

THE TREES

Written by
Tyler Hisel

Insignia Entertainment
Alexander Robb
310.936.7694
310.601.7499
alexrobb@insigniaentertainment.com

EXT. LOGGING CAMP -- NIGHT

A sea of grey barked trees stretch skyward into the darkness of the night. Harsh halogen work lights illuminate the woods.

A piercing SHRIEK cuts through the night air as the blade of a powerful chainsaw rips into the hardened wood of a tree.

JESSE NOLAND, early thirties, removes the saw from the trunk as the tree falls to the forest floor below with a deafening CRASH.

Jesse wipes beads of sweat from his forehead as he cuts the engine on his saw and places it by his side. Removing his protective earmuffs, he glances over his shoulder.

Another chainsaw lies unattended on the snow covered ground. Beside it rests a lit flashlight.

Jesse looks around confused.

JESSE

Riggs?

SNAP. A twig breaks in the consuming darkness just outside the range of the work lights. Jesse spins toward the sound. All senses on alert.

CRACK. Closer this time. Jesse forces a nervous laugh.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Riggs, you out there?

No answer. Jesse's forced smile quickly fades.

An AGONIZED SCREAM pierces through the night air from deep inside the woods. Jesse spins toward the sound.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Riggs?!

As quickly as the pained cry began, it is CUT SILENT.

JESSE (CONT'D)

RIGGS?!

No response. A deafening silence drifts through the trees.

CRASH. Something large and fast slams into the work lights mounted on a portable stand. The lights sway and fall, smashing to the ground in a splash of sparks. Darkness swallows Jesse and his work site.

The sounds of Jesse's panicked breathing can be heard through the darkness as he fumbles for his flashlight. He finds it, clicking it on.

Frozen in terror, he forces his muscles to work. He frantically scans the dark trees with his light. Terror.

He reaches for his walkie-talkie. It's not there. His flashlight searches the work site before landing on the walkie. It sits on a stump across the newly created clearing.

Before Jesse can take a step, the sound of movement cuts through the darkness. He freezes in fear, not brave enough to pull his eyes or flashlight away from that walkie.

The movement charges closer and closer before -- SOMETHING DASHES THROUGH JESSE'S FLASHLIGHT BEAM. We barely miss it, appearing as a blur running into the night.

Jesse's eyes widen. Every cell in his body tenses. He saw it.

He slowly bends his knees, lowering his trembling hand toward the handle of his chainsaw.

Behind him, the sound of a furious predator rushes forward at a blinding speed. Before he can react, it is upon him.

Jesse's fleeting GRUNT from the fatal impact is all that is heard as his flashlight drops to the cold dirt below.

Jesse is gone without a trace or a sound.

His glowing flashlight lies alone in the now empty clearing as silence once again fills the dark woods.

FADE OUT:

LEGEND: "Laytonsville, Maryland. 1984. Based on true events."

EXT. COW PASTURE NEAR TREE LINE -- DAY

Cows graze in a flat field surrounded by a black plank fence.

SHERIFF PAUL SHIELDS stands with an old man, TOM PETERSON, outside the fence. Paul is in his early-forties with eyes that show a rare inner strength. He wears a tan uniform shirt, jacket and jeans. A revolver hangs from his belt.

PAUL

I don't see any tire tracks Tom. It rained yesterday. A truck would've left some tracks in the mud.

TOM

I had 23 cattle yesterday, and I only got 22 today. I ain't no sheriff but best I figure that means one's missing!

Paul ignores the comment. He looks around the dirt.

DONNY SAUNDERS, a dark haired sheriff's deputy in his late twenties, inspects the fence line about twenty feet away. Donny exudes confidence and optimism, or maybe just naivety. He talks with a hint of a Brooklyn accent.

DONNY

The fence is kinda low over here.
You think it could've jumped it?

TOM

I've been raisin' cattle on this land for 35 years, and I've never seen a cow jump loose without taking a section of fence out with 'em.

PAUL

It just seems odd that someone would go through all the trouble just to steal one cow, Tom. It would take a couple of guys and a trailer.

The deputy approaches.

DONNY

The fences were closed?

TOM

And tied. I'm not an idiot.

Tom looks back and forth between Paul and Donny.

TOM (CONT'D)

So that's it? I'm just out 900 pounds worth of beef?

Beat.

PAUL

I wish I had more I could do for you Tom, I really do. But I'm just not seeing anything here.

TOM

I'm seeing one missing cow! That's what I'm seeing...

Paul and the Donny open the doors to their white squad car.

The nearby tree line CREAKS from a slight breeze.

PAUL

We'll keep an eye out Tom. You let us know if you see anyone out here.

Tom turns and walks toward his rusted truck.

TOM
If I lose another cow I be coming
out to your house.

Paul smiles.

PAUL
Let us know Tom.

Far from satisfied, the old man nods and gives a weak wave.

Paul and Donny shut the car doors as Paul starts the engine and backs onto the paved highway. Donny forces a smile at the old man through the windshield.

DONNY
He left that fence open.

