

VERVE

BLACK KITE

by

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EXT. TELEGI NATIONAL FOREST, CALIFORNIA - DAY

The forest is burning.

Thousands of acres on fire. Douglas firs, California reds, ponderosa pines -- hundreds of feet tall -- engulfed in flames. We can almost feel the heat on our faces. Wood snaps so loud it sounds like breaking the bones of the gods.

A B747 supertanker flies overhead, dumping eighteen thousand gallons of water on the flames.

It does nothing.

EXT. MEADOW FLOOR - CONTINUOUS

Firefighters walk shoulder-to-shoulder straight towards the inferno. Heavy boots trodding through a meadow full of wilted yellow wildflowers. Up ahead, the brush rustles, then ripples in a wave right towards them...

Dozens of small animals burst forth. Mice, squirrels, chipmunks. Running like mad in the opposite direction.

One of the firefighters looks down and sees: Snakes slithering between his feet. Racing away from the fire.

EXT. TELEGI NATIONAL FOREST - DAY

A second supertanker swoops over the trees, dropping a payload of bright-red fire retardant across the forest. Through the red shroud, we see that the fire rages on.

Suddenly, a bird, dripping with fire, punches through the smoke up into the dirty blue sky. It flaps desperately for a moment, then goes stiff and plummets towards the earth.

As it falls, we hear a blood-curdling sound: A SCREECHING, DIGITAL SCRAMBLE. And suddenly we cut to--

A PICTURE OF A GIRL

Eleven years old. Freckles, bright eyes, big smile. She wears a soccer jersey and holds a soccer ball on her knee.

The picture is on the back of an iPhone, lying facedown on a desk. A woman picks it up...

This is JESSIE, 40s. Blonde hair, dark roots. Small town pretty. She looks at the phone and sees: an incoming emergency alert.

JESSIE

Shit.

Jessie looks up, revealing that we're inside

MONK'S INSURANCE

A small, local insurance office. California Bear Flag hanging on the wall. Half a dozen employees looking at their phones. They're all getting the same message: Mandatory evacuations.

MOMENTS LATER

People grab their things and head out the door. Jessie and CINDY, a co-worker, are the last ones out.

CINDY

I'm happy to give you a ride...

JESSIE

That's alright, Ken's on the way. Although ten bucks says he stops for coffee first.

They laugh and Jessie heads out the front door. Cindy stays behind and starts setting the security alarm. Suddenly, Jessie bursts back in--

JESSIE (CONT'D)

Hang on! Sorry!

JESSIE'S DESK

Her iPhone is still on the desk. Picture of her daughter face-up. Almost forgotten, but not quite. Jessie runs up and snatches the phone off the desk.

EXT. STREET - MOMENTS LATER

Jessie stands in front of the office, alone, texting on her phone. A powerful gust of wind takes her by surprise.

She squints and turns away, battered by dust. Once it dies down, she looks up and sees:

A single ember, floating in the air. A tiny, glowing speck. It zig-zags downwards, hits the asphalt, and goes cold. She looks at it strangely.

A moment later, a green SUV rolls up.

INT. GREEN SUV - MOMENTS LATER

Jessie's husband KEN, 40s, is behind the wheel. Jessie looks at the empty cup holder.

JESSIE
No coffee. I'm impressed.

KEN
Oh, believe me, I thought about it.
You talk to Wendy?

JESSIE
Yeah, I just texted her.

KEN
What'd she say?

JESSIE
Nothing yet. I'll text her again.

Jessie pulls out her phone and starts texting.

KEN
Ron said the fire's on the other
side of Merced. Not even close.

JESSIE
Okay, good.

KEN
Let's not go nuts packing stuff,
okay? I don't wanna have to take
the plants and the TV and the...

Suddenly, Jessie stops texting. Ken's voice fades into the background. She hears something else... a distant, dull roar. Like the sound of the ocean.

She looks out the window, and her eyes go wide.

JESSIE
Oh my God, the trailer park...

KEN
What?

JESSIE
The trailer park's on fire!

Out her window, far off in the distance, we see smoke coming up from a group of mobile homes. Orange flames flickering on the roofs like birthday candles.

KEN

Holy shit.

Ken steps on it.

INT. GREEN SUV - MOMENTS LATER

They turn onto their street and their faces go white.

KEN

No...

JESSIE

Oh my God...

Their block is already on fire. Ken guns it down the street, zipping past several burning homes before slowing down...

JESSIE (CONT'D)

OH MY GOD, OUR HOUSE...

Their little ranch house is completely on fire.

Ken throws the car in park at the base of the driveway next to their mailbox: a wooden largemouth bass with a red flag on it. He starts to get out of the car.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

What are you doing??

KEN

I'm gonna grab the computer. It'll take two seconds.

Jessie grabs his arm. Hard. Forcing him to turn and look her in the eyes.

JESSIE

Ken. Fuck the computer. We gotta get out of here.

Ken snaps out of it. Gets back in the car.

EXT. KEN AND JESSIE'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

As the green SUV speeds off, we remain behind with the bass mailbox. Mouth open in a silent scream. In the background, Ken and Jessie's house burns to the ground.

INT. GREEN SUV - MOMENTS LATER

Ken white-knuckles it. Jessie is in shock.

KEN
What did Wendy say?

Jessie looks at her phone.

JESSIE
Nothing. I'll text her again.

KEN
Call her.

JESSIE
Okay.

Jessie dials her daughter. "Call failed." As Jessie dials again, she glances out the window and sees fire snaking along the power lines next to them. Such a strange sight. Then--

KEN
What the fuck...?

Ken sees something up ahead. Jessie turns and sees it, too: A massive traffic jam.

EXT. INTERSECTION - MOMENTS LATER

The main intersection in downtown Avalon is jam-packed with hundreds of cars. Bumper to bumper. Barely moving. All of them trying to get on the only highway out of town.

This intersection is designed to handle the routine traffic of a town of twenty thousand people. But suddenly all of them are in their cars at once, and it's chaos.

A FIREMAN, 30s, stands next to a fire engine on the far side of the intersection, directing traffic.

FIREMAN
MOVE! KEEP GOING, KEEP GOING!

Ken and Jessie try to cut through and go straight. The fireman blocks their way and waves them to the left.

FIREMAN (CONT'D)
No no no. That way!

Jessie leans out the window.

JESSIE

We gotta get to Ridgeview! Our daughter goes to Ridgeview!

FIREMAN

We already got the high schools evacuated. You gotta take care of yourself. Come on, keep moving.

JESSIE

Where did they take the kids? My phone's not--

BWAAAAHHHH -- the car behind them lays on the horn.

FIREMAN

LADY. YOU GOTTA MOVE! COME ON, COME ON, COME ON...

Right then, the fireman sees something behind them.

FIREMAN (CONT'D)

What the hell...?

We follow his look: a dozen nurses in pink pants and floral shirts are pushing disabled patients in cots and wheel chairs towards the intersection.

FIREMAN (CONT'D)

Hey! What are you doing?!

A Hispanic NURSE pushing a quadriplegic man in a wheelchair rushes towards him.

NURSE

Help... we need help...

FIREMAN

You guys gotta go back right now and get in a vehicle.

NURSE

We can no... bus gone, bus on fire...

FIREMAN

What...?

Suddenly, a SCREAM. Everyone turns: On the far side of the intersection, we see that a KFC restaurant is in flames.

The fire is upon us.

There's a moment of stillness and then... the fireman turns back to the cars and bellows as loud as he can--

FIREMAN (CONT'D)
GOOOOOOOO! GOOOOOOOO!

Inside the cars, people are panicking. They lurch forwards, but only move inches at a time. There's nowhere to go.

FIREMAN (CONT'D)
GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

INT. GREEN SUV - CONTINUOUS

The car behind Jessie and Ken BANGS into their bumper, and their heads snap forward. Ken whips around and screams at the guy behind him--

KEN
You hit my car, asshole!

JESSIE
Ken, we gotta go.

KEN
I know.

JESSIE
The fire is right there...

KEN
I KNOW! THERE'S NOWHERE TO GO!

EXT. INTERSECTION - CONTINUOUS

Several cars drive off-road, trying to slip around the traffic. A Camry leads the way, driving over the shoulder and down an embankment. Right away, it gets stuck in the gravel. Tires spinning frantically in place.

Trucks and SUVs try to follow suit and immediately get stuck behind the trapped Camry.

BWAAAHHHHHHHHHH -- they all lay on their horns.

INT. GREEN SUV - CONTINUOUS

Jessie looks around at the chaos:

-Fire blows out the windows of the KFC.

-People abandon their cars in the middle of the road and start running on foot down the highway.

-The fireman helps a nurse lift a woman with no legs into the fire engine.

-An SUV plows into the back of the Camry, trying to push it out of the way.

JESSIE

Ken, we gotta do something...

KEN

I know.

Ken creeps the car forward. Horns are blaring in all directions. Dark smoke is billowing up behind them.

JESSIE

If we don't get out of here we're gonna die.

KEN

I KNOW. I'M TRYING!

Ken hits the gas and rams in between two abandoned cars in front of them. His side mirror snaps off...

KEN (CONT'D)

Come on...

Their SUV is now wedged between the two cars. He stomps on the gas but they're not going anywhere...

KEN (CONT'D)

Come on, motherfucker!

Suddenly, they break through...

JESSIE

Good job, babe, good job...

Ken carefully weaves around several other abandoned cars. Now they're going 5, 10, 15 miles per hour. And finally... they break through onto the highway.

Jessie looks out the back window. A handful of lucky cars are getting through behind them. But dozens of vehicles are still stuck back in the smoke.

POP! POP! POP!

One by one, tires on the trapped cars explode from the heat. The fireman continues to load people onto the fire engine. A moment later, they're swallowed up by thick black smoke.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

Oh my God...

She looks away. Too awful to watch.

EXT. ROUTE 44 - CONTINUOUS

Their SUV zips past a wooden sign on the side of the road, printed in a yellow, National Parks font: "Welcome to Avalon!"

The sign is already in flames.

INT. GREEN SUV - MOMENTS LATER

The world around them is on fire. On both sides of the highway, the forest burns red and orange, like lava. Smoke so heavy, it looks like the middle of the night. Embers pelt the windshield as they push faster.

Ken stares straight down the road up ahead and grips the steering wheel tightly. Suddenly, he looks at his hands.

They're covered in something black and sticky. He rubs his fingers together but it won't come off.

JESSIE

What is that?

A beat.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

Ken, what is that?

KEN

The steering wheel is melting.

JESSIE

Oh my God.

He grabs the wheel tight and drives faster.

INT. GREEN SUV - MOMENTS LATER

Ken and Jessie are dripping with sweat. Smoke is starting to filter inside the car through the vents. Jessie covers her mouth and looks out the window:

Three deer are bounding through the fire in the same direction as them. Leaping through the flames. She watches them. Sees the fear in their eyes. Then--

KEN
What is that?

Jessie turns back and sees that straight ahead of them is a white curtain of smoke hanging across the road.

JESSIE
I don't know...

Their car is headed straight for it. There's nothing they can do but dive INTO THE SMOKE.

Everything is white. It's quiet and eerie. Like passing into the afterlife. Suddenly, they punch through to...

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FIRE

They're back in the land of the living.

They can see the world around them again. It's the early afternoon. The sun is a sickly yellow disk in the sky. News helicopters circle around like vultures.

Jessie breathes a huge sigh of relief.

JESSIE
Oh, thank God. Good job, babe. Good job...

She looks out the window at the field beside them. Right then, the three deer leap through the smoke. They're safe, too. The first two deer spring on ahead. The fawn bounces along behind them when suddenly...

FWHOOM!!!

A BOBCAT springs out of the brush and takes the fawn to the ground. Jessie gasps.

JESSIE (CONT'D)
Oh my God!

KEN
What?

Jessie looks out the back window, straining to see what happens next... but they're already too far away.

She turns back and looks straight ahead.

KEN (CONT'D)
What's wrong?

JESSIE
Nothing.

They speed down the highway.

EXT. FOOL'S GOLD FAIRGROUNDS - LATER

A large lot designed for local fairs, cheap festivals, and swap meets has been temporarily converted into an evacuation center for evacuees of the Avalon Fire.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - BACK LOT - MOMENTS LATER

Schoolbuses from all the local schools are parked in a line. Teenagers mill around the parking lot. Laughing, flirting, waiting for their parents.

Jessie and Ken find the Ridgeview High School buses and go over to their daughter's principal, MRS. WINDSOR, 50s.

JESSIE
Mrs. Windsor!

She turns. A look of surprise on her face.

MRS. WINDSOR
Hi...

JESSIE
We're here to pick up Wendy.

Mrs. Windsor looks at them strangely.

MRS. WINDSOR
I don't understand...

JESSIE
We just got here. Do we have to sign her out or--

MRS. WINDSOR
Wendy was sick today...

JESSIE
What?

MRS. WINDSOR
You called this morning and said she was sick.

A beat.

JESSIE

I'm sorry, you're thinking of someone else. I'm Jessie Hund...

MRS. WINDSOR

I know... You called this morning and told me Wendy had a fever.

JESSIE

No I didn't.

MRS. WINDSOR

Well... somebody did...

Jessie closes her eyes, realizing...

JESSIE

Oh my God... Oh my God...

KEN

So what, you're saying she's not on this bus?

MRS. WINDSOR

No...

Jessie pulls out her phone and calls Wendy. "Call failed."

KEN

So which bus is she on?

MRS. WINDSOR

She's not on any of these buses...

Jessie looks around the fairgrounds. The world spins.

MRS. WINDSOR (CONT'D)

See, look at our list. I have her down as sick...

KEN

What are you saying? She wasn't at school at all today?

MRS. WINDSOR

No...

KEN

Oh my God.

Jessie rushes over to a group of high school kids by the buses. They're quiet now. All watching her in horror.

JESSIE

Does anybody know where Wendy is?

They all lower their eyes.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

I'm Wendy Hund's mom. Does anybody know where Wendy is?

Finally, she finds a boy she knows. She grabs him.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

Ethan. Where's Wendy? You're not gonna get her in trouble. I just want to know where she is.

ETHAN

(softly)

I'm sorry, I don't know...

Jessie pulls out her phone and dials. "Call failed."

JESSIE

Come on...

She tries again... and again... and again... "Call failed."

JESSIE (CONT'D)

(screaming)

COME ON!!!

EXT. TELEGI NATIONAL FOREST - EASTERN SIDE - CONTINUOUS

A car cruises down a two-lane road deep in Telegi Park. We're on the Eastern side of the forest. Safe for now.

BOY (IN THE CAR)

Hey, Wendy. Look.

INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS

We see a girl, riding shotgun. Wendy, 17. Several years older than she is in the picture on her mom's iPhone case. Faded freckles. Distant green eyes.

BOY

Wendy!

WENDY

What?!

BOY
Watch this shit.

