom. Mary watches the news, transfixed. Amos reemerges seconds later with a HEAVY BACKPACK.

MARY (CONT'D)

Where are you going?

AMOS

I'm goin' to find him.

MARY

Find him where? In the forest?

Mary moves to Amos, who's throwing a FLASHLIGHT, MATCHES, and HEAVY JACKETS into the pack.

MARY (CONT'D)

Amos...

He looks up -- tears brim her eyes.

MARY (CONT'D)

I'll help you pack.

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - RIVERBANK - DAY

Gunner, shivering for warmth in his sappy clothes, wakes up. The rifle is slung across his body.

He pushes himself up, looking around.

Joseph is awake, sitting cross-legged by the river, trembling, his clothes also soaked. His face is ghostly pale and sweat beads down his forehead and upper lip.

Gunner moves to sit beside him.

GUNNER
Thanks for saving me last night.

Joseph stares into the water.

JOSEPH
(teeth chattering)
There's some weird shit going on.

GUNNER
Maybe it's a sign that we're
getting close.

Joseph shakes his head.

JOSEPH
I don't know, man. We lost
everything.

GUNNER
Got my gun still.

JOSEPH
Okay, besides that, we lost
everything. And the crap with your
compass, the snowflakes... I say we
call it quits.

Shock fills Gunner's face --

GUNNER
What do you mean, "quits?" We're
fine! Probably will find the Water
Man by the end of the day!

Joseph's eyes stay on the ground.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
I'm scared, too. But I know I can't
do this without you. Please...
Joseph, don't leave me.

Joseph looks into Gunner's wide, pleading eyes.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
If we don't find him by tonight,
we'll go home. Promise.

JOSEPH
Okay. One more day. Then we go
home.

Gunner smiles and stands.

GUNNER

Deal.

He helps Joseph to his feet. The two continue following the river downstream.

INT. AMOS'S TRUCK - MONTANA STATE HIGHWAY - DAY

Amos is in his truck, speeding along the two-lane state highway.

Coming the other way is a steady stream of CARS, packed full of families and their valuables, evacuating their homes.

Amos listens to the radio --

RADIO VOICE (O.S.)

More and more people in the Flathead and Glacier counties are encouraged to pack essentials and valuables. Already two homes have been destroyed --

HIGHWAY PATROL CARS are ahead, blocking the road.

Amos HONKS his horn in frustration, but the PATROL OFFICERS shake their heads, pointing Amos back in the opposite direction.

Amos looks to the side of the road -- the shoulders are CLEAR. He thinks for a moment, and then --

SWERVES HIS TRUCK OFF THE ROAD.

A patrol officer holds his hands up for Amos to stop, but Amos speeds past.

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - DAY

Gunner comes to a cliff -- he looks down --

There's at least a fifteen-foot difference from where they stand to the rocky shelf below.

The river CASCADES down a steep drop, creating treacherous rapids between massive boulders.

Joseph approaches Gunner's side, surveying the cliff --

JOSEPH
No way we can climb down.

Gunner gazes across the river -- that side gently rolls down, easy to descend.

Upstream, a couple FALLEN LOGS create a makeshift bridge.

GUNNER
There! We can cross!

Gunner heads for the logs. Joseph follows, violently shivering. He's looking more ill by the minute.

EXT. LOGS ACROSS THE RIVER - MOMENTS LATER

Gunner and Joseph examine the makeshift log bridge and the roaring waters underneath.

JOSEPH
Uh, uh. No way, man. I'm not crossing that thing.

GUNNER
You have a better idea?

JOSEPH
Yeah, we go home.

Gunner, unwilling to accept defeat, puts one foot on the log.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
Are you serious?!

Gunner takes another step. He gulps hard but keeps moving.

The river flows fast and mercilessly under his feet.

Gunner breathes steadily, arms balancing in the air.

One shaky step after another, he makes it to the half-way point.

Gunner exhales, a victorious smile on his lips.

GUNNER
(over his shoulder)
See? Not so bad!

Gunner turns back around and takes a step --

CRACK!

One of the logs bends under his foot -- held together only by its thin, papery bark.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
Joseph?!

JOSEPH
Run, man!

Gunner pulls his foot off -- the log BREAKS.

Gunner SCREAMS as he PLUMMETS DOWN.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
Gunner!

Gunner's flailing arms grasp the second log -- barely catching himself.

His legs dangle in the water.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
Holy shit!

GUNNER
Help! Help me!

Gunner's grip loosens -- the churning water pulling him in.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
I'm slipping!

Joseph crawls on all fours on the log, inching his way forward.

But he's still got about eight feet to go...

GUNNER (CONT'D)
Joseph! I can't hold!

Gunner slides farther -- he grabs a BRANCH with one hand -- it SNAPS OFF.