PAUL
Yep.

Paul puts the car in gear and pulls away.

EXT. RANCH STYLE HOUSE -- DAY

Paul's squad car slows to stop in front of a nice red bricked one story house. ADAM, a small boy of 8, stares expectantly out the front glass door.

As Paul and Donny emerge from either side of the car, Adam exits the house, yelling over his shoulder. He carries a blue backpack on his back.

ADAM
Dad's here!

Paul rubs Adam's hair as passes him on the way to the house.

PAUL
Hey pal.

Paul stops mid-step and cautiously watches Adam as he nears the street.

As the screen door swings, a voice comes from inside the house.

SUSAN
Adam, wait!

SUSAN SHIELDS emerges, catching the screen door the instant before it latches, a piece of paper in her hand. Susan is a natural beauty. She wears khaki pants, a button up blouse, and not a drop of makeup. She doesn't need it.

SUSAN (CONT'D)
H-

Adam is already to the car, throwing his backpack through the door. Susan sees Paul approaching her.

SUSAN (CONT'D)
Hey...

PAUL
Hey.

SUSAN
He forgot his homework.

She hands the paper to Paul.

SUSAN (CONT'D)
Subtraction.

Paul nods as he looks at the paper.

PAUL
Your mom's car's gone.

SUSAN
She's gone to Florida. One of those
senior bus trips.

She gives a weak smile.

SUSAN (CONT'D)
She was excited.

PAUL
You're here alone?

SUSAN
I'll be fine.

AT THE CAR

Adam sits on the hood next to Donny.

ADAM
So New York's a big city, right?

DONNY
Pretty big.

ADAM
And noisy?

DONNY
...and noisy.

ADAM
Why'd you leave?

DONNY
It's too big, and too noisy.

Adam smiles.

ADAM
We were supposed to go last summer.

Donny's smile fades slightly. He looks around uncomfortably before noticing a cartoon baseball player on Adam's shirt.

DONNY
So you like baseball, huh?

ON THE PORCH

Paul and Susan continue to speak on the steps.

SUSAN
I got a call from Adam's teacher.
She wants to have a conference with
us. We should both probably be
there.

PAUL
Sure.

Susan hesitates awkwardly for a moment.

SUSAN
It's Monday. At 3:45, I think...
I'll let you know.

PAUL
Sure. I'll be there.

Susan nervously spins her wedding band on her finger.

SUSAN
I've been talking to someone.

Beat. Paul stiffens.

PAUL
Okay...

SUSAN
Every Tuesday I drive to Richmond.
It's really helped me. If you ever
wanted to go together...

PAUL
I'm fine Susan.

He has trouble looking her in the eye.

SUSAN

...because I asked if it would be
okay.

PAUL

I didn't leave Susan... I'll drop
him back off tomorrow.

Susan nods. Sadness covers her face.

Paul backs toward the squad car as Donny lifts Adam off of
the hood and sets him on the ground.

Susan takes a disappointed breath as she forces a smile and
waves to Adam.

SUSAN

Have fun baby! Be safe!

Adam waves to his mom as he climbs into the rear of the car.

INT. KITCHEN -- NIGHT

Adam stands on a plastic stool at the kitchen sink. He washes
a dinner plate with a small yellow sponge.

Paul removes dirty plates from the table and puts them in the
sink. He nearly drops a salt shaker as he balances several
cups and plates on one arm.

ADAM

I don't want to go to school
tomorrow.

PAUL

Why not?

Adam doesn't answer. Paul gets it.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Is somebody picking on you?

ADAM

Josh Wiley told everyone I run like
a girl in gym today...

PAUL

Josh Wiley. Josh Wiley's brother's
been in the 8th grade for 3 years
and he's making fun of you?

ADAM

His brother's been in the 8th grade
for 3 years?!

PAUL

What? No. No, don't tell anybody
that... You don't run like a girl.

Paul takes a beat.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Do you like gym class?

Adam nods.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Do you have fun with your friends?

He nods again.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Then who cares what Josh Wiley has
to say about it?

Adam smiles. Paul looks down at one of the dishes.

PAUL (CONT'D)

You missed a spot.

He flips the plate over.

PAUL (CONT'D)

-you missed a side!

Paul smiles at Adam, but Adam stares straight ahead. A window is directly in front of him. He stares through the glass at the darkness that envelopes a line of trees just beyond the backyard.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Are you alright?

Adam stares ahead. Eerily still.

ADAM

Someone's in the backyard...

Paul leans in front of the dark window, peering into the darkness.

EXT. BACKYARD NEAR TREE LINE -- NIGHT

The flimsy screen door CLANGS as Paul exits the back of the house. He wears a jacket and shudders at the cold. His breath puffs out in front of him with every exhale. Paul cautiously moves through the back yard.

Adam stands at the kitchen window, peering out into the dark night. He breathes heavy. Fear shows on his face.

Paul sees nothing as he nears the trees. He stops a few feet short of the woods... he stares and listens.