Sitting in the back is ELI, 17. He takes a bottle and throws it out the window of the moving car. It hits a tree, glass exploding everywhere. Wendy and Eli laugh.

WENDY
Jesus Christ...

The driver, KAYLEE, 17, looks at him in the rearview mirror.

KAYLEE
Wait, what was that?

WENDY
He threw a bottle out the window.

KAYLEE
What the fuck, Eli! You can't do that out here!

ELI
And yet... I did.

Wendy laughs. Kaylee shakes her head and steps on the gas.

EXT. "THE FLATS" - LATER

Wendy sits on a massive flat granite boulder, looking out over a meadow of dead wildflowers. AirPods in her ears, listening to music. Behind her stands a grove of hundred-foot tall sugar pine trees.

In the distance, she sees Kaylee and Eli vaping on a rock ledge. The two of them start awkwardly making out.

Wendy rolls her eyes and shakes her head. She turns up her music and lays down on the boulder.

ON WENDY

Eyes closed. Soaking up the sun. Dead to the world. All we can hear is her music...

Suddenly, a single ember floats across the frame.

A moment later, a second ember flitters through the air and touches down on the granite beside her. It glows.

Suddenly, a hot breeze sweeps across the flats, and now dozens of embers swirl around her, landing on her face.

WENDY
Ow! What the fuck?

Wendy sits up and yanks out her AirPods. Suddenly sees something.

WENDY (CONT'D)
Holy shit... You guys. You guys!
YOU GUYS!!!

ELI (O.S.)
(annoyed)
WHAT.

Wendy scrambles to her feet and runs towards the others.

WENDY
There's a fire, there's a fire!!

Reverse to reveal the grove of sugar pines behind them. The treetops are ablaze.

EXT. TRAIL - MOMENTS LATER

Jessie, Eli, and Kaylee sprint up the trail back towards the trailhead. Wendy looks at her phone. No reception.

WENDY
Do you guys have any bars?

KAYLEE
No.

ELI
Dude. If they evacuate the school,
we're in deep shit.

Right then, Kaylee rounds a bend in the trail and freezes.

KAYLEE
FUCK.

Wendy and Eli come to a stop beside her and see: her car is on fire.

ELI
Whooooa...

Wendy looks around and sees that the road they came in on is already cut off by fire.

WENDY
Guys, we gotta get out of here...

KAYLEE
My dad is gonna kill me!

WENDY
Kaylee! Come on, we have to go!

She grabs Kaylee's hand and pulls her away.

EXT. FOOL'S GOLD FAIRGROUNDS - SAME

Jessie and Ken stand beneath a cheap blue tent with Mrs. Windsor, Eli's mom, Kaylee's parents, and TWO STATE TROOPERS.

ELI'S MOM
No, of course we don't know where they are. They were ditching school!

STATE TROOPER
I understand, ma'am. But are there places they normally go? Places we should look first?

A beat. Nobody says a word. Then--

JESSIE
The bowling alley.

Everyone looks at her.

JESSIE (CONT'D)
One time I caught Kaylee and Wendy there. In the parking lot.

The state trooper lays a map out on the table.

STATE TROOPER
Can you point it out to me?

Jessie nods. Points.

STATE TROOPER (CONT'D)
Ok. Do they ever go into the park?

Jessie looks back down at the map. Her focus slowly shifts from Avalon towards Telegi National Park: a huge green expanse, 166 square miles, twenty times the size of their small town. It just keeps going and going and going...

STATE TROOPER (CONT'D)
Ma'am?

JESSIE
(quietly)
Yeah. Sometimes they go there.

The state troopers exchange a glance.

STATE TROOPER
Okay. We'll call in these
locations. We already have teams
spread out, looking for...

He keeps talking, but Jessie's not listening. She's just staring at the map. Staring at big, green Telegi Forest. The size of it. The hopeless enormity of it...

EXT. TELEGI NATIONAL FOREST - CONTINUOUS

The air is dense with smoke. Wendy, Eli, and Kaylee are running as fast as they can. But they're getting tired...

Wendy glances back and sees: a wall of fire behind them. It plows forward. Steady. Indefatigable. Devouring the forest.

ELI
Dude, this is how people die.

WENDY
Shut the fuck up, Eli!

KAYLEE
Wendy, where are we going??

WENDY
There's a road right up here
somewhere...

Suddenly, Kaylee's foot snags under a tree root. She trips and goes tumbling down a huge embankment into the woods.

WENDY (CONT'D)
Kaylee!

Everything goes quiet. No response. She's so far down, they can't even see her.

WENDY (CONT'D)
Kaylee, are you okay?!

After a moment, Kaylee pops her head up.

KAYLEE
Fuck. Yeah, I'm okay.

WENDY
Climb back up! Hurry!

KAYLEE
It's too steep. Keep going! I'll
catch up.

Eli looks at Wendy.

ELI
I'll go down there with her. We'll
meet you on the road.

WENDY
Are you sure?

ELI
Yeah, yeah. Keep going.

WENDY
Okay.

Eli carefully slides down the embankment and joins Kaylee at the bottom. Wendy watches as the two of them start running through the woods.

Now alone, Wendy turns and looks back at the fire: less than a hundred feet away.

EXT. FOREST - MOMENTS LATER

Wendy sprints through the woods. Ducking under branches. Stepping over fallen trees...

Down below, Eli and Kaylee are slowly starting to disappear in the smoke. We can barely see them...

Wendy's feet pound through the brush. The next time she glances down, she can't see Eli and Kaylee at all...

EXT. PAVED ROAD - TELEGI PARK - MOMENTS LATER

Wendy bursts through into a clearing and finds herself on a paved road in the middle of the park. She looks around:

She's standing in a white fog of smoke. Impossible to see more than twenty feet in any direction. Fire roaring on both sides of the road.

WENDY
Kaylee! Eli!

No response. Wendy jogs down the road into the smoke. After a dozen steps she stops. Fire is blocking the way. She turns and starts running in the opposite direction. After a moment, she stops again. Fire is blocking this way, too.

Wendy looks around in horror. There's nowhere to go.

WENDY (CONT'D)

KAYLEE!

Wendy takes a deep breath, and the air burns her lungs. Clutching her chest--

WENDY (CONT'D)

Ow... ow, fuck...

She wheezes painfully and drops down to the road. After a moment, she hears a hissing sound. She looks down and sees: her knees are sizzling on the pavement.

She can't even scream as her flesh cooks in front of her. There's nothing to do but wait for death...

Suddenly, she hears AN ENGINE. Through the fire and the smoke she sees:

The front of an OLD RED PICKUP TRUCK coming straight at her. Headlights yellow through the smoke. Bent, banged up grill.

WENDY (CONT'D)

Help.

The truck pulls up next to her and the passenger door opens. Inside is a MAN wearing orange tinted glasses and a trucker hat. We can't see his face.

He looks at her for a long moment. Then--

MAN

(softly)

Come with me.

Wendy looks up at him. Is this real? Or a dream?

WENDY

Please. Help me.

A beat.

MAN

Come with me.

Wendy drags herself inside the truck, then collapses on the seat.

The door closes behind her, and as she slips into unconsciousness, the red truck roars down the road, disappearing into the smoke.

EXT. FOOL'S GOLD FAIRGROUNDS - SUNSET

Hours have passed. No more cars are coming. Anybody who was going to show up has already shown up. The parents of the missing kids sit in the dreadful silence. Waiting.

Suddenly, they hear a commotion near the parking lot entrance. They see headlights. The first vehicle in hours.

EXT. PARKING LOT - CONTINUOUS

Jessie, Ken, and the other parents rush over towards a white church van with its headlights on. The side door opens...

Two people come out. Completely covered in ash. They look like they've just emerged from the rubble of a bombed-out building. It's Kaylee and Eli.

Their parents embrace them. But Kaylee and Eli just stare straight ahead. Completely gray, except for their eyes.

ELI'S MOM

Eli! Eli, thank God...

Eli doesn't even look at her. No jokes now. Whoever he was before, that person is gone.

Jessie and Ken run up to the van and look inside--

KEN

Wendy??

There's nobody else in there. Jessie races over to Kaylee as two paramedics lead her away.

JESSIE

Kaylee. It's me, Mrs. Hund. Where's Wendy?

A flicker of recognition in Kaylee's eyes. She looks at Jessie.

KAYLEE

She was right in front of us...

JESSIE

Okay, honey, okay. But where is she now?

KAYLEE

I don't know. She should be here by now...

A look of horror on Jessie's face. Right then--

ELI

Unnnhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

Eli makes a strange, guttural sound. His head lolls and suddenly he turns and vomits blood all over the pavement. The paramedics catch him as he collapses into their arms.

PARAMEDIC

We gotta get him out of here...

They slip a mask over his mouth and nose.

ELI'S MOM

Eli?! Eli, I love you... Eli, I love you...

PARAMEDIC

...lungs are burned, possible internal bleeding...

ELI'S MOM

Eli!!!

They whisk him away. Everyone rushes back towards the evacuation center. Everyone except for Jessie and Ken. Alone beside the empty white church van.

KEN

Jessie. Where is she?

JESSIE

She'll be here soon. We just have to wait.

KEN

But what if--

JESSIE

She's coming. We just have to wait. We just have to wait...

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - NIGHT

Jessie and Ken stand at the entrance to the fairgrounds. They look back down the highway, back towards Avalon:

The fire rages on, lighting up the night sky, and we slowly
FADE TO BLACK.

INT. BASE CAMP TENT - DAY

A large white tent in the middle of a field. Full of police, firefighters, and volunteers. In front of them are laptops with GoFundMe pages on the screens.

SUPER: FIVE WEEKS LATER

INT. FRANK'S "OFFICE" - CONTINUOUS

The Sheriff of Boone County, FRANK, 50s, ducks through a flap into the private, partitioned-off area of the tent. Here, sitting on a couch, he finds Jessie and Ken. They look like they haven't slept in weeks.

They stand up to greet him.

FRANK

I'm sorry to keep you waiting. They didn't tell me you were--

JESSIE

It's okay.

FRANK

Can I get you coffee or water or anything?

Jessie shakes her head, no.

FRANK (CONT'D)

Ken?

KEN

We're fine.

FRANK

Okay. Let's take a seat.

They sit.

FRANK (CONT'D)

It's been over a month since we started searching for Wendy. At this point, we've done everything we possibly can to find her.

(MORE)

FRANK (CONT'D)

But given the size of the search area and the scope of the damage, we now think it's unlikely we'll ever be able to locate her remai--

JESSIE

You know what's not fair?

Jessie looks off into the distance. As she speaks, her eyes well up with tears.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

We lost our house, too. And who cares, it's just a house... but that means her room is gone. All her things are gone. All those memories... it's like losing every single piece of her.

The tears spill down her cheeks. Ken just stares straight ahead with hollow eyes. After a beat, Jessie looks at Frank.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. I know you have to say it. Go ahead and say it.

Frank looks at her sadly. Then--

FRANK

As of this morning, search operations for the Avalon Fire have been called off. All remaining missing persons, including Wendy, are now presumed to be dead.

INT. BASE CAMP TENT - CONTINUOUS

The volunteers continue working on their laptops. Typing. Casually talking. Then suddenly they hear--

JESSIE'S SCREAM

Everyone in the tent stops what they're doing. They look in the direction of Frank's office. All we can hear is a long, agonizing wail. More animal than human. And then--

JESSIE (O.S.)

My baby... my baby...

Everyone stands there in the awful silence.

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

My baby... my baaaby...

We slowly back away from all of it. The horror. The grief. The awful sound of human suffering.

We drift away from the office, away from the volunteers...

OUTSIDE THE TENT

We see that the rescue operation is coming to an end. Firefighters, police, and National Guard are packing up...

THE CITY OF AVALON

We see the extent of the damage. Blocks of the city are completely gone. Rows of houses, burned down to the foundation. Nothing left but the driveways...

OUTSKIRTS OF TOWN

An older, heavily wooded area. Secluded. Most of the houses out here have been miraculously spared from the flames. We go down a long, isolated driveway towards a...

BIG BROWN HOUSE

Tucked away, back in the trees. A massive home with a gabled roof, completely untouched by the fire. On the side of the house is a freestanding, yellow garage. And inside that garage we see...

THE OLD RED PICKUP TRUCK

The garage door slowly goes down, swallowing the truck in darkness, and as we FADE TO BLACK, the title rises on-screen:

BLACK KITE

CUT TO:

THICK BLACK WATER

A 5-inch deep river of ash rushing along a curb, overflowing a storm drain and flooding the street.

SUPER: NORTHERN CALIFORNIA - ONE YEAR LATER

A pair of heavy boots walks up the street through the black slurry. The boots belong to NICK DOSS, 40s, wearing a blue utility jumpsuit and carrying a black binder.

He reaches the top of the street, where suddenly we discover the source of the water...

A BURNED-OUT BUILDING

A black husk, still smoking, drenched in thousands of gallons of water. Surrounded by police and exhausted firefighters loading equipment back into their trucks.

Nick nods at a patrolman, ducks under the yellow tape, then heads towards the charred remains of the entrance. There, he finds a stocky man in his 60s, staring at the structure vacantly, in a state of shock.

NICK

Are you the owner?

The man looks at him and nods. Nick shakes his hand.

NICK (CONT'D)

My name is Nick Doss. Terrible what happened. Really terrible.

OWNER

Yeah.

Nick holds the handshake for an extra second, turning the owner's hand ever so slightly and looking at his fingers and fingernails: they're clean. Then--

NICK

Let's take a look inside.

INT. BURNED-OUT BUILDING - MOMENTS LATER

A factory, gutted by fire. Walls coated in a thick black crust, like the inside of a dirty grill. Water dripping from the warped steel trusses on the ceiling.

Nick leads the way into the ruins with a flashlight. The owner follows close behind him.

OWNER

You know, I already did a walkthrough with another detective.

NICK

I'm not with the police.

OWNER

Oh... Are you with the fire department then, or--

NICK
I'm a private fire investigator.
The insurance company asked me to
take a look around.

He ducks under a collapsed arch and heads deeper into the building.

INT. FACTORY FLOOR - BACK ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Nick sweeps his flashlight up the wall, studying the burn marks on the ceiling. As he scans the room.

NICK
Oranges...

OWNER
What?

NICK
It smells like oranges here. Why?

The owner thinks it over.

OWNER
I'm not sure. The guys from the
machine shop would wash up in this
room... I think maybe they use that
orange pumice hand soap.
(a beat)
Jesus, you can smell that?

Nick doesn't answer. He gives the room one last look, then continues deeper into the factory.

INT. FACTORY - BACK ANNEX - MOMENTS LATER

The trail leads him to the back of the building. He slows to a stop. Looks over the scorched walls.

NICK
What did you store here?

OWNER
Nothing.

NICK
Batteries?

OWNER
I don't think so.

NICK
Organ pipes?