His other hand digs into the log.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
HELP!

Joseph reaches for him -- too late --

THE WATER PULLS GUNNER OFF THE LOG.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
AHH!

The RIFLE STRAP tenses -- catching under his arm -- keeping him in place as the water tugs on his waist and legs.

Gunner looks up --

Joseph has the rifle strap in his grip -- his legs squeeze against the log.

JOSEPH

Kick!

Instinct takes over -- Gunner kicks with all his might, clutching the rifle for dear life.

Joseph pulls Gunner up -- every muscle straining...

Gunner plants one hand on the log -- Joseph reaches down and grabs the waistline of Gunner's soaked jeans, heaving him up.

Gunner climbs on the log, wrapping his legs around it.

Both boys pant, winded and emotionally drained.

GUNNER

Thanks...

JOSEPH

Man, you're nuts!

Gunner shivers, gazing at the churning rapids that could've been his demise.

GUNNER

Come on. We're halfway across.

Gunner scoots forward. Joseph watches him incredulously, then follows.

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - DAY

Amos holds a WHISTLE to his lips -- he blows into it, then listens for any response.

AMOS

Gunner! Gunner, can you hear me?

Silence -- except for the sound of RUSHING WATER in the distance...

BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE WILD HORSE FOREST

The Montana wilderness stretches to the horizon and beyond. Red, pulsing light from the FOREST FIRE flickers in the distance.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - DAY

The office is a frenzy of ringing phones, impatient citizens, and bustling staff.

Deputy Gray punches in a number on her desk phone, eyes on a PAPER in front of her --

DEPUTY GRAY
(into the phone)
Sheriff! 'Member that boy with the
scar Chuck was tellin' us about?

The paper is a HOSPITAL RECORD.

DEPUTY GRAY (CONT'D)
Think I found something.

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - DAY

Gunner and Joseph walk through woods, bedraggled, dirty, hungry. The fun of the woods long gone.

Gunner glances over to Joseph -- Joseph hugs his arms, his eyes glazed over -- pale and sickly.

GUNNER
What did the Water Man do last time
he stalked you?

JOSEPH
What are you talking about?

GUNNER
Before he attacked you, he stalked
you, right? Tired you out?

Joseph stops walking --

JOSEPH
Got anything to eat, man?

Gunner shakes his head, fidgeting. Joseph coughs raggedly.

EXT. DOUBLE-WIDE TRAILER HOME - DAY

Rusted truck carcasses, crushed beer cans, and a redneck feel that deters unwanted company.

Deputy Gray knocks on the door. A DOG BARKS VICIOUSLY --

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
(from inside)
Shut the hell up!

Scuffling and grumbling sounds as someone approaches the front screen door, OPENING UP --

GEORGE RILEY (late 30s, a back-country lowlife) sizes up the deputy, his eyes glazed over from a few drinks despite the early hour.

GEORGE RILEY
Can, can I help you?

DEPUTY GRAY
Are you George Riley?

GEORGE RILEY
(getting nervous)
What's this about?

A LARGE MUTT runs to the front door, BARKING FOR BLOOD. George Riley grabs the dog by the collar and throws him behind the screen door, then steps onto the front porch.

DEPUTY GRAY
I just want to ask you a few questions about your son, Joseph.

George's eyes narrow --

GEORGE RILEY
What'd that kid do now?

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Joseph leans back against a smooth slab of granite rock and closes his eyes.

GUNNER
You said that the Water Man tired you out.

JOSEPH
I don't wanna talk about this... I feel like shit.

He spits to the side. He has a strained look across his face. Gunner's getting anxious himself.

GUNNER

But what did you do when he attacked you?

JOSEPH

I don't know, I just fought him off.

GUNNER

Yeah, but how?

JOSEPH

I don't know, just did, okay?!

DEPUTY GRAY (PRELAP)

When's the last time you saw Joseph?

EXT. RILEY DOUBLE-WIDE TRAILER HOME - SAME

Riley leans against his trailer home while the deputy questions him --

GEORGE RILEY

Boy's in and out a lot. Can't say for sure last time I saw him.

DEPUTY GRAY

Have you ever seen him hang around with this kid?

Deputy Gray holds up the poster of Gunner's face. George squints, looking at the photo.

GEORGE RILEY

No, never seen that boy in my life.

The DOG BARKS violently -- George kicks the screen door --

GEORGE RILEY (CONT'D)

(to the dog)

Shut the hell up!

DEPUTY GRAY

This boy went missing two days ago. A witness says he saw him and a boy with a scar across his cheek together before they disappeared.

George Riley tenses -- Deputy Gray notices.

GEORGE RILEY

Like I said, I've never seen that kid 'fore in my life.

EXT. FOREST - SAME

Joseph averts his eyes from Gunner's --

JOSEPH

I'm heading back.