The branches CREAK and GROAN as the light wind glides through the trees. The quiet RUSTLE of dead leaves can barely be heard. Paul looks up and down the tree line in both directions. Nothing.

Paul takes a step toward the house. The moment he turns his back on the woods, the CRACK of a large branch cuts through the night. Paul quickly spins toward the trees.

PAUL

Hello?

Silence. Paul swallows hard as his breathing quickens.

PAUL (CONT'D)

This is Sheriff Shields. If there's anybody in there you need to come on out right now...

Paul's eyes scan the darkened trees as they sway in the breeze.

PAUL (CONT'D)

You're not in any trouble, I just need to know if someone is out there.

Nothing.

Paul slowly turns from the trees and begins to make his way back to the house.

As he opens the back screen door, another branch CRACKS. This one deeper into the woods. Paul eyes the trees and finally steps back into the house.

INT. CHILD'S ROOM -- NIGHT

Paul carries Adam into a brightly painted room lit only by a small plastic night light. Adam is asleep, wearing long sleeved pajamas. Paul lifts Adam onto the top bunk of a red metal bunk bed.

Adam slowly rolls onto his side, settling in. Paul grabs the covers and pulls them over his son. He rests his hand on Adam's head.

Paul looks at him for a moment before turning to leave the room. He picks up some clothing off the floor on his way out.

Adam lies sleeping in the top bunk of two. The lower bunk lies empty. Its sheets are made neatly, unslept in.

EXT. TREE LINE -- NIGHT

The Shields' TWO STORY HOME is barely visible from inside the woods. Darkness drapes the trees, the backyard and the house. All is still.

Slowly, small flakes begin to fall. A veil of white. Snowfall.

INT. KITCHEN -- MORNING

The bright morning sun floods through the kitchen window. A freshly fallen blanket of snow has covered the back yard.

Paul sips from a mug of coffee as he pours milk into a white porcelain bowl. He already wears his uniform shirt and jeans.

Adam sits at the kitchen table eating a bowl of colorful cereal. He still wears his pajamas. He stares at a cartoon maze on the back of the box.

Paul carries his bowl and mug from the counter to the table, sitting down across from Adam.

Adam slides Paul the box of cereal and continues eating. Paul glances at the box before pouring some of the multicolored pellets into his bowl.

ADAM

Mom never buys me this cereal.

Paul looks at Adam, and then picks up the box.

PAUL

She doesn't?

ADAM

She says it isn't healthy.

Paul scrutinizes the front of the box.

PAUL

There's fruit in it. Fruit's good for you.

ADAM

I don't think it counts when the fruit is made out of marshmallow.

Paul puts the box down.

PAUL

(sarcastically)

I think I have some granola in the cabinet.

Adam wraps his arm around his cereal, pulling it closer.

Both continue to eat their cereal in silence. Their spoons CLANK against their bowls.

ADAM

When can mom come home?

Paul stops eating.

Adam looks at him as serious as an eight year old boy can. Paul sets down his spoon. He thinks.

PAUL

That's a tough question pal...

Adam stares at Paul as he waits for an answer.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Um, Mom decided to stay with
grandma on her own, she can come
back whenever she wants.

ADAM

She says you don't want her to.

Paul gives a pained smile.

PAUL

Well, I think what mom meant...

He plans his words.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Is that there are some things that
we both need to figure out...

ADAM

Like what?

Paul shifts uncomfortably. Adam stares intently.

ADAM (CONT'D)

Is it because of Tim?

PAUL

No! I don't want you to think that.

Paul speaks with a sudden seriousness.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Do you understand? It's not because
of Timothy. Okay?

Adam nods "yes".

PAUL (CONT'D)

Okay?

ADAM

Okay.

The moment is broken by a LOUD KNOCK at the back door. Donny enters wearing his tan deputy uniform. He looks shaken.

Paul takes notice to Donny's expression as he closes the door behind him.

PAUL

Donny...

Donny looks expectantly at Paul.

DONNY

So what do you think?

Paul returns a blank look.

Adam stops eating turns in his chair toward Donny. Donny looks stunned.

DONNY (CONT'D)

You...you haven't been outside?

Paul's gaze moves from Donny to the back door.

EXT. BACKYARD NEAR TREE LINE -- MORNING

Paul and Donny exit the back door of the house. Donny closes the door behind him as Paul moves into the yard.

A freshly fallen, two inch blanket of snow covers the ground, the trees and the house.

As Paul steps into the backyard, he looks around curiously. Then he sees it.

Paul's eyes stare at the snow covered ground about fifteen feet into the yard. Slowly he steps forward, followed closely by Donny. They both look bewildered.

PAUL

What is this?

Pressed into the white powder is a set of tracks. HOOFPRINTS. Spaced evenly. One in front of the other.

DONNY

I have no idea... I woke up an hour ago and saw them.

Paul stands over the tracks. He looks to his left and right. They travel around the side of the house, across the yard and seemingly through the fence on the other side.

He kneels down close to the tracks. Each print is nearly five inches wide. The spacing of the steps is like that of a human.