OWNER
Organ what? No...

Nick puts on a pair of white gloves. Stoops down and touches the floor. Rubs the ashes between his fingers, below his nostrils. Then--

NICK
Where are the offices?

INT. OWNER'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

The destruction here is complete. Nearly impossible to reconstruct what was even in the room.

OWNER
It's unbelievable. My computer, my files... it's gonna take me years to figure out what I even lost.

As he talks, Nick flips through his binder. We see that he's looking at "before" pictures of the Owner sitting in his office, pulled from the company website.

OWNER (CONT'D)
I mean, Jesus, every single contract I had was in here. What a fucking disaster.

Nick glances over an itemized insurance spreadsheet: a computer, an office chair, a Montblanc fountain pen, a printer, a globe...

NICK
Let's see the next one.

INT. OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

A second office, as badly destroyed as the first.

OWNER
This was my brother's office.

Nick looks at pictures in his binder. He has many more of this room. Some from the company website. Some ripped from social media posts.

The pictures show a tan man with a bright smile sitting in an office full of expensive items, including sports memorabilia.

NICK
Sports fan?

OWNER
I always told him not to keep that
shit here. He's gonna be
devastated.

Nick scans the spreadsheet: Joe Montana game-worn jersey,
Barry Bonds game-worn jersey, Willie Mays autographed bat, a
3-D printer, a \$50,000 Mac Pro Rack...

Nick looks over the room. Scans the cremated remains of the
items. He looks at the pictures again. The dates on the
pictures. Looks back at the room. Seeing something. Then--

NICK
You and your brother ever argue
about money?

OWNER
What? No.
(a beat)
I mean, we're business partners. We
talk about money...

NICK
He wanted out?

OWNER
What does that have to do with--
wait, you don't think he did it...?

Nick looks at him.

OWNER (CONT'D)
That's ridiculous. First of all, he
couldn't have done it. He's in--

NICK
Let me guess. Disneyland.

The Owner's face goes white.

OWNER
How did you--?

NICK
It's always Disneyland...

Nick closes his binder and starts to walk away.

OWNER
I'm sorry, I don't understand.

Nick turns to the Owner one last time.

NICK

The next time you see your brother,
ask him why he took the Willie Mays
bat home the day before the fire.

Nick walks away, leaving the stunned Owner standing alone in the dark black room.

EXT. BURNED-OUT BUILDING - MOMENTS LATER

Nick walks out front just in time to see a DETECTIVE walking up with a cup of coffee. Nick has a big smile on his face.

NICK

Good news, Dave. You're going on
vacation. Hope you like Mickey
Mouse.

DETECTIVE

Are you fucking serious?

NICK

(without stopping)

Have the dogs check out the back
annex. There's accelerant
everywhere. And something metallic.
Magnesium maybe? I don't know, you
bright minds will figure it out.

DETECTIVE

Hey, Nick? Fuck you.

Nick laughs as he walks down the street. Turns around for one last dig.

NICK

Oh, and tell the boys nice job
drowning the building. If you're
looking for evidence, check the
sewers.

He takes off his gloves and flings them in a dumpster. As he walks away, we rise up and over the building and see that in the distance stands the Golden Gate bridge.

"RETURN OF THE GRIEVOUS ANGEL" by Gram Parsons begins to play...

EXT. NICK'S HOUSEBOAT - BACK PORCH - DUSK

Nick, freshly showered, sits on his back porch, finalizing some paperwork and drinking a glass of whiskey. He sings along to the music under his breath--

NICK

*Out with the truckers and the
kickers and the cowboy angels...*

A man in a suit, JIM, 50s, comes walking down the dock. He stops at Nick's house and knocks on the fence to get his attention. Nick glances up.

NICK (CONT'D)

Sorry, Jim. No lawyers allowed tonight. I'm celebrating the easiest payday of my life.

Jim smiles. He takes off his jacket, pours himself a glass of bourbon, and shuts off the music.

JIM

We need to talk.

NICK

Sure, as long as you make it quick. I've got big plans tonight.

JIM

Oh, yeah?

NICK

Yeah. Drinking half a bottle of Willett and looking at watches online.

JIM

That might have to wait. I have an opportunity for you.

NICK

Not interested.

JIM

Don't you want to hear what it is first?

NICK

Whatever it is, right now I'm not interested.

JIM

What if it's the Avalon Fire?

A heavy beat. Nick looks at him.

NICK

I thought it was case closed, the power company's fault. Last I heard, they were negotiating the biggest settlement in the history of California.

JIM

That's right.

NICK

So what's changed?

JIM

The mother of one of the victims claims she has evidence somebody started the fire.

NICK

Does she?

JIM

Nobody knows. That's what they want you to find out.

Nick laughs.

NICK

Sounds like a loser. No, thanks.

JIM

The pay would be good.

NICK

I'm guessing not good enough.

Nick finishes his paperwork and stands to go inside.

JIM

If you get the power company off the hook, I'm authorized to give you a percentage of the settlement.

Nick freezes. Slowly turns to Jim.

NICK

You're shitting me.

JIM

Nope.

A beat. Nick pours himself another drink and sits back down. Then--

NICK
I'll need an address for Mom.

JIM
Oh, Mom doesn't have an address...

Nick looks at him, confused.

JIM (CONT'D)
But I know where you can find her.

CUT TO:

EXT. BURNED-OUT FOREST - DAYS LATER

Seen high from above. Black trees. Scorched earth. Just a few yellow-green pockets of new growth. The earth looks dry and diseased, Like the patchy skin of a mangy dog.

Nick's jeep winds down the highway through the forest. The only vehicle headed in either direction.

EXT. ROUTE 44

He drives past the charred "Welcome to Avalon!" sign. It's covered with a loose blue tarp, like a dead body somebody forgot to collect.

RESIDENTIAL AREA

All of the houses are gone. It's just driveway after driveway, leading to nothing.

THE INTERSECTION

The intersection where all hell broke loose the day of the fire. No sign of the chaos now. All that remains is a single, crumbling wall of the KFC.

On the wall is a mural featuring the names of the dead. In the middle of the mural is a big red candle.

PARK ENTRANCE

Nick's jeep passes through town and heads into the gnarled, black landscape of the park.

EXT. TELEGI FOREST - LATER

He drives deep into the burned-out forest. Nothing out here but dead land. Finally, he sees something:

A beat-up RV, parked in a grove of charred aspen trees.

EXT. RV - MOMENTS LATER

Nick gets out of his jeep. It's eerie out here. No insects droning. No birdsong. Silent, except for a strange noise: *SHICK, SHICK, SHICK...*

He rounds the corner of the RV and finds A STRANGE FIGURE, standing in a hole, digging with a shovel.

NICK

Excuse me. Are you Jessie Hund?

Jessie stops digging.

NICK (CONT'D)

I was hoping we could talk.

JESSIE

You should have been here six months ago. You're too late now.

Her voice is tough. Leathery. She goes back to digging.

NICK

You're probably right. But I'd still like to talk.

Jessie plants her shovel in the dirt and turns to face us:

It's a jarring transformation. Her face is drawn out. Skeletal. Her hair is discolored and choppy, like she's been cutting it herself. She stares at him with dull gray eyes.

JESSIE

If you're with the Victim Trust, tell them they can take their money and shove it up their ass.

NICK

I have nothing to do with that.

JESSIE

Then why are you here?

NICK
My name is Nick Doss. I'm an arson
investigator.

There's a flicker in her eyes.

JESSIE
Arson...

NICK
I've been retained by a law firm
representing Sierra Power. They
told me you had evidence that
somebody started the fire.

JESSIE
That's right.

NICK
What is it?

Jessie studies him for a long beat. Maybe too long...

NICK (CONT'D)
Sorry I bothered you. I'll let you
get back to... whatever this is.

Nick turns to go--

JESSIE
I have a bottle rocket.

He stops in his tracks. Turns to look at her.

INT. RV - MOMENTS LATER

Jessie opens the door and kicks some junk out of the way,
clearing a path. Nick steps inside and pauses.

JESSIE
Sorry. Don't get a lot of guests.

NICK
I wonder why...

Everywhere around him, Nick sees signs of madness: Stacks of
bankers boxes. Newspaper clippings. Walls covered with maps.
In place of a TV, there's a pegboard with a shotgun and a
hunting rifle mounted on it.

He slowly walks through the room, taking it in. Glances at a
bundle of metal detectors on the couch.

JESSIE
(explaining)
Wendy was wearing a silver
bracelet.

NICK
How long have you been living here?

JESSIE
Six months. Ever since Ken left.

Jessie hefts up a banker's box and plops it down heavily on the dinette table.

JESSIE (CONT'D)
Everything I've found over the past
year is in these boxes. Except the
organic stuff. That's in the
freezer.

NICK
Organic?

Nick opens the double-freezer and immediately recoils...

NICK (CONT'D)
Jesus Christ...

Inside there are dozens of DEAD ANIMALS in plastic bags. Burned nearly beyond recognition. He pulls out a bag and wipes off the frost, revealing a frozen raccoon's face.

JESSIE
It's a raccoon.

NICK
Yeah. I can see that.

He puts it back in the freezer and shuts the door.

NICK (CONT'D)
Let's see your bottle rocket.

THE BOTTLE ROCKET - MOMENTS LATER

In a clear plastic bag. Burnt to a crisp. Nick turns it over in his hands, revealing an unburnt section of the red, white, and blue label.

JESSIE
I found it in the woods by the
Flats, not too far from here.
Pretty close to--

NICK
Where your daughter died.

A beat.

JESSIE
Yeah.

Nick opens the bag and breathes deeply, smelling it. Then he flips through a stack of Jessie's Polaroids showing the bottle rocket on the scorched forest floor, blackened trees in the background.

JESSIE (CONT'D)
I read a story about this guy in Oroville who started a bunch of fires by shooting bottle rockets out of his car. I was thinking maybe this was the same kind of--

NICK
This is nothing.

He closes the bag.

JESSIE
What?

NICK
This didn't start the fire.

JESSIE
You're so sure? After looking at it for what, two seconds?

NICK
Yeah.

JESSIE
How can you tell?

NICK
It's technical.

JESSIE
Well, then you better dumb it down for me. And dumb it down a lot, cause I'm pretty dumb.

She's not going to budge. Nick picks up the Polaroids and flips through them again. This time, we see them through his eyes:

NICK

There's deep char on the right side of the trees. Minimal char on the left. Burns rising, right to left, steeper than the slope. Branches all bent in the same direction. Foliage freeze. That means the wind was blowing right to left at the time of the fire. No odor. No sign of accelerant. It's burned on top, untouched on the bottom. That tells me that a fully formed, advancing fire swept over this area, right to left, at about six miles an hour. The bottle rocket didn't start the fire. It's just some litter you found in the woods.

He hands her the bottle rocket.

NICK (CONT'D)

Do you have anything else or was that it?

Jessie stares at the bottle rocket for a stunned beat. Not sure what to say. Then something dawns on her...

JESSIE

You. You can help me...

NICK

Maybe. That depends on what you want.

JESSIE

Just one thing. I want to know what really happened that day.

Nick glances over the room.

NICK

Yeah, well. That's not what it looks like to me.

JESSIE

Oh, yeah? What does it look like?

NICK

Like you're trying to find someone to blame.

A beat. Jessie bites her tongue.

JESSIE

To answer your question, yes, I have more. Come back tomorrow and I'll show you.

NICK

How about right now?

JESSIE

No. It gets hard to breathe out here in the afternoon. Better to do it in the morning.

Jessie puts the lid back on her box and returns it to its stack in the corner. Nick takes that as his cue, heads for the door.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

Do you think I'll ever find her body? Tell me the truth.

He thinks for a second.

NICK

Did she have braces?

JESSIE

No...

NICK

Then you'd be lucky to find a couple bones and a bracelet.

The words linger in the air for a hard beat. Then--

JESSIE

Thank you.

Nick nods, leaves.

ON JESSIE

She watches from the window as he gets in his jeep and drives away. As soon as he's gone, as soon as she's finally alone, her tough facade melts away.

Now the words hit her, and they hit her hard: *"A couple bones and a bracelet."*

She leans her forehead against the window, and for the first time today, she starts to cry.

"TAKE GOOD CARE OF MY BABY" by Bobby Vee begins to play...

INT. 1967 FORD F-100 PICKUP - DUSK

The music is playing on the radio. We see the analog instruments and gauges on the dashboard. They're in perfect condition. The truck is going exactly 25 miles per hour.

On the floor, a big red toolbox with a custom-made sticker on it: MR. FIX IT. Driving the truck, hands at 10 and 2, staring straight ahead, is Mr. Fix It himself:

RANDY BLODUM, 40s. He wears a canvas jacket and aviator glasses with orange-tinted lenses. Thinning hair beneath a baseball hat.

He has quiet, dispassionate features. Impassive eyes. There's no sign of what he's thinking. No sign of what he's capable of. Even though he's all alone, he doesn't show us anything.

It's like he knows we're watching him.

EXT. RANDY'S HOUSE - LATER

Randy pulls down the garage door and walks across the gravel driveway towards the big brown house with the gabled roof.

There are no lights in the windows. The house is pitch-black. Looming in the twilight. He unlocks the side door and heads inside.

INT. RANDY'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

It's dark in here, but he doesn't turn on the lights. He walks down a long, empty hallway. As he passes a doorway, we catch a glimpse inside the room: there's nothing there.

It's like no one actually lives here.

He gets to the end of the hallway, flips a bolt on a door, unlocking it, then heads into...

THE STAIRWELL

He pulls out his keys and locks the door behind him, then goes downstairs. It gets darker and darker as he descends the steps, like heading into a dungeon...

He flips a bolt on a second door at the bottom, opens it, and suddenly emerges into...

A beautiful, fully furnished BASEMENT APARTMENT.

The decorating style is wildly eclectic, featuring furniture from vastly different eras: a mid-century modern couch, 1950s tulip chairs, 1980s table lamps.

It's nice down here. Soft light. Cheerfully painted walls. It feels warm and cozy.

It feels like home.

VOICE (O.S.)
You're late!

Randy turns towards the kitchen, where we see: WENDY.

She's now 18. Beautiful. Hair perfectly done. Slender and attractive in a pretty red dress.

A big smile spreads across her face.

She's happy to see him.

WENDY
Welcome home.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Randy and Wendy are in bed together. She's in a thin cotton nightdress, curled up asleep on her side. Randy lies on his back, staring at the ceiling.

As we push in on Randy, we hear a soft noise, and suddenly realize that he's snoring.

It's so strange, it takes us a second to understand what's happening...

Randy is sleeping with his eyes open.

FADE TO:

EXT. TRANSMISSION TOWER - DAWN

The sun rises behind the scarred latticework of the Sierra Power transmission tower, perched on top of a ridge, like the skeleton of some prehistoric monster.