GUNNER

You promised me one more day!

JOSEPH

You gotta know when to quit, man. I'm sick. Feel like shit. We have no water, no food, nothing.

GUNNER

There's a river with water right here, and... and we're almost there.

Joseph frowns -- his nervousness replaced by irritation.

JOSEPH

Gunner, man, forget about the Water Man. It's a bunch of crap.

Gunner gulps hard --

GUNNER

No, it's not. You saw him.

JOSEPH

Okay... Look, Gunner... Maybe I was making that up.

Gunner looks like he just got hit in the stomach. The whole world seems to spin around him --

GUNNER

But... what about your scar?

EXT. RILEY DOUBLE-WIDE TRAILER HOME - SAME

The deputy puts her hands on her hips -- emphasizing the PISTOL in its holster. George shifts his weight uncomfortably.

DEPUTY GRAY

Pulled some files from the county hospital. Joseph got fifteen stitches for a cut on his cheek a couple months ago.

The deputy's cold stare bores into George Riley.

DEPUTY GRAY (CONT'D)

Wanna tell me about that scar of his?

George licks his lips -- his voice is steady and calm.

GEORGE RILEY

Joseph's the kind of kid that's always finding himself in trouble. You know how boys do.

EXT. FOREST - SAME

Joseph drops his gaze -- staring darkly at the ground.

GUNNER

Joseph! What about your scar!

Gunner is frantic, on the verge of losing it...

EXT. RILEY DOUBLE-WIDE TRAILER HOME - SAME

Deputy Gray returns to her patrol car --

DEPUTY GRAY

(calling back)

Call me as soon as Joseph gets home. And Mr. Riley...

The deputy shoots George a nasty look.

DEPUTY GRAY (CONT'D)

This isn't the last time you'll be seeing me.

She ducks into the driver seat. The dog continues to BARK.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Joseph's breaking point teeters on a hair-trigger...

GUNNER

Joseph, tell me!

JOSEPH
(exploding)
I didn't get it from the Water Man,
alright!

GUNNER
Then where did you get it?

JOSEPH
You know what, man? Screw you!

Gunner grabs Joseph's shoulders, shaking him, desperate --

GUNNER
Joseph! Where did you get the
scar?!

Joseph pushes Gunner back.

JOSEPH
(screaming)
You have no idea the shit I've been
through! I survived because I only
look out for number one -- myself.

Joseph seethes at Gunner --

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
And right now, you and this stupid
plan are gettin' in the way of
that.

GUNNER
(desperate)
You won't get the rest of the
money! Our deal was you had to take
me to the Water Man!

JOSEPH
I don't give a shit about your
stupid money.

GUNNER
You know why I'm looking for the
Water Man?

Gunner's mouth quivers -- anger and fear staving off tears.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
Because my mom is dying. Everyone
thinks she'll never get better. The
doctors. Nurses. My dad. Everyone
except me.

Joseph leans his head back against the granite slab.

JOSEPH

You got a sick mom, who you love, and
you're chasing a ghost in the woods?
(genuinely)
Let's go home, Gunner.

Gunner stares at him, anger boiling in his whole body.

GUNNER

(screaming)
So you think I should give up on
her, too, huh?! The Water Man is
the only chance I have to save her!

JOSEPH

Everyone you love will one day
leave you! They'll die or just pack
their bags and leave. Grow up, kid.

Joseph coughs wretchedly, spitting thick mucus to the side.
He's in bad shape.

GUNNER

I'm going to find him, with or
without you.

He turns and storms away, following the water downstream.
Joseph watches him go, taking shallow, raspy breaths.

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - DUSK

The dark, skeletal trees seem to moan -- moss and fungus gnaw
on plant carcasses.

Amos tears through the woods. SOMETHING catches his eye. He
pauses, turning back --

Two ORBS REFLECT THE EVENING SUN back to him.

OBSIDIAN PENDANTS hang from branches -- the strange carvings
scar the tree trunks.

He CRUNCHES on something -- looks down --

A PIECE OF PAPER, wadded up.

Amos picks it up and opens -- a page from Gunner's drawing
pad -- a cartoon DETECTIVE KNOXX hovers mid-page.

He looks across the forest floor --

Scattered across the ground are Gunner's belongings: his pack, food wrappers, clothes... chewed up by something.

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - NIGHT

The night sky is salted with stars -- the FULL MOON fills the forest with monochromatic light.

Gunner marches through the dark, lonely forest. He rubs his arms, trying to keep warm. His breath comes out as steam.

ANOTHER PART OF THE FOREST

Joseph stumbles through the thick brush, hugging his scrawny bare arms to his chest. He begins to sing, hauntingly and deliriously --

JOSEPH

One, two, three four... Close your windows, lock your doors...