DONNY (CONT'D)
They're hoofprints...like, um, like
a horse's...

His brow furrows.

DONNY (CONT'D)
But...

PAUL
The spacing is wrong.

Donny nods.

PAUL (CONT'D)
One in front of the other...on two
legs.

DONNY
How is that possible?

Paul looks down the trail of prints.

DONNY (CONT'D)
What's going on here, boss?

Paul runs his fingertip around the inside of one of the prints in the tightly packed snow.

PAUL
I don't know. But we need to find
out very quickly.

He rises to his feet and looks to the sky. A light flurry of snowflakes has started to fall. Paul catches one on his hand.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Nature's going to hide the
evidence...

EXT. SIDE YARD -- CONTINUOUS

Paul leads the way as he and Donny follow the trail of prints around the side of the Shield's home. They move past the air conditioner, past a shrub, and both slow to a stop.

Paul stares at the snow with an almost sickened look on his face. Donny steps up beside him. Both look at the tracks.

PAUL
They were looking in our windows.

THE HOOFPRTS LEAD UP TO A GLASS PANED WINDOW. Several indentations mark the ground below. They stop there.

DONNY
Three or four other houses have the same thing. They go up to windows or door and just stop... Whatever happened, took time, right? They just don't seem like they were in a big hur-

Donny suddenly stop talking. Paul stares blankly over Donny's shoulder. He isn't paying attention.

DONNY (CONT'D)
What?

Donny turns around, following Paul's sight line over his shoulder.

As the tracks lead away from the Shields' window, they approach the neighboring house. Without warning, the tracks stop. Feet from the side of the solid wall.

From above it is clear that the tracks do not stop. The fresh sheet of snow covering the neighboring roof has been disturbed by a TRAIL OF PRINTS. Large hoof prints.

The trail continues on the other side of the house without losing pace.

Paul and Donny both stare at the roof from far below.

PAUL
And these go all the way to your apartment?

Beat.

DONNY
They go all the way through town...

Paul pulls his eyes from the roof to Donny. They exchange concerned looks.

INT. HALLWAY -- MORNING

Paul enters the hallway. He stops and opens a narrow door. A closet.

Donny moves into the doorframe of the kitchen behind Paul.

Paul thumbs through an abundance of jackets and coats that protrude from the closet, both male and female.

PAUL
There's a camera in the top left drawer.

Donny nods, but hangs in the door.

DONNY
What do you think it is?

Beat. Paul continues to rummage through the closet.

PAUL
I don't know.

Donny nods nervously. He turns, scanning the kitchen with his eyes. He moves to a drawer, opening it. He pulls out a small silver camera.

Paul pulls a heavy DRAB GREEN coat from a hanger. He stuffs his arms into the sleeves as he moves to the glass front door. He stands, peering outside.

Outside several neighbors curiously stare at the tracks that run through their front yards. Many begin to walk down the street, following the disturbing prints.

Adam bounds down the stairs, now changed from his pajamas. He stops at the bottom step, gazing out the front door. He sees the commotion outside.

A small Pomeranian, SAMMY, runs into the foyer and circles Adam's feet.

ADAM
What's going on?

Paul turns to Adam.

PAUL
You're going to ride to school with Evan's mom today. You got your homework?

Still staring out the front door, Adam slowly moves toward the kitchen.

ADAM
Yeah...

PAUL
Get it together and we'll drop you over there.
(MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)
Mom will pick you up after school.
Donny, you find the camera?

INT. KITCHEN -- CONTINUOUS

Donny begins to close the kitchen drawer when something inside catches his eye -- the edge of a photograph peeks out from under an unorganized pile in the back of the drawer.

The image of Paul's smiling face can be seen.

Donny pulls the pile of photos to the front of the drawer. The images come into view in parts and pieces as Donny pushes the photos around with his fingers.

Photos of a birthday party. Susan's face appears next to Paul's as they embrace and smile at the camera. Another photo shows Adam eating a plate full of cake and ice cream.

The one of the last photos shows a small, six year old boy, TIMOTHY, seated at the head of a table in front of the birthday cake. He wears a cone party hat and smiles. Susan and Paul each have a hand on the boy's shoulder. Happiness.

Donny quickly buries the photos and closes the draw.

DONNY
Got it.

He hurries out of the kitchen.

INT. SQUAD CAR -- DAY

Paul and Donny slowly drive down a residential street. Both stare out the passenger side, watching the tracks progress through the snow.

Outside, a zombie-like procession of people in robes, pajamas and coats follow the tracks as snowflakes gently fall around them. They progress down the sidewalk before rounding the corner of a house.

Paul slows the car to a stop along the curb. He leans forward, looking past Donny.

In between two small houses, a group of about 30 people have gathered. They stand on either side of the prints that disappear into the dark wall of trees that back the house.

EXT. TREE LINE -- DAY

The white snow CRUNCHES beneath Paul and Donny's feet as they make their way toward the edge of the trees. They both wear thick coats and snow boots.