Against the glow of the sunrise, we see the dark silhouettes of Nick, Frank, and TWO POLICE OFFICERS.

The two cops watch as Nick digs a small trench with a shovel. We see that one of them has a red candle tattoo on his neck.

ON NICK

He drops the shovel and reaches into the trench. Pulls out a fistful of dirt and lets it sift through his fingers.

FRANK

What are you looking for?

NICK

Glass.

He rubs the dirt below his nostrils, smelling it. Then stands and walks down the ridge. Frank follows after him.

A cop bends down and touches the soil. He picks up a pinch of dirt and rubs it under his nose like Nick.

COP ONE

Holy shit...

COP TWO

You smell something?

COP ONE

Yeah... oh my God, it smells terrible... Oh wait, no, that's just you, Garcia.

COP TWO

Fuckin' hilarious.

EXT. RIDGELINE - MOMENTS LATER

Nick and Frank walk down the ridge.

NICK

One of your guys back there has a red candle tattoo. I've seen it around town, what does it mean?

FRANK

It's the sanctuary lamp from St. John. The fire gutted the chapel, but when they came back, the sanctuary lamp was still burning. People think it was a miracle. It became kind of a symbol of the recovery.

Nick nods. Keeps walking.

FRANK (CONT'D)

I heard you talked to Jessie Hund.

NICK

Yeah.

FRANK

How's she doing?

NICK

Not great.

Nick pushes through some heavy brush before stopping at a half-destroyed chain link fence. He puts on a white glove.

NICK (CONT'D)

Did you know her husband's gone?

FRANK

No. He took it bad. Maybe even worse than her.

NICK

I find that very hard to believe.

Nick wipes his hand along the inside of the fence: nothing.

FRANK

She show you anything interesting?

NICK

Not yet.

Nick reaches over and wipes his hand on the outside of the fence. Looks at it.

NICK (CONT'D)

She's right about one thing, though.

FRANK

What's that?

Nick takes off his glove and tosses it to Frank.

NICK

The fire didn't start up here.

Nick walks away and Frank looks at the glove: it's black with soot.

EXT. JESSIE'S RV - LATER

Nick knocks on the door to Jessie's RV. No answer.

THE SIDE OF THE RV

He walks around the RV to the area where he saw Jessie the day before. No sign of her here, either.

He walks to the edge of the hole she was digging. Four feet deep. He looks out into the woods and sees dozens of other holes, extending far off into the distance.

JESSIE (O.S.)
You're late.

Nick turns and sees Jessie, holding a jug of water and a shotgun.

NICK
I had to check something out.
(re: the shotgun)
What's that for?

JESSIE
Protection. There are some fucked up animals out here.

NICK
Well. I'm here. Bright and early.
Let's see what else you got.

JESSIE
Slight change of plans. First you're gonna tell me what happened to my daughter.

EXT. THE FLATS - LATER

A California spotted owl in a dead tree. It looks out over the Flats with a big, beautiful dark brown eye. Then it turns its head, revealing that the other eye is smoky and dead.

Nick and Jessie, still with her shotgun, stand on the granite rock where we saw Wendy and her friends the day of the fire. Even now, a year later, everything here is scorched black.

JESSIE
Kaylee said Wendy was sitting up here, listening to music. That's when she saw the fire.

NICK
Where?

JESSIE
Back there. In the trees.

Nick turns and looks up at the blackened sugar pine trees, swaying uneasily in the breeze.

NICK
What time?

JESSIE
Early afternoon.

NICK
What time exactly?

Jessie gives him a look.

NICK (CONT'D)
It's important. Sometimes the
timeline is all we have.

She thinks.

JESSIE
Kaylee said just after noon. So
let's say... 12:05.

NICK
Okay. At 12:05 they saw the fire.
Then what?

Jessie looks up at the trees.

JESSIE
Then they ran.

THE WOODS - LATER

Jessie and Nick walk through the burned-out trees.

JESSIE
They were together up until this
point. Somewhere around here,
Kaylee tripped and they got
separated. And don't ask me what
time, I have no idea.

NICK
12:18.

Jessie laughs.

JESSIE
How could you possibly know that?

NICK

I've been counting our steps.

Nick wanders off a little ways, examining the trees. Strange S-shaped grooves run up and down the trunks. He traces his fingers along the curves.

NICK (CONT'D)

Can I talk to Kaylee?

JESSIE

I doubt it. Her family got the fuck out of here the first chance they had. I don't even know where they live now.

NICK

What about the boy? Was he able to tell you anything?

JESSIE

Eli? No. He died before anyone could talk to him.

A dry wind blows through the trees.

EXT. THE ROAD - MOMENTS LATER

Jessie and Nick stand on the same stretch of road where we last saw Wendy the day of the fire. The pavement is cracked and burned. The trees are completely black.

JESSIE

This is the road Wendy was looking for. The guys from the task force think she never found it.

NICK

They're wrong. She made it here.

JESSIE

You're sure?

NICK

Yeah. She had just enough time.

Jessie looks around.

JESSIE

Then I'm thinking maybe she crossed back over into the trees here and--

NICK

No. She was looking for the road. Once she found it, she wouldn't have left, no matter how bad things got.

JESSIE

How do you know that?

NICK

Because no one ever does.

He crouches down and examines the road. Thinking about something.

JESSIE

What happened to her?

Nick stares at the road for a beat. Then--

NICK

The trees back there were bug-infested. Dead before the fire. They would have burned fast. Faster than normal. By the time she got here, she would have been surrounded by fire. The air would have been so hot, every time she took a breath it would have burned her from the inside out.

JESSIE

She burned to death?

NICK

No. The fire would have eaten up all the oxygen first.

He stands and looks at Jessie.

NICK (CONT'D)

Your daughter died of asphyxiation, somewhere on this road, between 12:30 and 12:35.

JESSIE

Then why couldn't they find her body?

NICK

Probably because there was nothing left to find.

Jessie quietly absorbs this, staring out at the woods. Black and motionless. No signs of life.

EXT. WOODS - LATER

They trudge back through the forest in silence. Jessie leading the way.

JESSIE
Can I ask you a question?

NICK
Sure.

JESSIE
How do you catch someone who starts a fire in a place like this? A million acres in the middle of nowhere.

Nick thinks it over.

NICK
The dumb ones you catch because of something they did. The clever ones you catch because of who they are. And if you're lucky, you just catch the guy masturbating to the fire.

Jessie laughs.

JESSIE
Has that actually happened?

NICK
Yep.

JESSIE
Jesus.

NICK
There was a guy in Stockton about five years ago who--

JESSIE
Shhhhhhhhhhh...

Jessie reaches out her arm to stop Nick dead in his tracks. Suddenly, he sees what she sees:

A hulking figure lumbering through the trees. Obscured at first, then finally emerging into a clearing...

A BLACK BEAR, half-bald, scarred from the fire. One ear missing. Lip flap torn back, exposing a row of two and a half inch long teeth.

Jessie slowly raises her shotgun and tracks the bear as it crosses in front of them, dangerously close.

It doesn't even look in their direction. It just plods ahead, moving forward with the slow business of dying.

A moment later... it's gone.

A long beat and then Jessie lowers her gun.

JESSIE (CONT'D)
I could use a drink.

NICK
Yeah. Me, too.

INT. DIVE BAR - NIGHT

Nick and Jessie walk into the dingy, small town bar. Nick looks down at his feet: the floor is carpeted.

NICK
Well. Never seen that before...

INT. BAR - LATER

The two of them sit side-by-side, drinking beers and picking at a basket of fries.

JESSIE
The guy who owns this place had a stable outside of town. The day of the fire, he didn't have time to evacuate the horses, so he just opened up all the stalls before he left. Figured at least give 'em a chance, you know? When he got back two days later, he found his horses dead in their stalls, right where he left them. The gates were wide open, but they didn't even move.

NICK
That happens.

JESSIE
Why would they just stay there?

NICK

For the same reason we find dead dogs and cats under their owners' beds. Because they're scared, and that's the place they feel safest.

Jessie looks at him.

JESSIE

Well shit, you're just full of fun facts, huh?

She takes a drink. Nick sees a smudge on his glass and pushes it away distastefully.

NICK

Jessie.

JESSIE

Hm-mm.

NICK

I'm beginning to think you're just stringing me along.

JESSIE

What makes you say that?

Nick smiles.

NICK

Look. As much as I've enjoyed the pleasure of your company and the...
(glancing around)
...local color, I'm going to be very disappointed if you've been lying to me.

JESSIE

Let's say I have been lying. What have you got to lose?

NICK

Money.

JESSIE

Oh. That's nothing.

NICK

I disagree. I happen to like money. In fact, it's the only reason I'm here. Now, if you've found evidence of a crime, that's great.

(MORE)

NICK (CONT'D)

But I'm not going to be thrilled if you just start dragging me around the woods trying to find--

JESSIE

A couple bones and a bracelet?

She looks right at him. Nick feels a warm flush of shame rising in his cheeks. He nods, looking away--

NICK

Yeah.

Jessie takes a pull from her beer. They sit in silence for a moment. Nick slowly picks up his smudged glass and takes a drink. Then--

NICK (CONT'D)

Tell me about her. What was she like?

Jessie thinks.

JESSIE

You know, they had a memorial where everybody got up and talked about the people they lost, like they were all saints or something. The truth is, Wendy wasn't exactly an angel. She would get in trouble at school. Sneak out of the house. God knows what else...

Jessie stares into space. Remembering.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

One time, I sat in the living room all night, waiting for her to come home. Just absolutely fuming. She finally snuck in just before sunrise. Didn't see me sitting there in the dark. She shut the door. Locked it without making a sound. Then she went upstairs, straddling the steps so the stairs wouldn't creak. And I didn't say anything. I just watched her. And I remember feeling lucky. Lucky to witness that. Because I was seeing her. The real her.

A beat.

JESSIE (CONT'D)
I don't know... I love that memory.

Jessie eats some fries.

NICK
Is that what you said at the
memorial?

JESSIE
Of course not, I said she was an
angel.

They laugh.

EXT. BAR - LATER

Closing time. Nick and Jessie leave the bar.

JESSIE
Jesus. It's late.

NICK
Yeah.

They walk in silence down the empty street. A certain level
of comfort between them now. They get to Jessie's RV.

JESSIE
You know how to get back to your
hotel?

NICK
I think so.

She nods. As she starts to climb in behind the wheel, she
pauses. Turns to Nick.

JESSIE
I'll show you something in the
morning. Something nobody knows
about but me. Goodnight.

NICK
Goodnight.

She shuts the door and drives off.

INT. JESSIE'S RV - CONTINUOUS

Jessie, deep in thought, drives the big, hulking RV back into
the darkness of Telegi Park.

Her phone lies facedown on the passenger seat beside her. On the back of the case, we see the picture of Wendy.

Ever smiling. Frozen in time...

INT. RANDY'S BEDROOM - SAME

Wendy sleeps peacefully on her side, facing the wall. Randy asleep beside her, eyes open, snoring softly.

Suddenly, Wendy's eyes flick open.

They're alert. Smart. Full of fire. This is no brainwashed girl. This is no victim.

This is someone with a plan.

Slowly, without making a noise, she pulls her hands out from under her pillow and we see: her left hand is handcuffed to the bed post.

Up close now, we get our first good look at Wendy. She's lost a significant amount of weight. She's nothing but skin and bones. And right now, it's working to her advantage...

She folds her hand, bites her lip, and slowly, quietly, tries to pull her skeletal wrist through the handcuffs. She makes it about an inch... but can't go any further.

She slowly exhales. Slides her hands back under the pillow. She can't get out of the cuffs. Not yet.

But she's close.

CUT TO:

EXT. MEADOW - DAY

A field of California oatgrass. New growth since the fire. Jessie and Nick hike through the field. Tall grass swishing hypnotically around their legs.

They get to the top of the hill and pause for a moment. Looking out over the burned landscape below.

NICK
How much farther?

JESSIE
We're close.

EXT. LOWER MEADOW - MOMENTS LATER

Jessie walks slowly through the grass. Suddenly stops. Points down at her feet.

JESSIE

Here.

Nick looks down at the ground and sees: A DISTINCTIVE, THICK GRAY LINE. Baked into the earth, like an old scar. He stares at it for a moment, furrowing his brow. Then he follows it.

ON NICK

He swishes through the meadow, following the strange course of the line. It zigs and zags sharply. Cutting a long, chaotic trail through the grass.

Suddenly it straightens out, moving faster and faster and then... it stops.

Nick crouches down and looks at the termination point. Jessie beside him.

JESSIE

Maybe lightning?

NICK

No.

JESSIE

Then what did this?

A beat. Almost surprised--

NICK

I don't know.

JESSIE

This isn't like the bottle rocket, is it?

NICK

No. It's not like the bottle rocket.

Nick touches the dirt. Rubs it between his fingers.

NICK (CONT'D)

Have you seen anything else that looks like this?

JESSIE

Yeah. I found the same thing in two other places.

NICK

Show me.

EXT. MALESTAR CREEK - LATER

Nick and Jessie stand in the rocky creek bed, looking down at the ground. There, beneath the brush, there's another faded gray line.

They follow the trail and see the same thing as before. A long straight line with sudden, strange deviations. Sharp zigs and zags cutting wildly through the brush...

Nick stops. Looks up. Straight above him, up the ridge, is the burned-out transmission tower.

EXT. HARKNESS TRAIL - LATER

A third location, a third gray line. Zigzagging through a field of dry wildflowers. This one is darker. More pronounced than the others.

Nick stops at the darkest section of the line. Gets on his hands and knees and lowers his nose down to the ground...

Nothing.

He pulls himself forward, belly to the earth like a lizard. Brings his nose right down to the line. Almost touching it. Suddenly, he takes a deep whiff...

NICK

Jesus Christ...

He instantly recoils, nauseated, covering his nose and mouth with the back of his hand.

JESSIE

What's wrong?

Nick is on his knees in the dirt, gagging, fighting the urge to vomit.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

Nick, what is it?

He turns to Jessie. We can tell by the look on his face: he knows what caused this.

NICK
I need to see your freezer.

HARD CUT TO:

POWERPOINT SLIDES

Three aerial photos showing black zigzag burns.

NICK (O.S.)
These images were taken by drones
photomapping the burn area in the
forest two days after the fire.

INT. POLICE STATION - CONFERENCE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

We move down a long conference table. On one side sits Frank, along with a number of officials in various uniforms: FIRE, POLICE, FOREST SERVICE, CAL FIRE, FBI. On the other side: MEN AND WOMEN IN SUITS, including Nick's lawyer friend Jim.

Jessie sits by herself in the back corner of the room.

NICK (O.S.)
Three different pictures. Three
different areas of the park. All
with the same signature.

Nick stands at the head of the table. He flips the slide.

NICK (CONT'D)
Narrow black trails, zigzagging
through fields of tall grass or dry
brush. High-temperature burns.
Irregular, approximately hundred-
foot-long trails...