He's dwarfed by thick, looming pine trees -- a sinister darkness fills the spaces between.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

'Cause you never know for sure... who it is he's coming for...

Joseph's eyelids flutter, fighting to stay open.

DEEP IN THE WOODS

Gunner weaves between logs, rocks, and hillsides.

SMOKE starts to fill the forest, descending like dark, choking fog.

JOSEPH (V.O.)

(slowing down)

Five, six, seven, eight... by the time it's getting late...

EXT. WILD HORSE LAKE - NIGHT

Gunner shivers in his dirty, threadbare shirt. His shoes sink into fine-grained sand. He looks up --

He's on the shore of a LAKE, its surface covered with a thin layer of GRAY ASH.

JOSEPH (V.O.)
All you can do is wait...

Across the lake is a RAMSHACKLE HUT, worn from years of harsh weather and neglect. The FLICKERING GLOW OF A FIRE lights up the inside, smoke rising from the chimney.

JOSEPH (V.O.)
Til the Water Man decides your fate.

Gunner cautiously creeps around the lake toward the hut, entranced... scared... curious...

EXT. HUT - NIGHT

Gunner walks carefully toward the rickety hut, GUN at the ready.

The same type of OBSIDIAN ROCKS decorate the wooden door of the hut. Gunner runs his hand along the rocks. They glint like eyes, challenging him, beckoning him in.

He KNOCKS on the door, then backs up, clenching his rifle tight. His finger hovers above the trigger.

SOMETHING RUSTLES IN THE BUSHES BEHIND HIM.

Gunner spins around -- accidentally PULLING THE TRIGGER --
 BOOM!

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - SAME

The GUNSHOT echoes around the forest -- Amos freezes.

He spins around the forest, ears pricked. No clue what direction the shot was fired from.

AMOS
 (at the top of his lungs)
 Gunner!

He picks a direction and takes off running.

EXT. HUT - NIGHT

Gunner runs to the side and ducks under a bush for cover -- BIRDS take flight from its thorny branches.

His whole body trembles with fear -- he searches for any sign of movement.

A cold, eerie silence descends on the lake.

Tears brim in Gunner's eyes -- he gingerly steps out from hiding.

He creeps forward, opening the door to the hut.

INT. HUT - CONTINUOUS

Gunner steps through -- a CLICKING NOISE draws his gaze down -- BEETLES scuttle along the ground. One crawls over his shoe.

Gunner swallows hard and looks up, forcing his eyes to stay focused on the firelight. He lets his hand fall from the wood door.

The door closes behind him.

A cot with a ratty blanket, rusty pots and pans, dried meat hanging in strips along a clothesline, an ORNATE ROCKING CHAIR set right in front of the hearth.

The hut is EMPTY -- not a soul in sight.

THEN --

The WOOD DOOR CREAKS. Gunner spins around --

A FIGURE pushes the door open, heaving something behind them.

Gunner drops to his stomach by the cot, wiggling underneath.

From Gunner's vantage point beneath the cot, he can only see from the knees down -- WORN BOOTS enter frame -- re-sewn over years of use. They walk feebly toward the campfire, dragging a MASSIVE BRASS POT behind them.

The figure sets an old GRILL above the fire, plopping the brass pot on top of it.

The firelight dances in Gunner's wide, fearful eyes.

The rocking chair creaks as the figure sits down. They tend to the heavy pot nestled on the grill above the campfire.

GRUFF MALE VOICE (O.S.)
No point in hidin', son.

The voice is slow like molasses but rough as sandpaper. Decaying, hopeless.

Every muscle in Gunner's body tenses.

GRUFF MALE VOICE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 I seen you walk in after you fired
 your rifle. Under my bed, I 'spect.
 Tends to sag, so if you're down
 there when I retire you won't be
 able to breathe.

Gunner considers staying put, but decides against it. He slowly shimmies his way out from under the cot.

GRUFF MALE VOICE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 There ya go. Was afraid I'd have to
 drag you out.

Gunner stares forward, eyes wide --

THE WATER MAN rocks gently in the chair, his back to Gunner.

He's dangerously thin and feeble -- hunched shoulders, the hint of a long, white beard.

Gunner clutches his gun, fearing the Water Man might turn around and swallow him whole...

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - NIGHT

A FLASHLIGHT BEAM illuminates clouds of thick smoke pouring through the trees and rolling over the river.

Amos emerges, flashlight in hand, his mouth covered with a BANDANA.

AMOS
 Gunner, can you hear me?!

Despite the thick smoke, Amos runs between the trees, racing the river next to him.

INT. THE WATER MAN'S HUT - NIGHT

The fire dances under the massive pot -- a frothy red substance BUBBLES and BOILS over the fire.

THE WATER MAN
 Stew's about done. Hungry?