The crowd of people notice Paul and Donny. The edge of the group parts, revealing the focus of their attention.

The hoofprints approach the edge of the shadowy woods and continue on into the dense trees.

Paul and Donny slowly move into the center of the group. Their eyes move from the marked snow to the top of the trees.

MAN 1
(unnerved)
What's goin' on sheriff?

Paul turns to the group.

PAUL
Did anybody see who did this?

A man of about 30 with a five o'clock shadow, JIM, speaks.

JIM
Who?

Donny begins snapping photos of the tracks.

PAUL
Someone had to have done this late last night. Did anyone see anything or hear anything?

A small woman in a bath robe and snow boots speaks up.

WOMAN 1
Dogs went crazy about three o'clock. Just jumped up and started barkin'.

Paul nods.

PAUL
Okay.

JIM
These tracks went up to my daughter's window.

Paul thinks for a moment.

PAUL
Anyone else?

MAN 2
(nervous)
The roof... I heard something on the roof. I just remembered. I thought it was the wind knocking the antennae around.

PAUL

Okay...

JIM

How is this okay? I wanna know what the hell did this!

PAUL

But the important thing in this situation is to remain calm.

JIM

Whatever made these damn tracks jumped right over my eight foot fence without so much as missin' a step. How exactly am I supposed to stay calm?

PAUL

We just have to follow through on this, Jim. But we don't know what's going on yet.

The group continues to look at the woods with concern. With fear.

PAUL (CONT'D)

We're probably just looking for some prankster. One of the boys in town. Or maybe it's an animal...maybe it's hurt.

Paul turns back to the trees.

WOMAN

What are they sheriff?

MAN 1

They're obviously tracks!

JIM

From what then Charles? Huh? What the hell causes tracks like that?

MAN 2

Sheriff. You'd better find out what did this.

Paul raises his hands, trying to calm the crowd.

PAUL

Alright...

They quiet.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Alright. I don't know any more than you do right now. But we're going to figure this out. Okay?

Several nod nervously.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Did anybody see anything last night? Anyone in your yards, at your windows?

The crowd remains silent. No one answers.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Alright. Has anybody gone into the woods? Has anybody followed the tracks further than this?

The people looks around nervously. No one speaks. Jim shakes his head slightly. They're afraid.

MAN 2
We figured we'd wait for you to do that sheriff...

Paul slowly turns back to the woods, to the branches that hang disturbingly still. The tracks forge directly into the grey barked trees. He takes a cold breath.

MAN 2 (CONT'D)
Whatever did it could still be out there.

EXT. DEEP WOODS -- MORNING

Paul and Donny break through the thick trees. They walk alone down a snow covered incline. Donny braces himself on a small tree as he nearly loses his footing.

At the bottom of the small hill, Paul looks to the ground. The tracks continue. Their spacing occasionally changes down hills and around trees.

PAUL
They're speeding up.

Donny steps up beside him, slightly out of breath.

DONNY
Huh?

Paul points to the snow.

PAUL

The prints are getting farther apart. It was running.

Donny stares at the snow. He thinks.

DONNY

From what?

Beat. Paul doesn't respond.

DONNY (CONT'D)

...us?

Paul sends Donny a look of concern. Maybe.

Donny presses forward once again, following the trail as it continues into a small clearing just ahead.

Something catches Paul's eye. He stops. A broken twig. It hangs waist high from the trunk of a tree. The embedded prints pass just underneath where it would have protruded.

Paul pulls the twig from the tree, bringing it to his eyes. FUR. A small clump of dark brown strands hangs from the splintered wood at one end. Paul grazes his finger over the fibers as they dance in the breeze.

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

Hey boss...

Paul looks to Donny, who stands in the center of the small clearing about 40 feet away. Donny stares at the snow intently, not looking to Paul as he speaks.

DONNY (CONT'D)

You...uh...you need to take a look at this.

Donny stares down at the snow. As Paul steps up beside him, Donny looks straight into the sky above as Paul looks to the snow in front of him.

The tracks emerge from the woods and progress into the center of the untouched clearing where Paul and Donny stand. Without warning they simply stop. The last print looks no different than the countless before it.

DONNY (CONT'D)

They're gone...

Looking down on the clearing we can see Paul and Donny standing in confusion alongside the trail of hoofprints that lead nowhere.

INT. PAUL'S OFFICE -- DAY

Paul sits behind his desk. Stress in his eyes. He holds a telephone to his ear as he leans forward. His elbow rests on the dark laminate desktop next to a coffee mug.

His office is modest. An off white filing cabinet sits in the corner.

A single window reveals the snow covered ground outside.

PAUL
(into phone)
I don't understand it either.
That's why I called you.

He listens.

PAUL (CONT'D)
And nothing's been reported in the
last few hours anywhere else in the
area?

Donny enters the office. He notices Paul on the phone and quietly closes the door behind him. He takes a seat in a chair against the wall.

PAUL (CONT'D)
They were tracks... two legs like a
bear or a person... I don't know. I
don't even know what kind of
animals walk on two legs.