CAL FIRE
I'm sorry. Caused by what, exactly?

Nick looks up. Almost surprised he has to say it out loud--

NICK
Arson.

The air goes out of the room.

FRANK
Shit...

Nick changes the slide.

NICK
Satellite images from before the
fire confirm that--

POLICE OFFICIAL
Hang on a second. We have evidence
that transmission tower 37-C
malfunctioned...

NICK
The malfunction was caused by the
fire. It didn't start it.

LOCAL FIRE
Then what did?

NICK
This.

Nick sets a Yeti cooler on the table, then opens it and pulls
out a plastic bag containing: a char-black DEAD SQUIRREL.

FBI
Jesus.

FRANK
Squirrels...

NICK
Yes.

FOREST SERVICE
Where did you get that?

Nick points to Jessie.

NICK
She found it.

They all turn in unison to face Jessie in the back of the
room, noticing her for the first time.

JESSIE
Hi.

Nick flips the slide showing Jessie's Polaroid of a burned-up
squirrel on the ground.

NICK
This squirrel was discovered in the
vicinity of one of the burn sites.
Tissue samples are out at the lab,
but the burns suggest the presence
of an accelerant.

LOCAL FIRE
Gasoline?

NICK
Probably, yes.

Nick clears the slides.

NICK (CONT'D)
On the day of the fire, three live squirrels were transported into Telegi National Forest. They were then soaked in gasoline, set on fire, and released into the driest areas of the park. They ran as fast as they could, back and forth in a zigzag pattern, spreading the flames, trying to shake off the fire right until the moment they burned to death.

He looks at the squirrel in the bag.

NICK (CONT'D)
It also looks like they were fattened up ahead of time so they would burn longer.

FRANK
Jesus Christ...

NICK
There's a lot we still don't know, but I can tell you this. The Avalon Fire was not caused by a downed transmission tower. It was not caused by lightning or wind or any other natural phenomenon. It was started, intentionally, by a person.

He puts the squirrel back in the cooler and shuts it.

NICK (CONT'D)
A very, very dangerous person.

INT. POLICE STATION - HALLWAY - LATER

Nick and Jim walk down the hallway. Talking excitedly, under their breath.

JIM
I can't believe you actually found
something...

NICK
Neither can I.

They pass through double doors and head...

OUTSIDE THE STATION

Nick and Jim walk past a small group of cops, stress-smoking,
turning to glare at them.

JIM
When are you heading back?

NICK
First thing in the morning.
Assuming those guys don't slit my
tires.

JIM
I'd say it's fifty-fifty, tires or
throat.

We hear a loud commotion offscreen. Jim looks--

JIM (CONT'D)
Jesus. What now?

Nick follows his gaze across the parking lot and sees:

Jessie, screaming mad, being physically restrained by two men
as FBI agents gather around her RV.

NICK
What the hell...?

EXT. JESSIE'S RV - CONTINUOUS

Jessie fights to get loose. Face red, veins bulging in her
neck.

JESSIE
Get your hands off me! GET YOUR
FUCKING HANDS OFF OF ME!

She slams her head sideways, headbutting one of the guys in
the jaw. He staggers back and lets her go. Right then Nick
runs up.

NICK
What the fuck is happening?

JESSIE
I want them out of my RV!

NICK
What are you talking about?

JESSIE
They're taking all my stuff!!

Nick turns and sees FBI agents coming out of Jessie's RV with her banker's boxes.

NICK
(to Jessie)
Wait here.

He walks over to the LEAD AGENT, a no-nonsense woman with her hair in a ponytail.

NICK (CONT'D)
What are you doing?

She hands him a document.

FBI AGENT
I have orders to process everything in this vehicle. The only thing we can't touch are the freezers. We'll get those next week once I get authorization for a refrigerated transfer.

NICK
Do you really have to do this right now?

FBI AGENT
Yes. We need to establish chain of custody right away.

Nick thinks about it.

NICK
Okay. Just... hold off for a second, okay?

The FBI agent nods. Nick walks back over to Jessie and takes her aside.

JESSIE

They go barging in there, they didn't even fucking ask me. Some of that shit is personal!

NICK

I know. I know, it's crazy. But look, they have to do it.

JESSIE

They're taking *everything*.

NICK

I understand.

She looks at him, pleading.

JESSIE

Please don't let them take it. It's all I have left.

NICK

It's okay. You can trust them...

JESSIE

You saw how they fucked it all up the first time! They're gonna do the same thing all over again.

NICK

Jessie, this time will be different. You'll be getting the best of the best. There's too much at stake now.

Jessie lowers her eyes, defeated.

NICK (CONT'D)

They'll find the guy who did this. I promise. Okay?

She nods, giving in. Nick squeezes her shoulder.

NICK (CONT'D)

Okay.

He walks back over to the RV and gives a nod to the lead agent. She signals her team to get back to work.

As Nick walks away, looking sick to his stomach, we see them going into Jessie's trailer and pulling out boxes.

Jim rejoins him halfway across the parking lot.

JIM
Everything okay?

NICK
Yeah.

JIM
Good. Look, I'm going to have a crazy week, but how about we do dinner at Quince on Monday?

NICK
Sure.

JIM
Perfect. I have to go wrap some things up, but nice job, Nick. Plan yourself a big vacation. You can afford it.

NICK
Thanks.

Jim heads off and Nick gets in his jeep.

INT. NICK'S JEEP - MOMENTS LATER

As Nick starts the engine, his phone rings. He picks it up.

NICK
Yeah.

VOICE (ON THE PHONE)
Hi. This is Kelly Long with ChemTech.

NICK
Uh-huh.

As Nick starts to pull away, he looks in the rearview mirror and sees dozens of agents taking boxes out of Jessie's RV. Jessie stands to the side, looking incredibly small.

VOICE (ON THE PHONE)
We got the results of those tissue samples you ordered. There were no markers for gasoline, but we did find traces of paraffin oil...

NICK
Listen, this all has to go through the task force now. I'm not involved anymore.

He drives away.

INT. NICK'S HOTEL - BAR - NIGHT

Nick, freshly showered, sits on a stool at the hotel bar. The BARTENDER puts a napkin in front of him.

BARTENDER
What can I get you?

NICK
I'll tell you what... give me a
bottle of your best whiskey.

The bartender nods. Pulls out a bottle of Jim Beam and sets it down in front of Nick. He raises an eyebrow.

NICK (CONT'D)
I said *best*.

BARTENDER
I can charge you five hundred bucks
for it if that makes you feel
better.

Nick smiles.

NICK
That's okay.
(gesturing to a phone
behind the bar)
Mind if I put something on?

BARTENDER
Knock yourself out.

The bartender hands Nick the phone. He searches for a moment and then finds a track. "RETURN OF THE GRIEVOUS ANGEL" begins to play over the bar speakers...

Nick pours himself a tall glass of whiskey. He drains it like water as he does some paperwork on the bar. Then he pours another drink, singing under his breath--

NICK
*Out with the truckers and the
kickers and the--*

MAN'S VOICE (O.C.)
Heyyy. Look who finally decided to
show up.

Nick turns. We PAN OVER to see two men, ALAN and LEN, sitting at a table across the bar, calling out to TOM, 40s, walking in holding a white banker's box.

TOM

Sorry. Fuckin' crazy day. Can I get one of those?

Alan grabs a beer from a bucket and hands it to Tom. Tom drops the box on the table and sits down heavily beside them.

TOM (CONT'D)

Good to see you boys. When did you get in?

ALAN

Couple hours ago.

LEN

So, what are we looking at?

TOM

Fellas... you're looking at two, maybe three weeks of the easiest money of your life.

ALAN

No shit?

TOM

They're going to have you look over a year-old wildfire scene. Spoiler alert... you're not gonna find shit. Even if you do, they could never use it in court. Which means you take your money, plus a fat per diem, and enjoy the sunshine while the cops, who are equally fucked, try to pull a suspect out of their asses.

ALAN

Call off the search. I got the bad guy right here.

Alan holds up a taxidermied squirrel sitting on one of the hotel tables. They all laugh.

LEN

What's in the box?

TOM

Some lady whose daughter died in the fire has been collecting all kinds of bullshit and we're supposed to look through it.

ALAN

Anything crazy in there?

TOM

Oh, it's all crazy. Garbage she found in the woods, newspaper clippings and shit.

Len opens the box. Pulls something out.

LEN

Not bad...

He flips it around and we see that it's a picture of Jessie and Wendy.

LEN (CONT'D)

You can only pick one: Mom or the daughter.

ALAN

Hmmm. The daughter before or after the fire?

TOM

Jesus Christ...

They all laugh. Suddenly--

NICK (O.C.)

You know...

They turn to see Nick sitting at the bar.

NICK (CONT'D)

She was right.

The guys chuckle awkwardly. Look at each other.

TOM

Hey, buddy? Mind your own business.

Nick nods, returns to his drink. Tom rolls his eyes to his friends. They laugh and go on drinking.

TOM (CONT'D)

So listen, I was out here last year.

(MORE)

TOM (CONT'D)

There's a Mexican place in Chico called La Bamba or La Hambra or something. We should plan on--

NICK

You two are Cal Fire, right?

Nick is facing them now, looking at Alan and Len.

ALAN

Yeah.

NICK

Nice. What's your clearance rate this year, 22 percent? That's an all-time high for you guys, isn't it?

LEN

Hey, bud. Go scratch.

NICK

I, uh... no, I don't think I will. I actually don't know what that means...

Nick pours himself another glass of whiskey and walks over towards them. Looking at Tom.

NICK (CONT'D)

So they're Cal Fire, and you... I'm guessing you're ATF.

(sympathetically)

Sorry the FBI turned you down.

Hard silence. Tom bristles.

TOM

Do you want me to beat your ass?

NICK

No, no. I don't want that.

(a beat)

I mean, it looks like you could pass the FBI fitness test, so what was the problem? You were too dumb?

Tom stands up. He's a big dude.

TOM

Alright, you stupid fuck. You want to do this here or outsi--?

Nick punches Tom in the face, breaking his nose and sending him toppling backwards over the table.

NICK
Here's good.

Tom's friends leap to their feet and immediately jump Nick.

CUT TO:

MORNING - JESSIE'S DOOR SWINGS OPEN

Nick is standing there with a black eye and a deep cut on his lower lip, holding the banged-up banker's box.

NICK
I think maybe we still have some
work to do.

Jessie smiles.

INT. JESSIE'S RV - CONTINUOUS

As Nick steps inside, we see that the RV has been emptied out. The boxes, the maps, the metal detectors... everything is gone except for Jessie's guns on the wall.

Nick catches a whiff of something unpleasant--

NICK
What is that smell?

JESSIE
My freezer broke last night. All
the animals are thawing out.

NICK
Jesus...

JESSIE
Just breathe through your mouth,
you'll get used to it.

INT. RV - LATER

They unpack the box... Tape Jessie's maps back up over the windows... Pull documents from folders.... Organize them on the floor. The RV slowly begins to look the way it used to.

INT. RV - LATER

The two of them stand in front of a map of Avalon, illuminated from behind by light from the window.

JESSIE

It's going to be hard to catch him, isn't it?

NICK

Yeah. We only have one advantage.

JESSIE

What's that?

NICK

He doesn't know we're looking for him yet. Right now, he thinks he got away with it.

EXT. RANDY'S HOUSE - DUSK

The sun goes down through the trees behind Randy's house.

NICK (V.O.)

Right now, he feels completely safe.

INT. BASEMENT APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Randy and Wendy sit at the kitchen table, having a quiet dinner together. Randy watches Wendy eat.

RANDY

Are you happy, Wendy?

She smiles at him. Very convincing.

WENDY

Of course I am.

He nods. Picks at his dinner.

RANDY

Good. You're supposed to be happy.

INT. BATHROOM - LATER

Wendy shoves her fingers down her throat, flushing the toilet the instant she vomits her entire dinner into the bowl so that Randy can't hear it.

She carefully rinses the puke out of her mouth and then checks herself in the mirror. She looks perfect. Nothing out of place.

She didn't even smear her lipstick.

INT. BEDROOM - LATER

Randy asleep in bed, staring at the ceiling, snoring. Wendy quietly pulls her handcuffed hand out from under the pillow.

It's time to try again.

She folds her left hand and slowly twists her emaciated wrist as she attempts to pull it through the cuffs. She only makes it an inch and then, just as before... it gets stuck.

She can't believe it. She looks like she's about to cry.

But now she closes her eyes, holds her breath, pulls as hard as she can, straining against the steel, and suddenly...

Her hand slides out of the handcuffs.

Her eyes are wide in shock. She opens her fingers slowly and looks at her hand. Free.

She quietly slips off the side of the mattress. Silently steps around the bed, watching Randy the entire time.

She reaches an OLD ARMOIRE on Randy's side of the bed. Pulls open one of the doors with a gentle click.

Her eyes flash to Randy. He continues snoring.

Inside the armoire she finds Randy's jacket. She reaches into one of the pockets, and slowly, with great care, she pulls out: his keys.

INT. BASEMENT APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

She tiptoes out through the living room and gets to the door leading upstairs. Slides the brass key into the lock.

She hesitates before turning it. It's deathly quiet in here. The only sound is the constant whirring of the ventilator fan on the back wall.

She stops for a moment. Looks at the fan.

Then turns the key with a soft pop.

THE STAIRWELL

Wendy slowly goes up the stairs, feet wide, straddling the steps so the stairs don't creak. She moves cautiously, one foot at a time, in dead silence.

At last, she reaches the door at the top. She goes to turn the knob -- it's locked.

WENDY
(mouthing)
Fuck.

ON WENDY

She rotates the eight keys on the key ring as quietly as possible, metal clinking softly together. Tries the first key: it doesn't work.

She quietly flips to the next key, and gently slides it in the lock. It doesn't work either. She's starting to sweat. Breathing a little heavier as she tries the third key.

Still no luck.

The silence drones louder in her ears. Her breath quickens as she tries the next key. It doesn't work. She slightly turns her head. Did she just hear something downstairs...?

Now she's scared. She flips to the fifth key, puts it in the doorknob, and... the knob turns.

She immediately breaks silence... throws open the door and starts to run. We hear MUFFLED FEET POUNDING UP THE STEPS BEHIND HER.

Wendy dashes down the hallway towards the front door... escape is just within reach... and then suddenly--

Randy grabs her from behind.

WENDY
(screaming)
No! NO!!! NO!!!!!!

RANDY
It's okay, Wendy.

WENDY
No! Please let me go!!

Randy grabs her by the scalp and drags her back down the hallway.

WENDY (CONT'D)
HELP! SOMEBODY HELP ME!!!

She claws wildly at the doorframe as he wrestles her into the stairway. As he drags her downstairs, she kicks wildly in the air, bare feet punching holes in the drywall.