Gunner opens his mouth -- finally finding his voice, remembering how to speak.

GUNNER
N-not really...

The old man stirs the pot.

THE WATER MAN
Neither am I, truthfully. Haven't
been hungry in years.

Gunner opens his mouth, but the words catch in his throat.

THE WATER MAN (CONT'D)
What is your name, son?

GUNNER
(finding his courage)
Gunner... Gunner Boone.

The Water Man nods, tending his stew.

THE WATER MAN
Gunner Boone, what are you doing in
my home?

GUNNER
I, I'm here...
(takes a deep breath)
... to find the Water Man.

Gunner waits for a reaction... but the Water Man just stirs
the stew. Finally --

THE WATER MAN
I hope you haven't sacrificed too
much trying to find him.

Gunner's lip quivers.

GUNNER
He... He's my only hope.

THE WATER MAN
You speak of the Water Man in the
way a religious man speaks of God.
I fear a hopeful man more'n I do a
demon.

The old man shifts in his seat -- the rocking chair creaks.

THE WATER MAN (CONT'D)
I think you should head back to
your home, Gunner Boone.

Gunner stands defiant --

GUNNER

I think you're the Water Man.

THE WATER MAN

Go home, son.

GUNNER

The Water Man came back to life after he died. My mom is dying. Everyone, even my father, they... they've given up on her. But I haven't.

(a beat)

If the Water Man can come back to life, maybe he can help my mom.

The Water Man finally turns -- his eyes are COMPLETELY BLACK -- sunken and hopeless -- lifeless, lonely voids.

THE WATER MAN

Hope can drive a man to madness well 'fore he's driven to the grave.

Gunner freezes in fear.

EXT. ALONG THE RIVER - WILD HORSE FOREST - NIGHT

Amos sprints beside the river, dodging rocks and fallen logs. In the distance, it seems like a dawn from hell is breaking, smoke choking out the stars above.

THE WATER MAN (V.O.)

But love makes a man even madder. And while I've never understood hope... I understand love.

INT. HUT - NIGHT

The Water Man dips a worn metal bowl into the pot, ladling out stew. He indicates for Gunner to take it -- Gunner looks at the frothing red liquid -- shakes his head.

The Water Man brings the bowl to his own lips, slowly sipping.

GUNNER

Can you help me? Please?

THE WATER MAN

You got one thing wrong, son. I never came back from the dead. I just refused to die.

Gunner slowly circles around the fire until he's facing THE WATER MAN, rocking in his chair.

THE WATER MAN (CONT'D)

Dying... that's easy. Living's much harder. When my life was spared, it came with a price. I may not have died, but I created my own living hell...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WILD HORSE WOODS - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Edward Schaal etches a CARVING into the tree above a FRESHLY DUG GRAVE -- the strange symbol all around the forest --

THE WATER MAN (V.O.)

Sarah Schaal... she was the only part of my life that mattered.

The strange symbol is two S's, side by side, looking like a crude drawing of a river. He hangs an OBSIDIAN PENDANT on a branch above the grave.

THE WATER MAN (V.O.)

I ran 'stead of trying to save her.

His eyes are empty and hopeless.

INT. THE WATER MAN'S HUT - BACK TO THE PRESENT

The Water Man's trembling fingers set the bowl down on the ground. He reaches into his pocket --

THE WATER MAN

I haven't left these woods since. Partly 'cause I never wanted to see another human again...

EXT. WOODS - DAY - FLASHBACK

Edward Schaal, older but still just as grief-stricken, stares grimly at the sinister forest --

THE WATER MAN (V.O.)

And 'cause I could feel myself going mad. I couldn't remember where I buried my Sarah. Maybe I imagined it. Maybe I was dead after all.

Every tree before him is branded with the initials that mark his wife's grave, making it impossible to know the original...

INT. HUT - BACK TO THE PRESENT

The Water Man pulls something from his pocket -- an OBSIDIAN PENDANT.

He extends the pendant over the fire for Gunner, his HANDS visible in the light -- his fingers way too thin, the KNUCKLES stark white.

His hands are BONES.

THE WATER MAN

This is the answer you've been looking for, Gunner Boone.

Though terrified, Gunner reaches for the pendant, clasping the twine. The Water Man leans back in his rocking chair. The pendant... it's...

FLASH TO EDWARD SCHAAL COMING BACK TO LIFE

Edward Schaal gasps and sits up, taking in the world around him, overwhelmed and terrified.

He looks down in his hands -- he's holding an OBSIDIAN PENDANT.

BACK TO THE PRESENT

Gunner inspects THAT SAME PENDANT.

Gunner looks up -- the Water Man seems to gaze at the fire, but the light doesn't reflect in his eyes.

THE WATER MAN

Give it to your mother. Perhaps it will do the same for her as it's done for me...