He listens.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Right. They look like hooves. Like
you'd see on a horse... about the
same size.

He listens.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Okay, well do you have any idea of
what I'm looking at here? Does
it... does it sound like anything
that would be in the area? Should I
be warning my people not to go near
the woods?

He sighs. He rubs his eyes with his hand.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Alright. I'll do that, and I'd
appreciate it if you'd keep an eye
out as well.
(MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)

Whatever did this has got people a little spooked... A little bit of an explanation would go a long way.

He listens.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Right. I appreciate your help.
Thanks.

Paul hangs up the phone. Frustration covers his face.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Forest Department doesn't have any idea what it could be... They've never heard of an animal that can walk on its hind legs for that far.

He takes notice to Donny's condition. Donny breathes heavy and his head is dampened by sweat.

PAUL (CONT'D)

What happened to you?

DONNY

I just chased Mrs. Faulkner's poodle for half a mile. She let it out last night because it wouldn't stop barkin', right?

Paul nods.

DONNY (CONT'D)

Well, the worthless little rat gets away from her. I get a call about an hour ago tellin' me the dog has been spotted outside Ruth's Diner.

PAUL

Did you catch it?

Donny nods unhappily.

DONNY

I don't know who enjoyed it more, the poodle or the crowd supportive fans watchin' me try to find a white poodle in half a foot of snow.

Paul smiles.

DONNY (CONT'D)

Seven dogs got out last night. At least that's how many owners called in before I headed out.

(MORE)

DONNY (CONT'D)

Mrs. Faulkner's is the only one
that's shown up so far.

Paul looks stunned.

PAUL

All last night?

DONNY

Some at the south end of town, some
in the north. Most of 'em just
broke through the fences. Something
scared them to death...

PAUL

Well whoever is responsible for all
this is going to have a lot to
answer for.

DONNY

You think it was a person?

PAUL

You heard the phone call, Donny.
There's no two legged animal that
leaves tracks like that.

DONNY

I'll be honest boss. I don't know
what to think.

Donny lowers his voice despite being in a sealed office.

DONNY (CONT'D)

I mean...they disappeared into thin
air.

Beat.

DONNY (CONT'D)

How does a person do that?

Paul shakes his head slowly.

PAUL

I don't know Donny. I'm not saying
I have it all figured out. How does
a person leave three miles of fake
hoofprints without any other trace?
I don't know. But I'm afraid
someone's having some fun with us,
trying to get people riled up...
Adam saw something in the woods
last night before it started
snowing... So I went out there.

DONNY

What'd you see?

PAUL

I didn't see anything. With the woods and all, it was too dark. But there was something in the trees. Movement, branches snapping. It didn't sound small... it could have been a person.

Donny nods slowly.

DONNY

Right.

Paul rises from his chair.

PAUL

Don't let it get to you. That's exactly what whoever did this wants.

Paul moves to the door. He grabs his coat from the back of a chair and begins putting it on.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Hopefully this will all just blow over.

Donny nods again as he moves to follow Paul out the door.

DONNY

Right.

INT. GROCERY AISLE -- DAY

Paul stands in narrow grocery aisle. He stares at a wall of cereal. A box of grain cereal rests on one shelf. A colorful box of marshmallow fruit cereal sits on the shelf directly below it.

Paul frowns before grabbing the grain cereal and tossing it into his shopping cart.

PASTOR LAWRENCE MOORE rounds the corner into the aisle just as Paul nears the same corner. Seeing the approaching conversation, Paul stiffens uncomfortably.

PASTOR

Paul! How are you doing this morning?

Paul speaks in minimal detail. Nothing to further the conversation.

PAUL
Pastor Moore. Just fine, yourself?

The Pastor nods while perusing the cereal selection.

PASTOR
Quite a little mystery we seem to
have woken up to.

PAUL
Nothing mysterious about a good
prank.

The Pastor smiles before changing the subject.

PASTOR
Haven't seen you in church in a few
weeks.

There it is. Paul tightens. The Pastor takes a beat.

PASTOR (CONT'D)
There's no weakness in mourning,
Paul.

Beat. The Pastor lets the words hang in the air.

PASTOR (CONT'D)
I just want you to know that
turning to someone bigger than
yourself doesn't show weakness...
it shows wisdom in knowing where to
find strength... and we're here in
case you need us.

Paul nods.

PAUL
...until then?

The Pastor gestures toward the front of the store.

PASTOR
People seem a little nervous right
now. But they'll follow you to the
ends of the earth if you ask 'em
to. Just let 'em know you're
leading them in the right
direction.

INT. GROCERY AISLE -- DAY

Paul steps up to one of three cash registers in the small town grocery store. He begins unloading his items onto the black conveyer belt.

ETHEL LERNER, a short round woman, joins the line behind Paul. She nervously watches him.

Paul looks from her to the young female CASHIER in front of him. She too looks uneasy as she slowly picks up one of Paul's items.

As Paul glances around the checkout area. Four or five more customers all look to Paul expectantly.