WENDY (CONT'D)
LET ME GO, MOTHERFUCKER! LET ME GO!

There's no point in pretending with him anymore. She knows this was her only chance.

There will never be another.

INT. BASEMENT APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Randy drags her, kicking and screaming, through the living room, towards the big bookshelf on the back wall. He grabs it forcefully and rolls it to the side, revealing a FOUR-FOOT TALL STEEL DOOR in the wall.

WENDY
No. Please don't put me back in there. Please, no...

RANDY
It's okay.

He opens the door, and drags her into...

THE HIDDEN APARTMENT

A vast, unfinished space beneath the house. Dirt floors. A maze of mustard-yellow, cinderblock corridors. It's dark in here, except for occasional light bulbs on the ceiling.

Randy drags Wendy down a corridor, past endless stacks of cardboard boxes full of old broken appliances.

WENDY
No! NO!!!

RANDY
It's okay, Wendy. God will forgive you.

WENDY
(shrieking)
NO! NO! NO!!!

She twists around and bites Randy's arm.

With a sudden animal fury, he grabs her by the throat and slams her down hard on the ground. She screams.

Randy raises his hand in the air, then savagely brings down his fist, pounding her in the face once... twice...

The third time he hits her, the screams stop.

He hits her twice more, but we don't see it. We're floating away from the horror... past the boxes... deeper into the dungeon...

There, in the shadows, we land on two rooms with metal gates across the doors. And behind the gates, we see...

TWO TERRIFIED FACES.

We suddenly realize: There are two other women down here.

CUT TO:

CABLE NEWS HELICOPTER FOOTAGE

Aerial footage of the Avalon Fire. Hills burning red and black. A horrible orange sky. It looks like the end of the world.

The camera tilts down to see vehicles driving out of the fire along the evacuation route: a minivan, a sedan, an SUV. Every single one of them gray with ash.

INT. JESSIE'S RV - NIGHT

Nick sits in front of a laptop, staring at the footage with bloodshot eyes. Jessie's in the kitchen, making a cup of tea.

JESSIE

What are you doing?

NICK

Checking to see if anyone stopped on the side of the road to watch the fire.

He watches for a moment longer, then goes over to the couch and flops down on it. Rubbing his eyes--

NICK (CONT'D)

Hey, Jessie?

JESSIE

Yeah.

NICK

Have I mentioned how bad it smells
in here?

JESSIE

Yes, I know, I can smell it too.

NICK

Honestly, I'm not sure you can.

Jessie sips her tea and walks across the room. Suddenly, she stops. Looks at the news footage on the laptop.

NICK (CONT'D)

What?

JESSIE

Nothing.

(a beat)

I've just never seen this.

NICK

You're kidding.

She shakes her head no.

Jessie sits down and watches the old news footage. Awed by this strange, remote vantage point. Cars, seen from high above, punching through the curtain of smoke at the edge of the forest, just like she and Ken did...

She gets a distant look in her eyes. Suddenly remembering--

JESSIE

The day of the fire, during the evacuation, I saw deer. Three of them, running through the flames. They made it out, just like us, but the second they were free, a cat -- a bobcat or something -- took one of them down. I've never told anyone that story.

Nick looks at her, thinking. A moment later, Jessie shuts the laptop.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

It's two in the morning. We should get some sleep.

EXT. NICK'S JEEP - LATER

Nick drives down a winding road cutting through the black forest. He stares out the windshield, deep in thought.

IN HIS MIND'S EYE

Three deer, running through the fire...

BACK TO SCENE

Nick looks straight ahead. Dashed yellow lane markers flicking past like tracer rounds.

INT. NICK'S JEEP - LATER

Nick pulls into a parking spot in front of his hotel and shuts off the engine.

But he doesn't get out. He sits there. Thinking about something. After a moment, he turns the engine back on.

EXT. THE ROAD - LATER

We're back at the road where we saw Wendy the day of the fire. It's the dead of night. Nick stands in the middle of the road, illuminated by the headlights of his jeep.

He crouches down and looks at the pavement. He knows he's missing something. But what? He looks off into the darkness, trying to understand.

Suddenly, he freezes. He slowly looks up and sees...

HIS JEEP

Headlights on. Engine running. Ominous in the dark.

IN FLASHBACK

Wendy on the road. She looks up and sees headlights.

ON NICK

He slowly stands up, staring straight into the light.

IN FLASHBACK - SERIES OF SHOTS

-The truck rolls up alongside Wendy.

-The door swings open.

-She gets inside.

-A BOBCAT, seen from behind, lies in wait in the brush. A fawn comes bounding out of the woods, away from the fire, oblivious to the danger. The bobcat crouches, tenses its muscles, then leaps into the air straight at the fawn...

BACK TO PRESENT

Nick's eyes get wide: HE KNOWS.

PRE-LAP: BOOM, BOOM, BOOM

EXT. JESSIE'S RV - LATER

Jessie, half-asleep, opens the door and finds Nick. He looks like he's just seen a ghost.

JESSIE

Nick...?

NICK

You were right.

JESSIE

Right about what?

NICK

You were the only one asking the right questions. What happened to Wendy? Why couldn't they find Wendy's body?

Jessie, now fully awake--

JESSIE

...What's happening? Did something--

NICK

So why couldn't anyone find her? Maybe she never got to the road. That's possible. Maybe she got lost in the woods and you've been looking in the wrong spot.

(MORE)

NICK (CONT'D)

Maybe she got caught in a blowout
and you'll never find anything. Or
maybe...

A beat. This is the point of no return.

NICK (CONT'D)

Maybe you can't find her because
she's not here.

JESSIE

What?

NICK

Maybe Wendy didn't die in the fire.

The blood drains from Jessie's face.

NICK (CONT'D)

The deer and the bobcat--

JESSIE

What the fuck are you talking
about?

NICK

The bobcat you saw. They do that.

JESSIE

Do *what*?

NICK

Hunt. Even in a fire, predators
hunt.

He locks eyes with her now.

NICK (CONT'D)

There's a bird called a black kite.
They take burning twigs and drop
them into the brush, intentionally
starting fires. Then they set up
outside the flames and wait for
their prey to run straight at them.

JESSIE

Nick. What are you saying?

A beat.

NICK

I think somebody took Wendy. I
think whoever started the fire
kidnapped Wendy.

Her eyes are wide. Her breath quickens.

JESSIE

Oh, God. I think I'm gonna be sick...

NICK

I don't have any evidence yet. And I know it sounds crazy. But I'm asking you to believe me.

She looks at him.

JESSIE

I believe you.

INT. RV - DINETTE TABLE - MOMENTS LATER

Nick rips a map off the window and spreads it over a table.

NICK

Arsonists tend to follow evacuation routes like everyone else. But a kidnapper wouldn't do that. He would have done the one thing no one else would do in the middle of a fire...

JESSIE

He would have gone home.

Nick nods, looking over the map--

NICK

Here's what I can tell you about the man we're looking for. Given the makeup of the area, he's probably white. Likely in his forties. He drives a van or a light truck or an SUV. And on the day of the fire, in the middle of the evacuation, he was here...

Nick traces his finger through downtown Avalon.

NICK (CONT'D)

...driving in the opposite direction of everybody else.

A beat. Jessie looks at him.

JESSIE

Nick. Do you think she's still
alive?

NICK

I don't know.
(turning to her)
But maybe.

Jessie stares at the map. Fire in her eyes.

FADE TO:

EXT. DOWNTOWN AVALON - MORNING

We track along a row of small storefronts on the main drag of
downtown Avalon.

Some are burned out, gutted. Others survived the fire, but
not the aftermath. Only a handful are still open.

INT. NICK'S JEEP - CONTINUOUS

Nick drives along, looking at the buildings. We see that his
eyes are looking up. Scanning above the doors...

Suddenly he finds what he's looking for above a store: A
SECURITY CAMERA.

He pulls over and goes inside.

EXT. DOWNTOWN AVALON - SIDE STREET - SAME

Jessie walks down another street, doing the same. Her eyes
checking above the doors: No camera... no camera... camera.

She looks down and suddenly realizes that she's standing in
front of MONK'S INSURANCE. Her old workplace.

She goes to open the front door and catches a reflection of
herself in the glass. She pauses, as if seeing for the first
time the physical toll this past year has taken on her.

A moment later she goes inside.

INT. MONK'S INSURANCE - CONTINUOUS

Jessie steps in quietly. She's a hard woman now, a woman with
a singular focus. But even for her, this is difficult.

The place hasn't changed at all. People sit at their desks, chatting, laughing. No one notices her at first. But then--

CINDY (O.S.)

Jessie?

She turns and sees her old co-worker Cindy. Jessie, a little self-conscious, gives her a sad smile.

JESSIE

Hey, Cindy.

Cindy wraps her up in a big hug.

CINDY

It's so good to see you. Are you here to talk to Bill? He's at the dentist, but I'm sure he'd love to have you back. He always says--

Jessie shakes her head, cutting her off. All business now.

JESSIE

Cindy, listen. I need you to do me a favor.

EXT. AVALON - LATER

Nick is back in his Jeep, driving through town. He stops at a red light and looks around for traffic cameras.

Suddenly, he notices a church on the southwest corner. ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST. He stares at it for a moment. Thinking.

INT. ST. JOHN - LATER

Nick stands in the chapel, looking at something. A priest, FATHER GEORGE, 70s, enters behind him.

FATHER GEORGE

Can I help you?

NICK

I was just looking at your sanctuary lamp.

FATHER GEORGE

Ah. It's been months since anyone has come to see it.

Father George stands beside him and looks at the old gold and red sanctuary lamp suspended near the altar.

FATHER GEORGE (CONT'D)
Are you from Avalon?

NICK
No. But I heard about the miracle.

Father George laughs softly. Then--

FATHER GEORGE
The fire took so much from so many. People were looking for something. A symbol of hope. You know, when we think of fire in the Bible, we associate it most frequently with the Devil. Fire and brimstone. The fires of hell. But in the Church, more often we use it as a symbol of God. The light. The eternal fire of the Holy Spirit. The burning bush. I think on some level, that's why people were drawn to the lamp. That's what brought them comfort. As for it being a miracle? I don't know if it was God or the lamp oil or--

NICK
Paraffin.

FATHER GEORGE
What?

NICK
It's liquid paraffin.

FATHER GEORGE
I suppose I wouldn't really know.

NICK
I'm guessing you don't refill this yourself.

FATHER GEORGE
No, no. Thankfully, one of our parishoners is a handyman. He sees to that.

Nick nods. Then--

NICK
Does he take care of the rest of these, too?

He turns out to the sanctuary, and we suddenly see that the walls of the church are LINED WITH OIL CANDLES...

INT. NICK'S JEEP - LATER

Nick is on the phone as he drives through the park.

NICK

Randy Blodum. B-L-O-D-U-M. He lives in Avalon. Drives a red, 1960s pickup truck. I'm looking for priors. Arson, child molestation, animal cruelty. Check IRB and Accurint first. Stay off the state databases until I talk to the FBI.

EXT. JESSIE'S RV - CONTINUOUS

Nick, still on the phone, drives down the path towards Jessie's RV.

NICK

Pull up the lesser charges, too. Theft, shoplifting, noise complaints. Anything you find, I want to--

Suddenly, Nick stops talking. His world goes silent. He lowers the phone and we see what he sees:

Randy's truck is parked outside of Jessie's RV.

Nick's heart is thumping. For a moment, he's frozen. Then he leaps out of his jeep and races to the RV, blood rushing in his ears.

INT. JESSIE'S RV - CONTINUOUS

Nick bursts through the door and finds...

Randy and Jessie laughing together in the kitchen. Jessie sees him.

JESSIE

Hey, good news! This is Mr. Fix It. He's here to take a look at the freezer.

Randy smiles at Nick. Very friendly.

RANDY
Hi, I'm Randy.

Nick stands there for a tense beat.

NICK
Hi.

JESSIE
(to Randy)
Sorry about the smell, by the way.

RANDY
Oh, believe me. I've smelled worse.

He opens up a rolling black crate, pulls out some tools and starts putting on a pair of gloves.

Nick looks around the RV. Realizing with horror that everything they've been working on is right there in plain sight, all out in the open...

He slowly walks over to the map on the table and quietly flips it over.

RANDY (CONT'D)
Alright, let's see what we got here...

Randy cracks open the fridge, revealing the animals.

RANDY (CONT'D)
Well. That explains the odor.
(noticing Jessie's guns)
You a hunter or something, Miss?

JESSIE
(laughing)
Me? No. Jesus, no.

NICK (O.S.)
What about you?

Randy turns to see Nick looking at him.

NICK (CONT'D)
Are you a hunter?

RANDY
No, no. Look, I don't judge... but I just don't think I could do something like that to an animal.

Randy glances around the room, just now noticing it.

RANDY (CONT'D)

You guys seem like you have quite the operation out here.

JESSIE

Yeah, we're--

NICK

We're studying soil composition throughout the park. Checking to see if the nitrogen levels after the fire have affected new growth on the forest floor.

Jessie gives Nick a confused look. But he doesn't take his eyes off Randy.

RANDY

Wow. Sounds like pretty smart stuff. Hope this bum freezer's not screwing up your project.

NICK

Let's hope not.

RANDY

I'm gonna take a look around back...

Randy drags the freezer out. Jessie is still looking to Nick for an explanation, but he's giving her nothing.

Right then her phone rings. She picks it up.

JESSIE

(on the phone)

Cindy? Yeah, that's great. Email's fine...

Randy glances over at her and sees: the picture of Wendy on the back of Jessie's phone.

His world goes quiet. His eyes get wide. He looks at Jessie again and suddenly places her: a woman he's only seen on the news before. Wendy's mom.

He quickly goes behind the refrigerator and stands in the darkness, back against the coils. Staring at the wall. Blood pumping...

JESSIE (CONT'D)

(on the phone)

Thanks, Cindy. I owe you one.

Jessie hangs up and turns to Nick.

JESSIE (CONT'D)
I found a camera downtown. I'm
getting the link in a minute.

Nick nods. Jessie starts looking for her laptop charger under a pile of papers in the back of the RV.

ON NICK

His jaw is tight. He stares at the darkness behind the freezer, knowing that Randy is back there. His gaze shifts to Jessie's guns on the wall, just feet away from Randy.

Nick slowly steps in the direction of the guns. He gets closer and closer...

Suddenly, Randy appears behind him -- coming around the back side of the freezer.

RANDY
I'm sorry...

Nick whirls around to see a glint of metal in Randy's hand...

RANDY (CONT'D)
Compressor's broken.

It's the compressor from the back of the freezer. Jessie, still looking for her charger--

JESSIE
Well, Mr. Fix It... can you fix it?

RANDY
Unfortunately, some things are
beyond fixing. But I've got some
old compressors at home. Bet I can
find you one by tomorrow.

JESSIE
That would be great.