Gunner sidesteps around the fire -- BEETLES scurry out from the shadows.

THE WATER MAN (CONT'D)
Goodbye, Gunner Boone.

Gunner sprints out of the hut --

EXT. WILD HORSE LAKE - NIGHT

Outside the hut, Gunner comes face-to-face with billowing clouds of SMOKE -- he covers his mouth and runs around the lake.

He meets the junction of river and lake -- he follows the river upstream.

EXT. BESIDE THE RIVER - NIGHT

The smoke grows thicker and thicker. ASH RAINS DOWN around Gunner as he hurries up the river.

LATER

Gunner pulls himself up a couple of boulders, looking at the granite slab where he last saw Joseph --

No one's there.

GUNNER
Joseph? Joseph!

FOOTPRINTS indicate Joseph dragged himself into the forest.

Gunner glances upstream -- the way home, to his mother -- then in the woods where the footprints lead.

Gunner takes off into the forest, following the footprints.

EXT. DEEP IN THE FOREST - NIGHT

The smoke clears in the dense brush.

Gunner creeps forward, scanning the dark woods methodically.

GUNNER
Joseph?

Something RATTLES -- CAWS -- RUSTLES -- SNAPS. Every sound magnified in the dark.

Gunner swings the gun around, holding it up defensively.

SHADOWS pass through the trees.

GUNNER (CONT'D)

Hello?

Gunner raises the gun -- panic seizing his body.

GUNNER (CONT'D)

Who's there?!

He cocks the rifle, finger poised on the trigger. He holds the gun up, looking through the sights --

A FADED CONVERSE SNEAKER --

GUNNER (CONT'D)

Joseph!

He lowers the gun. Joseph lies sprawled on the forest floor.

Gunner runs to Joseph.

GUNNER (CONT'D)

Joseph, it's me, Gunner!

Joseph's eyes focus on Gunner -- a small smile breaks across his blue-tinged lips.

JOSEPH

You came back for me...

GUNNER

No way I'm leaving your ass behind!

Gunner wraps Joseph's arm around his neck, heaving him up.

JOSEPH

(weakly)

Hey man, cursing is for lowlifes
and dirt bags.

GUNNER

(straining under the weight)

Who told you that, your mommy?

Joseph's head hangs down -- his body too weak to move.

JOSEPH

I have to tell you...

GUNNER

We gotta get out of here, there's more smoke every minute!

Gunner nudges Joseph, forcing him to take a step. Joseph plants his feet down hard --

JOSEPH

Gunner... my dad is how I got the scar. My drunk, asshole dad. I tried to runaway, but I was scared out here alone...

Joseph's eyes brighten, growing lucid --

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

But you... you were gonna come out here all by yourself. I couldn't run 'til you showed up.

GUNNER

You're my first real friend, Joseph.

JOSEPH

(smiling weakly)
I guess me too.

Joseph coughs wretchedly, doubling over.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

I'm scared, man. I don't think I can make it back...

Gunner's face brightens with an idea --

GUNNER

Soup! I can get you some soup, maybe a jacket, too!

Joseph's consciousness ebbs... he leans limply on Gunner's shoulder.

GUNNER (CONT'D)

Just wait til you see, Joseph! The Water Man is alive!

Gunner half-drags, half-carries Joseph back toward the lake.

EXT. THE WATER MAN'S HUT - MOMENTS LATER

Gunner and Joseph approach the hut --

GUNNER

It's going to be okay, Joseph.

Gunner looks up -- freezes, a look of confused horror spreading over his face --

The hut is still there... but it's different...

The roof is CAVED IN -- the wood rotten -- MOSS AND FUNGUS grow in patches -- it's dark and lifeless.

Looks like no one's lived there for DECADES. Gunner lets go of Joseph, staring at the derelict hut in shocked horror.

GUNNER (CONT'D)

What happened...

Gunner reaches into his pocket and pulls out the obsidian pendant -- still very much real.

A HEAVY CRACKLING SOUND grows behind him -- he turns --

The WILD HORSE FIRE pulses on the other side of the lake, leaping from tree to tree with terrifying dexterity.

JOSEPH

Fire...

Joseph FALLS OVER into the lake --

GUNNER

Joseph!

Joseph sinks. Gunner jumps in after him --

UNDERWATER

The eerie GHOST TOWN is illuminated by firelight below -- Joseph's silhouette descends toward it.

Gunner jumps in the water, scanning --

EERIE SHAPES rise from the submerged buildings below -- a trick of the eye, or GHOSTS...

Gunner's dives deeper for Joseph, wrapping his arms around Joseph's midsection.

He frantically kicks his way toward the surface, Joseph in tow, AIR BUBBLES leaking from his nose.

The OBSIDIAN PENDANT falls from his pocket, sinking...