PAUL
Is everyone alright?

Ethel speaks with a raspy Southern accent.

ETHEL
What's going on Sheriff?

Paul smiles as he scans the people with his eyes.

PAUL
We're trying to figure that out,
Ethel...

ETHEL
Well, what are we supposed to do
till then? What are we supposed to
think?

PAUL
You don't have to do anything.
We're working on it.

Paul turns back to the cashier.

CASHIER
What if it comes back?

Paul looks surprised at her sudden input.

CASHIER (CONT'D)
Whatever left those tracks. What if
it comes back?

Paul smiles at her before talking to the group.

PAUL
Alright, I think everyone just
needs to take a breath. The Forest
Department tells me there is no
animal that leaves tracks like the
ones we found in our yards this
morning. There isn't an animal that
walks on two hoofed feet.

Beat.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Which means we're probably just dealing with a creative prankster with too much time on his hands.

The crowd visibly calms a bit. Pastor Moore steps into the back of the line as Paul speaks. He listens from afar.

PAUL (CONT'D)

I'm not saying you shouldn't be careful. Lock up your doors tonight if you want to... But let's not overreact. There's no reason to be scared.

He smiles.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Let's not make this any more fun for whoever did this than it already is, okay?

The shoppers slowly go back to their transactions as the Cashier rings in Paul's items.

EXT. GROCERY PARKING LOT -- DAY

The sun is out. Icicles hang from the roof of the small shopping center. Paul carries his groceries through the parking lot. Piles of plowed snow lie along the curbs.

Paul unlocks the door to his white squad car. He puts his car keys in his teeth while opening the rear door. He tosses the grocery bags into the back seat.

As Paul has his head inside the car, a large early model red pickup truck pulls up behind him. EARL LERNER, a middle aged man wearing a camouflaged hat, hangs his head out the driver side window.

Paul backs his head out the car and turns to Earl.

EARL

How's it goin' there Sheriff?

PAUL

Hey Earl. It's going alright. I just saw Ethel there in the store.

EARL

Yeah, she's all riled up over these hoofprints. They got her a little scared.

Earl looks at the store, then back to Paul.

EARL (CONT'D)
That's why I pulled over here
actually.

Paul shuts the rear door. He pays attention to Earl's serious tone.

PAUL
What's on your mind Earl?

EARL
You haven't figured it out yet have
ya?

PAUL
Not yet.

EARL
You been out in the woods recently,
into the trees?

PAUL
Yeah. Donny and I went out pretty
deep this morning. We-

He thinks better of it. No details.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Is there something going on?

EARL
I bet you didn't see a single
animal, did you? Not a bird.
Nuthin'.

Paul thinks back for a moment. Earl's right.

PAUL
It is still winter, Earl. Birds
migrate. Animals hibernate...

EARL
I'm a hunter, Sheriff. You know
that. Been one all my life.

Paul nods softly.

EARL (CONT'D)
It's deer season and for the last
two weeks I haven't seen so much as
one deer within five miles of this
town. Not even a single tree
squirrel. I ain't never seen
anything like it.

Paul looks to the tree line that always seems to be near.

EARL (CONT'D)
I wouldn't have even brought it up.
But with these tracks and
everything, I thought you might
wanna know...

PAUL
What would cause something like
that? There being no animals?

EARL
Hard to say, but animals can sense
things, Sheriff. When they sense a
threat, they normally don't hang
around.

PAUL
A threat? So you think an animal
left those tracks?

EARL
They don't look like any animal
tracks I ever saw... but like I
said, with all that's goin' on, I
thought you might wanna know...

Paul nods thoughtfully.

EARL (CONT'D)
Take it easy sheriff. We're all
still prayin' for ya...

Paul forces a pained smile and nods.

Earl's big red truck pulls away leaving Paul standing next to his squad car. Paul again looks to the woods. The trees seem to swallow the light into their darkness.

EXT. SUSAN'S DRIVEWAY -- DUSK

The evening breeze blows across the snow covered driveway.

Adam rolls two basketball sized ball of snow to the base of an incomplete snowman. His gloved hands pack snow onto the ball.

Paul and Susan sit on a picnic table, watching Adam play.

SUSAN
Adam says the kids at school are
saying it's the devil.

PAUL
Did they scare him?

SUSAN

No. He's smarter than that.

Paul nods as he looks back to Adam on the driveway.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

It's been six months Paul. You said you needed some time and I understood that. You said you needed space and I gave you space. I didn't understand it, but I gave it to you...

Paul stares ahead. His jaw tightens.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

But I need to know where you are. If... if you're closer or farther away. Because it's not fair. It's not fair to us and it's not fair to Adam.

Beat. Paul continues to stares ahead into space.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

Where are you, Paul?

He thinks before turning to her.

PAUL

I have no idea.

SUSAN

Do you even care?

PAUL

Does it matter?

Susan grimaces slightly. She looks at Adam as she speaks.

SUSAN

He looks up to you more than you know.