RANDY
As for these guys...
(he gestures to the
animals in the freezer)
I'd say you're either gonna have to
stuff 'em or bury 'em.

He smiles big.

EXT. JESSIE'S RV - MOMENTS LATER

Randy quickly walks back to his truck. Glad to be out of there. As he goes to load his gear into the truck bed--

NICK (O.S.)
I can help you with that.

Before he can say no, Nick hops into the back of the truck and helps Randy load his rolling black crate into the bed. Randy's not thrilled about it.

RANDY
That's really not necessary...

NICK
Oh, I'm happy to help.

As Nick pulls in the crate, he glances down at the truck bed and sees: dozens of tiny scratch marks.

IN FLASHBACK

-A cage secured in the back of the truck. Inside, three squirrels scramble around furiously, scratching the paint.

-A squirrel claws the air wildly as it gets soaked in liquid paraffin. It lets out a high-pitched, almost human scream.

BACK TO SCENE

Nick hops out the back and closes the tailgate.

NICK
Great truck.

RANDY
Yeah, she's a real beauty.

NICK
They don't make real beauties anymore, do they?

RANDY
No, Sir. No, they do not.

A hard beat. Nick stares at Randy, studying him. Randy stares right back at him. Neither backing down. Then--

RANDY (CONT'D)
Well. I should go see about that compressor.

NICK
Alright. See you soon.

RANDY
See ya soon.

Randy gets into his truck.

INT. RANDY'S TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

Randy smiles and waves as he drives away.

Once he's out of sight, his face goes cold. The eyes go dead.
The smile disappears.

It's as if a dark cloud is passing over him.

INT. JESSIE'S RV - MOMENTS LATER

Jessie is at the sink washing her hands. Nick comes back
inside and looks out the window after Randy.

NICK
Do you know that guy?

JESSIE
"Mr. Fix It"? No. Repair guys are
always a little fucking weird, huh?

NICK
Where's that video.

JESSIE
It's downloading right now. Should
be done in a second.

Nick goes over to Jessie's laptop and sees that the video
download has just completed. He opens it. We stay on his face
as he watches it.

JESSIE (CONT'D)
I didn't have much luck out there
today. Found maybe three or four
places on Linden, but this was all
I got. How'd you do?

Nick doesn't respond. He's perfectly still, looking at
something on the screen.

JESSIE (CONT'D)
Nick?

He slowly looks at her.

NICK

You need to watch this.

A look of concern on her face. She goes over and sits down across from him, spins the laptop around, and clicks on...

THE VIDEO

Security footage outside of Monk's Insurance, the day of the fire. As she scrubs through it, we see:

People leaving the office... Jessie waiting outside... Ken picking her up and the two of them driving off, right to left... smoke on the edge of the frame... the first signs of fire... two cars drive by, right to left, right to left... the store across the street BURSTS INTO FLAMES... moments later the street is FULLY ABLAZE, and then suddenly, in the middle of the chaos... a vehicle passes through the frame.

Jessie pauses it, quickly scrubs back, and plays it again at half-speed... low-res video of a RED TRUCK passing through the frame, moving left to right, in the opposite direction of everybody else.

She stares at the screen for a moment, frozen in shock.

JESSIE

What the fuck? Is that...?

NICK

The repair guy, Randy Blodum. He's the one we're looking for. Has he worked for you before?

JESSIE

No.

NICK

Did you tell him your last name? Does he know of anything that ties you to Wendy?

JESSIE

No, I don't think so...

NICK

Good. Then we might still be able to catch him by surprise.

Nick shuts the laptop and packs it in a bag. Jessie rises to her feet, adrenaline pumping.

JESSIE

We have to go after him... we have
to go after him right now...

NICK

We will. But we need help.

Right then, a strange noise: PLEP PLEP PLEP.

Nick and Jessie look up at the ceiling, startled. They walk
over to the window and see:

It's raining.

EXT. JESSIE'S RV - CONTINUOUS

Gray skies loom overhead. For the first time in a long time,
the rain is coming down.

And it's coming down hard.

EXT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - LATER

It's pouring. Water dumping down from the heavens. Thunder
rumbling over the dark black land.

It's shaping up to be a Biblical storm.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - PARKING GARAGE - CONTINUOUS

Police officers and sheriff's deputies are dressed in rain
gear, loading sandbags into police cruiser trunks.

Frank walks through the garage, Jessie and Nick following
close behind.

FRANK

Look. I don't know what you expect
me to do...

JESSIE

Search his house. Get a warrant.

Frank laughs.

FRANK

A warrant! What am I gonna tell a
judge? There's a guy in town who
helps out at the church and drives
a truck? Shit, we better call in
the SWAT team!

Frank slams the trunk on a cruiser and sends it off.

JESSIE

You're not listening. This guy--

FRANK

Jessie, I can't do this right now. I've got floods all over the place. If the Merced Pass gets washed out, you're gonna have to drive through Nevada to get to Sacramento. Let's just give it a day.

JESSIE

I'm not giving it a day. Anything can happen in a day.

FRANK

I understand, but it's better to wait. Tomorrow we'll talk to the FBI and--

NICK

I'll tell you what, Frank. You stay here and we'll go by ourselves. If it turns out this guy had something to do with the fire, we'll just let everyone know you couldn't make it because you were too busy playing weatherman.

Frank pauses. Exhales deeply. Then he turns to them, glaring.

FRANK

Okay. You get me. That's it. The three of us will go over to this guy's house and talk to him. Just talk. No wild accusations. Got it?

NICK

Yeah.

FRANK

And you...
(pointing to Jessie)
I know you've got guns in that RV. I don't want to see 'em.

JESSIE

Sure.

Frank shakes his head, can't believe he's agreeing to this.

FRANK
God damn it. Alright, let's go.

EXT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - STREET - CONTINUOUS

Frank's police SUV pulls out into the rain. Jessie's RV follows closely behind.

INT. JESSIE'S RV - CONTINUOUS

Jessie looks through the windshield. Her wipers are moving as fast as they can go, but they can barely keep up with the downpour.

Right then, we hear a sound coming from Jessie's phone: a HORRIBLE, DIGITAL SCRAMBLE. We've heard it before...

INT. FRANK'S SUV - CONTINUOUS

The emergency alert continues on Nick's and Frank's phones. Nick looks at.

FRANK
What is it?

NICK
Flash floods.

FRANK
Shit.

Frank shakes his head. Muttering to himself--

FRANK (CONT'D)
"Playing weatherman." What an asshole.

They drive on through the rain.

EXT. RANDY'S STREET - MOMENTS LATER

Jessie parks her RV on the side of the road half a block down from Randy's driveway. Frank pulls up beside her, lowers his window, and calls to her through the rain.

FRANK
What's up?

JESSIE

I don't want to get stuck in his driveway. I'll meet you guys there in a sec.

FRANK

Okay.

Frank pulls away. Jessie gets out of the RV.

EXT. RV - CONTINUOUS

She walks down the street through the rain. Suddenly, she slows down. Stops walking. Thinks.

INT. JESSIE'S RV - MOMENTS LATER

She runs back into the RV and grabs a SHOTGUN.

INT. FRANK'S SUV - CONTINUOUS

Frank and Nick park in Randy's driveway. No sound but the pitter-patter of rain on the car.

They look at the house through the windshield. Quiet and dark in the storm.

FRANK

Okay. Ready?

NICK

Yeah.

EXT. RANDY'S DRIVEWAY - CONTINUOUS

Nick and Frank get out of the car and walk up the long driveway together in the rain.

FRANK

It's probably best if I do the talking.

NICK

Fine by me.

FRANK

You know, it's funny. Just two blocks from here, every single house is gone.

(MORE)

FRANK (CONT'D)
But neighborhoods like this one,
you can barely even tell there was
a--

DUT - DUT - DUT

Three gunshots. Two bullets burst through Frank's chest. The third hits him in the right side of the face. It happens so fast, it takes us a second to process what's happening...

NICK
Frank?

Frank slowly looks at him. Eyes wide. Tottering on his feet. As he turns, we see that the right half of his jaw is gone.

NICK (CONT'D)
Frank...!

Frank reaches up and touches his shattered face. Blood streams through his fingers.

He reaches out clumsily with his left hand and shoves Nick hard in the chest, pushing him to the ground just as--

DAKA-DAKA-DAKA-DAKA-DAKA-DAKA...

Several more shots hit Frank. Two in the thigh. One in the chest. One in the neck. He falls facedown in the mud.

Nick crawls behind the massive TREE STUMP along the side of Randy's driveway, just as the shooter turns on him...

DAKA-DAKA-DAKA-DAKA...

INT. RANDY'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Randy is set up in the front window of his house with an AR-15 on a bipod. We see a bump-stock trucking back and forth as he zeroes in on Nick's position.

DAKA-DAKA-DAKA-DAKA-DAKA-DAKA...

EXT. DRIVEWAY - CONTINUOUS

Nick curls up against the tree stump, trying to make himself small. His teeth rattle every time a bullet punches into the wood.

Frank lies in the mud, just a few feet away. Rain pouring down on him. Staring at Nick with one eye, in horror.

A barrage of gunfire cascades down on Nick, getting closer and closer...

He closes his eyes and screams.

QUICK SERIES OF IMAGES

-Randy firing mercilessly. Shell casings helicopter through the air...

-Nick's face pressed against the tree stump. He looks at Frank in the mud, gasping for air with his final breaths.

-The bass mailbox, mouth agape. Jessie's house burns to the ground in the background...

-The tree stump begins to break apart. Nick squeezes his eyes shut as four-inch-long wood splinters shower down on him.

-A squirrel, on fire, runs through a field of tall grass. Flames spreading in its wake...

DUT -- DUT -- DUT -- DUT...

PRELAP: BOOM!

INT. RANDY'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Jessie kicks in the side door of Randy's house, aims her shotgun down the hallway at Randy, and fires: **BLAMM - BLAMM - BLAMM!**

Randy gets grazed by the first shot, but pulls away just in time. He calmly wheels around the corner and returns fires at her... **DUT-DUT-DUT!**

Jessie quickly ducks outside the house. Teeth clenched as the two-inch long bullets punch through the door frame next to her head.

Randy keeps firing... **DAKA-DAKA-DAKA-DAKA-DAKA-DAKA-click!**

Jessie's eyes get wide. He's out of ammo. She whirls back inside, just in time to see:

Randy throwing a **FLAMING MASON JAR** full of melted Styrofoam, and gasoline. HOMEMADE NAPALM.

JESSIE

Fuck...!

She dives outside the house just as the JAR EXPLODES on the door frame, spraying liquid fire everywhere.

Jessie quickly clambers back to the house. Peeks around the corner. Through the flames she sees Randy sprinting down the hallway...

She takes another shot at him -- BLAMM! -- missing just as he barrels through a door and heads down the basement stairs.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

Shit.

EXT. RANDY'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Nick is still frozen against the tree stump. Completely shell-shocked. Jessie calls to him through the pouring rain.

JESSIE

Nick? Are you okay?

No response.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

Nick!

NICK

Yeah.

JESSIE

Is Frank dead?

Nick looks at Frank's body. Facedown, lifeless in the muck.

NICK

Yeah.

Jessie closes her eyes, pained. After a beat

JESSIE

Hey, Nick?

Nick just stares at the mud. He's somewhere far, far away...

JESSIE (CONT'D)

Nick, I need you.

Her words break through.

NICK

Okay. I'm coming.

Nick staggers to his feet and runs over to her.

THE SIDE OF THE HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Nick presses against the wall next to Jessie. She takes the four remaining shells off the side saddle of her shotgun and starts feeding them into the magazine.

NICK

Where is he?

JESSIE

The basement.

Nick takes a quick glance inside the house: The fire has quickly spread down the hallway. Walls engulfed in flames. Dense gray smoke billowing on the ceiling.

He ducks back out and looks at the top of the house. Ominous wisps of smoke curl out the top of the roof.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

How much time do we have?

NICK

Six minutes. Maybe seven.

She finishes loading her shotgun and racks it.

JESSIE

Okay.

NICK

I'll go first. Stay low.

She nods. Nick goes to the edge of the door. Takes a deep breath. Then he swings around the door frame and the two of them head...

INTO THE HOUSE

A red and orange inferno. Nick and Jessie crouch low to the ground as they move quickly through the blaze.

SMOKE DETECTORS SHRIEK in a horrible, ear-piercing chorus. Flames flutter violently on the walls. The fire doubling in size every thirty seconds.

Jessie glances up to see flames rippling strangely across the ceiling. It's dizzying. Like looking down at a pool of fire.

The fire is just getting started, but the heat is already almost unbearable. So hot the moisture on their eyes begins to evaporate.

They get to the basement stairs. Doorway engulfed in flames, like a gateway to hell. They pass into the stairwell and Nick pulls the door shut.

INSIDE THE STAIRWELL

An angry red glow emanates from the door behind them. Up above, the fire is devouring the house. It sounds like a freight train passing overhead.

They get to the bottom steps and duck down into...

THE BASEMENT

Jessie slips into the apartment first, quickly checking right and left with her shotgun.

A thin fog of smoke hangs in the air. But otherwise, the living room looks as cozy as ever. A half-made lunch on the kitchen counter. Bouncy music playing on the stereo...

Nick follows behind her and looks around the room. There's no sign of anyone.

Jessie raises her palm and signals to Nick, "You stay here." He nods. Then she slips around the corner and heads towards...

THE BEDROOM

Jessie enters, checks the corners. The room is empty. She checks the closets. No one there.

LIVING ROOM

Nick, sweat dripping down his face, scans the room. After a moment, something above him grabs his attention:

A current of smoke is being sucked along the ceiling, drawn towards the ventilator fan on the back wall.

Nick crosses the room, following the smoke. He stops at the wall, then looks down at the bookshelf. He pushes it, rolling it aside, revealing: the hidden door.

He slowly opens the door. Looks inside. Then steps in and goes to the left.

HIDDEN APARTMENT

It's dark and smoky in here. Hard to see. As Nick creeps along the cinderblock wall, he glances up:

The light bulbs on the ceiling are swimming in smoke. An orange glow can be seen through the seams in the sub floor above him as the fire eats its way through the house.

Nick gets to a corner. Peeks around and sees a narrow corridor full of boxes. No one there.

He hesitates. He knows how vulnerable he is down here, but he also knows he's running out of time. He has to move quickly.

He rounds the corner and creeps along the corridor.

THE LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Jessie emerges from the bedroom and freezes when she sees that Nick is gone. No sign of him.

Suddenly, she clocks the secret door.

INT. HIDDEN APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

ON JESSIE

Drenched in sweat, she cautiously steps into the hidden apartment. Shotgun at the ready. She looks to the right, then looks to the left. Which way to go?

She goes to the right.

ON NICK

It's getting darker and darker as he weaves around boxes, making his way down another cinderblock corridor.

Suddenly, he sees something up on the left. A room with a metal gate across the door. As he looks inside--

A WOMAN slams up against the gate.