Gunner's eyes go wide -- he lets one hand free.

He tries to grab the pendant -- fingers grasping through the water.

His grip on Joseph loosens -- the pendant plummets further.

Joseph's head lolls limply on Gunner's shoulder.

Gunner lets go of Joseph for one more attempt to grab the pendant -- his fingers just barely graze the twine --

The last air bubble leaves Joseph's nose. He sinks deeper --

Gunner turns away from the pendant.

With all his might, he kicks against the water, pulling Joseph toward the surface.

EXT. LAKE - NIGHT

Gunner bursts above the water, Joseph in tow. Gunner drags him to shore. The smoke is EVERYWHERE.

Gunner spots THE WATER MAN through the smoke, watching him.

GUNNER
(screaming)
Why are you doing this?

The Water Man remains silent -- black eyes boring into Gunner.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
Help us out of here!

No answer.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
I said HELP US!

Gunner grabs a ROCK on the shore of the lake and hurls it toward the Water Man.

The rock swirls the smoke -- the Water Man disappears in the moving particles.

Gunner chokes -- eyes and throat burning.

He plops down beside the river, lying Joseph down beside him.

He slaps Joseph's face -- but Joseph just lies there limply.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
Joseph! Stay with me!

Gunner shakes Joseph HARD -- Joseph's eyes open for a second.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
You gotta get up, man! We can't
stay here!
(coughing)
Joseph!

Gunner looks around -- darkness and emptiness everywhere.

GUNNER (CONT'D)
Is anybody out there?

Then --

A BRIGHT LIGHT grows steadily toward him, jumping and jolting as it gets closer.

Gunner freezes, terrified.

VOICE (O.S.)
Gunner!

Gunner blinks through the tears -- the light shines to the side, and as Gunner's eyes adjusts, he sees Amos with a flashlight.

GUNNER
DAD!

Gunner jumps to his feet -- sprinting toward his dad --

They reunite -- Amos picks Gunner up, holding him close. He kisses Gunner's cheeks, tears pouring from his eyes.

AMOS
My baby... my baby boy, it's
okay... I got you...

Gunner also cries, safe in his father's arms.

AMOS (CONT'D)
We have to get out of here --

GUNNER
Joseph! We can't leave Joseph!

Gunner points behind him -- Amos spots the unconscious boy.

He hands Gunner the flashlight then goes over to Joseph, scooping the boy up and hoisting him over his shoulder.

They take off into the woods -- the silhouette of the Water Man barely visible through the smoke, watching them flee...

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - DAWN

Thick smoke obscures the warm sunrise colors -- but the dawn's SHADOWLESS LIGHT illuminates the forest.

Amos walks steadily through the trees, both Gunner and Joseph slung over his shoulders. His eyes are sharp and lucid, but the skin around them is strained.

Erratic FLASHES of POLICE LIGHTS beam through the trees -- Sheriff Goodwin, Deputy Gray, and FOREST SERVICE WORKERS run to Amos and the two boys.

INT. FOREST SERVICE EMERGENCY TRUCK - MOVING - EARLY MORNING

Two rangers attend to Joseph -- Amos holds Gunner -- they bounce along the rough forest road, holding OXYGEN MASKS to their faces.

NEWSCASTER (PRELAP)

After a long night of evacuating homes and setting up fire barriers, the Wild Horse Fire is under control.

CLOSE ON TELEVISION SCREEN

NEWSCASTER (CONT'D)

There have been no casualties and only minor property damage from the sudden and powerful brush fire.

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - MORNING

FOREST SERVICE WORKERS spray the remaining embers with water and red fire retardant.

NEWSCASTER (V.O.)

But most of the beautiful forest has been burned, and will take decades to regrow.

EXT. WILD HORSE FOREST - DAY

Now a black, barren forest.

The lake littered with ash and debris. The Water Man's hut reduced to smouldering ashes -- BLACK OBSIDIAN STONES the only remaining evidence of its existence...

INT. GUNNER'S ROOM - DAY

Gunner's eyes open lethargically --

Soft sunlight streams in. His parents' MUFFLED VOICES waft from the kitchen. A child safe at home.

MARY (O.S.)
I'm going to check on him.

Her footsteps pad down the hallway -- she peeks her head in.

MARY (CONT'D)
(seeing him awake)
Gunner!

She goes to his bed -- a SCARF covers her bare head -- she's gaunt, but seeing her boy awake brings color to her cheeks.

GUNNER
Mom!

He sits up and wraps his arms around her -- she holds his head to her chest, clutching him close. TEARS fall down her cheeks.

MARY
My baby... you're safe. You're home.

GUNNER
I messed up, Mom. I tried to save you and I... I messed up...
(burying his face into her)
I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!

MARY
Gunner...

She pulls him back, looking into his eyes. She sniffs and wipes a tear away --

MARY (CONT'D)
Remember what I told you? About heaven and hell?

GUNNER
We make our own here on Earth...

MARY

Exactly. And I couldn't ask for a better heaven. I got a husband who loves me. A son who will do anything to help me, even go off into the woods.

A smile forms on Gunner's lips.

INT. HALLWAY RIGHT OUTSIDE GUNNER'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Amos listens outside the door --

MARY (O.S.)

And this son of mine... he's so smart. Reads books I never even heard of. Even writing one himself.

Amos's lips curl in a small, wistful smile.

INT. GUNNER'S ROOM - DAY

She strokes Gunner's hair tenderly.

MARY

And I know that both my darling husband and amazing son are going to be okay, no matter what happens.

She smiles -- Gunner snuggles in her arms.

A KNOCK on the door -- Amos steps in, a bit tentative.

AMOS

Hey, Gunner.

GUNNER

Hey... Dad.

Awkward. Amos clears his throat --

AMOS

I, uh... I found this in the woods...

He extends the crumpled-up page from Gunner's graphic novel. Gunner takes it.

AMOS (CONT'D)

I... I just wanted you to know, I have an idea. For the ending of Detective Knoxx.

Gunner's face lights up --

GUNNER
You... you read my story?

AMOS
(tearing up)
Yeah... It's really... really good,
Gunner. The best thing I've ever
read.

Gunner beams --

GUNNER
What's your idea?

Amos comes over and sits on the bed.

AMOS
Well, so Detective Knoxx is walking
into a crime scene, but what if...
what if it isn't the crime scene of
his murder...

Mary keeps one arm around Gunner, the other grabbing Amos's hand.

EXT. DOUBLE WIDE TRAILER HOME - DAY

The rickety screen door opens -- Joseph, back to full health, bounds out of the trailer, hoisting a DUFFEL BAG over his shoulder.

Deputy Gray and a CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES REP (40s) follow Joseph out of the trailer.

AMOS (V.O.)
What if it's the crime scene of the
case he never closed, died trying
to solve...

George Riley watches from behind the screen door, a cold, bitter expression plastered on his face.

EXT. WILLOW SPUR BASEBALL FIELD - DAY

Joseph, suited up with a BALL and GLOVE, warms up his throwing arm on the pitcher's mound --

AMOS (V.O.)
 And when he goes in, he's a ghost,
 right, so he can slip through
 walls...

Gunner has the BAT, preparing to swing. Amos plays catcher,
 his glove ready for Joseph's throw.

GUNNER (V.O.)
 And there's a clue inside the wall!

Joseph throws the ball -- Gunner HITS IT -- it flies a couple
 feet -- a SMILE breaks across Gunner's face.

AMOS (V.O.)
 Exactly.

SWEEPING ACROSS THE MONTANA WILDERNESS

The forest is burnt and dead for acres.

GUNNER (V.O.)
 And that clue, that leads him to
 find the murderer of the crime he
 was investigating!

THE SEASONS PASS IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE -- WHITE SNOW
 blankets the BLACK ASH -- then the snow melts away.

EXT. FLATHEAD COUNTY CEMETERY - DAY

Mary's FUNERAL -- springtime flowers bloom. The cemetery is
 PACKED WITH MOURNERS.

Gunner and Amos stand side-by-side. Tears streak down their
 face as Mary's COFFIN is lowered into the ground.

AMOS (V.O.)
 And maybe, maybe he doesn't even
 find his body... maybe at that
 point, it doesn't matter anymore.

Amos wraps his arm around Gunner.

INT. GUNNER'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Amos helps Gunner bind the FINISHED GRAPHIC NOVEL.

AMOS (V.O.)
 He finished his purpose. And that
 lets his soul be free.
 (MORE)

AMOS (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 And he lets himself leave the Earth
 after that, no longer a lonely
 ghost.

They laugh, comfortable and happy together.

EXT. WILLOW SPUR K-12 SCHOOL - DAY

First day back at the small rural school -- buses and kids
 pour in from all directions.

GUNNER (V.O.)
 I love it, Dad.

Gunner and Joseph stand outside the front steps, selling the
 finished graphic novel.

AMOS (V.O.)
 Really?

GUNNER (V.O.)
 You wanna... You wanna write it
 with me?

Two GIRLS (11-12) come up and buy the graphic novel -- one
 dollar each. One of the girls smiles at Gunner.

Gunner beams -- Joseph elbows him playfully.

EXT. WILD HORSE LAKE - DAY

The lake is surrounded by barren, burnt land and trees --
 obsidian rocks the only evidence of the Water Man's hut.

AMOS (V.O.)
 I'd love that more than anything,
 Gunner.

From below the ashes, A SPRIG OF GREEN GROWS.

THE END.