WOMAN

(in a whisper)

Help me! Please. You have to help me!

Nick is frozen in shock for a moment. Snapping out of it--

NICK
How do I--?

WOMAN
There!

She points to the side, where Nick finds two sliding bolt latches. He slides the first bolt.

WOMAN (CONT'D)
Hurry...

He slides the second bolt and opens the gate.

NICK
Where is he? Is there a girl named
Wendy--

But as soon as the gate is open, the woman bolts out and runs down the corridor, getting the fuck out of there.

Nick watches her go, then turns and pushes further down the corridor. Moving faster now. He comes up on a second room with a metal gate...

He looks inside and sees A YOUNGER WOMAN, hiding in the back.

In a whisper--

NICK (CONT'D)
It's okay. I'm here to help.

He slides open the two latch bolts and opens the gate.

NICK (CONT'D)
The house is on fire. You have to
hurry.

The girl doesn't move. He looks closer at her. Sees the fear.

IN HIS MIND'S EYE

A horse on fire, standing in an unlocked stall. Shaking its head back and forth as it burns alive.

ON NICK

He looks at her. Mouth dry from the heat.

NICK (CONT'D)
What's your name?

YOUNGER WOMAN
I... I don't know.

A beat. Nick checks right and left. No one there. He looks back at the woman. Firmly--

NICK

Randy said you can come out.

YOUNGER WOMAN

He did?

Nick nods. Sweat dripping down his face.

NICK

He said he wants you to go upstairs and go outside right now. He'll be really mad if you don't.

She gets to her feet. Nervously comes out of the cell.

NICK (CONT'D)

Run and don't stop until you get outside or he'll punish you.

She nods. Runs off into the smoke, disappearing from sight.

ON NICK

He turns and pushes ahead. Fear in his eyes. Adrenaline coursing through his body. It's getting darker in here. A living nightmare.

Above him, the WOOD GROANS. He doesn't have to see it to know what's happening: the house is on the verge of collapse.

He sees a third door at the end of the corridor. He hurries towards it, rushing in the dark. When he gets there he sees:

The door is open. There's no one inside.

ON JESSIE

She leads with her shotgun, creeping along a corridor full of boxes. Passes a doorway and checks inside: an empty 4x4 foot bathroom with a stainless steel toilet and a standing shower.

She keeps moving, sweating through her clothes. Pupils dilated. Quick, panting breaths. She passes another room: a tiny kitchen hidden behind a filthy green curtain.

She crouches. Presses forward. Weaving between the boxes. In the background behind her, we suddenly see a blurry ORANGE POINT OF LIGHT. Jessie senses it. Turns and sees:

Fire. Chewing through a weak spot in the subfloor. Flames drip from the ceiling and land on a stack of boxes, setting them ablaze. Black smoke rises to the ceiling.

Jessie breathes faster. She's out of time. She turns and pushes deeper into the maze. Moving faster and faster...

She quickly rounds a corner and freezes:

Standing at an intersection at the end of the hallway is Randy, holding Wendy in a chokehold with one arm. In his other hand he holds a big plastic jug.

Jessie sees Wendy and her world goes still.

JESSIE

Wendy--!

RANDY

Put down your gun.

Wendy struggles weakly. Her face is badly beaten. Her eyes are swollen shut.

WENDY

Help me... Please help me...

JESSIE

I'm here, Wendy. It's going to be okay.

Wendy suddenly registers the voice. Her face contorts--

WENDY

(sobbing)

Mom...??!

JESSIE

Yes, Wendy. It's me.

WENDY

I thought you were dead... He told me you were dead...!

JESSIE

It's okay, Wendy. Everything's gonna be okay.

RANDY

Put down your gun.

JESSIE

Let her go.

RANDY

Put down your gun or I'll bless her
with oil.

He lifts the container.

Jessie hesitates. The growing fire off to her left flickers
in the corner of her eye. If Wendy's covered in oil, she'll
never make it out of here alive...

Randy starts to pour--

JESSIE

Okay, okay! I'm putting down the
gun...

She crouches down and puts the shotgun on the ground. Slowly
stands back up.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

Okay. It's on the ground.

RANDY

You need to leave.

JESSIE

I'm not leaving without her. I
don't care about you. I just want
Wendy. Just please give me Wendy.

Randy considers something. Then, softly--

RANDY

Where is the lamb?

JESSIE

What?

Randy stares at her with cold, dead eyes.

RANDY

We have the fire and the wood. But
where is the lamb for a burnt
offering?

JESSIE

Randy--

RANDY

God himself will provide the lamb.

He raises the container above Wendy's head.

JESSIE

No!--

He starts to pour--

Suddenly, NICK FLASHES ACROSS THE SCREEN from the side corridor, tackling Randy hard to the ground. The container goes flying, spilling paraffin everywhere.

Jessie sprints forward and grabs Wendy, pulling her back, just as they hear a HORRIBLE GROANING NOISE...

A MASSIVE PORTION OF THE CEILING COLLAPSES.

Jessie and Wendy narrowly avoid being crushed. A shocked beat and then Jessie stumbles back towards the mess of wood, plaster, and concrete. A flaming barrier blocking her path.

She looks through it. No sign of Randy, but she sees Nick. He's out of reach, struggling to pull himself from the wreckage.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

Are you okay?

NICK

You have to go.

JESSIE

I can get to you.

She tries lifting one of the wooden beams to get to him. It doesn't budge.

JESSIE (CONT'D)

If we just--

NICK

(barking)

Jessie. Save her.

She locks eyes with him for a moment. And then... she snaps into action.

ON JESSIE

She backs away from the wreckage, then grabs Wendy and runs with her back down the corridor, the way she came in. Wendy is hysterical, tears streaming from her swollen eyes.

WENDY

Mom... I can't see... I can't see anything...

JESSIE

It's okay. I've got you. I've got you.

Jessie leads Wendy as they round a corner, racing down a corridor lined with burning boxes. A foot of black smoke now on the ceiling above them.

They reach the end of the hallway and turn, just as another section of the ceiling collapses behind them.

THE BASEMENT APARTMENT

They burst through the secret door back into the basement apartment, now fully in flames. As they run for the stairs, Wendy falters...

JESSIE

Come on, Wendy. Come on.

Wendy's legs give out, too weak to keep going. Jessie picks her up and carries her. Running on pure adrenaline now as she sprints...

UP THE STAIRS

It's like passing through a furnace. Jessie powers her way up, step by step, carrying Wendy, the muscles in her legs feeling like they're about to explode under the pressure.

SHE SCREAMS as she makes it up the last few steps, punching through the flames to...

THE GROUND FLOOR

Thick black smoke and total destruction. Jessie gets one clean breath of air and holds it, racing for the door before finally making it...

OUTSIDE

She staggers out into the muddy yard, slowly lowers Wendy into the mud, and then collapses beside her. Coughing. Crying. Completely depleted. She rolls over to Wendy.

JESSIE

Are you okay? Wendy, are you okay?

WENDY

(sobbing)

Mom... Mommm...

Jessie holds her tight in her arms and kisses her head over and over. Suddenly, Jessie freezes. She sees something:

Standing at the edge of the yard are the TWO OTHER WOMEN. Skinny. Sickly. Huddled together in the pouring rain.

A look of horror on Jessie's face as she realizes who they must be. She turns and looks back at the house.

The entire structure is on fire.

INT. HIDDEN APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Nick screams in pain as he rips his legs free from the wreckage. A deep gash in his right thigh, nearly to the bone. His right arm is badly broken.

He grimaces, then drags himself up and starts running down the only way out of there. He hears a noise behind him and looks:

Randy emerges from the wreckage and staggers after him.

ON NICK

He runs in a crouch through the burning maze. Thick black smoke now halfway down the cinderblock walls.

ON RANDY

He's badly injured from the ceiling collapse. A flap of skin hangs from a nasty gash over his eye.

He stops at a stack of boxes full of old military gear. Digs inside and pulls out a seven-inch Ka-bar combat knife.

ON NICK

He's going as fast as he can, as low to the ground as possible. Soon he'll have to start crawling.

Flaming boxes around him are spewing up more and more black smoke, but he's grateful for the flames. As soon as they go out, he'll be trapped in pitch-black darkness.

Now almost crawling, he gets to an intersection and stops. Looks around desperately. Which way to go?

With only the bottom three feet of the corridor visible, it's almost impossible to tell where he is. Suddenly he sees the rooms of the girls he let out earlier.

He turns the corner.

ON RANDY

Randy scuttles along as fast as possible, face red from the fire, clutching his knife in his fist.

He rounds a corner and then suddenly--

Nick leaps out from behind a stack of boxes and shoves him into one of the cells. Before Randy can react, Nick slams the metal gate and bolts it shut.

RANDY

No!

Randy slams against the gate.

RANDY (CONT'D)

WAIT!

Nick turns to leave.

RANDY (CONT'D)

Don't you want to know why?

NICK

Not really.

Nick goes down the corridor, now crawling as fast as he can with a broken arm.

In the background, Randy slams against the gate, banging into it as hard as he can.

RANDY

No. NO. NO. NO!!!

The final boxes burn out and the corridor is plunged into a horrible darkness. Randy lets out a roar like a monstrous, inhuman creature moments before he drowns in smoke.

RANDY (CONT'D)

EUGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!

THE BASEMENT APARTMENT

Nick emerges into the basement apartment, crumbling in the fire. He can barely breathe. The heat is unspeakable.

He looks at the stairwell and sees that it's fully in flames. It would be suicide to go up.

He searches frantically. Finds a big woolen blanket on the couch. Takes it to kitchen, uses it to turn on both faucets, then stuffs it in the sink.

While it soaks, he lays down, pressing his face against the floor. Takes three big breaths.

Then he leaps to his feet and grabs the wet blanket. Covers as much of his body as possible and then sprints...

UP THE STAIRS

He holds his breath, dashing up the stairs, unable to see anything inside the blanket. He's two steps from the top when suddenly--

One of his feet punches through the step.

NICK

NO...!

His leg is stuck past the knee. He tries to push himself up, but he can't put enough pressure on his broken arm. He grits his teeth inside the blanket, being cooked alive, and then--

Someone grabs him and pulls him out.

ON JESSIE

She drags Nick out of the stairwell, gets him to his feet, and then pulls him through the hallway until they get...

BACK OUTSIDE

As they stumble out the door, she takes the woolen blanket, now fully on fire, rips it off him, and throws it aside.

The two of them stumble to a safe distance from the house and collapse in the mud next to Wendy.

Their faces are both bright red from the heat. Nick looks like his entire body is sunburned. He coughs horribly, hacking, retching up smoke.

He rolls over on his side, gasping for air. Jessie suddenly notices his arm and the gash on his leg. He's losing a lot of blood.

She takes off her jacket and presses it against his leg. It immediately soaks through with blood.

NICK

Why would you do that? Why would you come back for me?

JESSIE

Shhhhh.

NICK

You just got her back. Why would you risk everything? That was so stupid. So stupid...

JESSIE

Quiet. You need to save your strength, okay?

Nick is lying on his back in the mud. His face starts to go pale. His eyes are swimming.

NICK

There were two other girls... did they...?

JESSIE

They made it out. You saved them, Nick. You saved them.

His eyes loll in his head...

JESSIE (CONT'D)

Nick!

She cradles him in her arms as he loses consciousness...

We rise up, pulling away from them, as Randy's house collapses in on itself, and police cars and fire engines come screaming down the street...

EXT. TELEGI FOREST - DAY

A beautiful day. The sun is out. Birds twitter in the trees.

EXT. MEADOW SITE

The burn trails are gone. Blotted out by the storm.

A deer passes through. Moments later, a fawn follows after.

EXT. DOWNTOWN AVALON - INTERSECTION

The intersection where everyone was trapped the day of the fire. There's a man in overalls doing something to the mural.

We drift around him and see: he's painting over Wendy's name, taking it off the list of the dead.

SUPER: TWO WEEKS LATER

EXT. HOSPITAL - DAY

Jessie steps outside the hospital doors. She looks almost like she used to. Younger. Healthier. Reborn. She glances around, then finds him:

Nick sits on a bench outside the hospital. Windbreaker draped over his shoulders. Arm in a sling. Looking out at the woods across the parking lot.

Jessie walks over and sits down beside him.

JESSIE

I heard you were leaving.

NICK

Yeah, well, when the state of California volunteered to pay my medical bills, I figured I'd milk them for as long as possible. But I think they're starting to catch on.

She laughs.

JESSIE

It's appalling that you would leave without saying goodbye.

NICK

I just didn't want to see you get mushy.

JESSIE

(laughing)

Yeah, right.

NICK

Did you hear they figured out who the girl is?

JESSIE

Really?

NICK
Yeah. Stephanie Ortega. Kidnapped
in Yosemite six years ago.

JESSIE
Jesus Christ.

They look out over the forest. It's green. Surprisingly lush.
Awakened by the rain.

NICK
How's Wendy?

JESSIE
A little better every day. Ken is
in there with her now. He's going
through it.

NICK
I'm sure.

JESSIE
She's eating well now, so that's
good. They think maybe she's going
to lose the vision in her left eye,
but...

She stops, choked up.

NICK
Well. The experts have been wrong
before.

Jessie smiles.

JESSIE
True.
(a beat)
She'd really like to meet you, by
the way. Maybe say thanks for
saving her life.

Nick looks at her.

NICK
I'm not the one who saved her life.
(then)
Here's my ride.

A California Highway Patrol car pulls up in front of them.

EXT. PATROL CAR - CONTINUOUS

Jessie helps Nick over to the car. They turn and face each other for a long beat. Too much to say. Finally--

NICK
Bye, Jessie.

JESSIE
Bye, Nick.

He's about to go when suddenly-- she grabs him and gives him a long hug and then a quick, awkward kiss on the cheek.

JESSIE (CONT'D)
Okay, get out of here.

She steps away, embarrassed, wiping away tears as he gets into the car. He pauses before shutting the door--

NICK
You know... San Francisco's a nice place to visit if you have rich friends.

Jessie smiles.

JESSIE
I'll keep that in mind.

Nick shuts the door and Jessie watches as they drive off.

INT. PATROL CAR - LATER

Nick looks out the window, black trees flicking past as he leaves Avalon behind.

After a moment, he settles into his seat and turns to the young police officer driving.

NICK
Officer, are you familiar with the work of Gram Parsons?

POLICE OFFICER
I don't know. I don't think so.

NICK
Well...
(he plugs in his phone)
You will be by the time we make it back home.

EXT. AVALON - CONTINUOUS

Music plays as the patrol car drives off into the distance. We drift up and over the forest, where we find a bird cutting above the treetops.

We follow the bird as it rises up, climbing higher and higher. Faster and faster. Wings beating relentlessly as it fights to stay afloat above the invisible weight of the air.

CUT TO BLACK.