Paul looks to the ground. He immediately looks uncomfortable.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

Do you know what he sees when he looks at you? His daddy, who protects people. Who makes them feel safe... The same man I still see... even if you don't.

Paul's mouth hangs open but no words come out.

ADAM

Dad, it's too heavy.

Adam struggles to lift the large snowball from the ground.

PAUL

Just a second, buddy.

Adam strains to lift the snowball. His gloved hands slip, causing him to tumble over the ball and into the snow.

The tension breaks as Paul and Susan both smile at Adam, who laughs from within the snow bank. Susan turns back to Paul. She looks in his eyes for a moment.

SUSAN

I'll get his stuff.

She rises from the bench.

EXT. PAUL'S DRIVEWAY -- EVENING

Paul's squad car pulls into the small concrete driveway. As the car swings toward the garage, its headlights illuminate the dark expanse of trees behind the house.

INT. CAR -- CONTINUOUS

Paul sits behind the wheel. Adam reads a colorful comic book in the passenger seat.

As Paul gazes through the windshield, the headlight beams cross the tree line. The lights reflect off trees and bushes, and...something else.

Paul jerks the car to a stop. The lights land on a small area of the tree line. Behind a thicket of thin trees there is a large dark shape. Not a tree. Almost human, with an awkwardly slouched posture. Five feet tall, maybe six.

Paul stares at the shape through the fogging windshield.

ADAM

What are we doing?

The dark brown shape seems to remain still as the surrounding trees sway in the breeze.

It moves. Very slightly. Like a person shifting weight from one foot to the other.

PAUL

Do you see that?

Adam now sits completely upright in his seat. His widened eyes focus on the shape. He barely nods.

The shape turns and steps behind a thin grey tree. Its movement is smooth and sudden as its form disappears into the darkened woods.

Paul's eyes widen and he quickly unbuckles his seat belt. Adam presses into his seat in fear.

EXT. PAUL'S DRIVEWAY -- EVENING

Paul flings open the driver side door of his car. He scrambles out of the vehicle, attempting to keep his footing.

PAUL
Stay in the car and lock your door!

He slams the driver side door shut and bolts toward the woods. Paul unclips his holster and pulls his gun as he runs toward the trees.

The headlights lights illuminate the trees as Paul draws near. His shadow makes the trees seem alive with movement.

PAUL (CONT'D)
(yelling)
You! In the trees! Stop!

Paul ducks headlong into the trees.

EXT. WOODS -- CONTINUOUS

Paul bounds into the woods. Darkness and stillness surround him. He stops, breathing heavy. His breath clouds the air.

A disturbing calm floats through the trees.

SNAP. Branches break in the nearby trees. Paul instantly bolts toward the sound.

PAUL
Laytonsville Sheriff's Department!
Stop where you are!

Paul stumbles his way through near darkness. Fear courses through his veins.

He stops again, frantically searching the surrounding darkness.

He slows his breathing. Listens.

CREAKING. The branches high above GROAN under their own weight, interrupting the absolute silence of the woods.

PAUL (CONT'D)
This is Sheriff Paul Shields.

Silence.

PAUL (CONT'D)
You need to come out right now.
Before you get yourself into any
more trouble. I can take a joke...
You just need to come out now.

No answer.

Paul slowly lowers his gun and sighs. He turns back to the house and his now distant headlights.

MOVEMENT. From above. Something large in the top of the trees. Large branches CRASH together.

Paul spins toward the sound. His pulse races.

CLAWING. The sound descends a distant tree. Like a knife scratching across bark. It slowly lowers to the ground.

HOLLOW THUDS. Something hits the ground and begins to run. The sound of breaking branches and fast heavy footsteps disappears into the deep forest.

Confusion covers Paul's face as his prey escapes him at a speed and power he could never match.

Paul slowly backs toward the yard before turning and walking.

EXT. PAUL'S DRIVEWAY -- EVENING

Paul moves through the back yard as he places his gun back in his holster. The motion light on the rear of the house triggers on.

Paul rounds the back of the house. He sees the car and stops. Panic covers his face. He dashes toward the vehicle.

The door of the squad car hangs open. The seat passenger seat is empty. Adam is gone.

PAUL
Adam?!

Paul spins wildly, lost in panic.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Adam?!

He brings his hands to his forehead.

ADAM (O.S.)
Dad?

Paul frantically turns toward the sound of Adam's voice.

Adam stands inside the house. He nervously peers out the wooden door which leads into the kitchen.

Emotion floods over Paul's face as he runs to Adam, who looks surprised by his father's reaction. Paul kneels and wraps his arms around Adam's small body, pulling him close.

Paul closes his eyes in relief as he squeezes. Suddenly, concern strikes him. He looks Adam over.

PAUL
Are you ok?

ADAM
I heard something outside the car
and I got scared...

PAUL
Are you hurt?

ADAM
No.

Tears seep from Paul's eyes. Adam's more frightened by his father's reaction than what occurred.

PAUL
I'm so sorry!

He holds Adam's face in his hands and stares him in the eyes.

PAUL (CONT'D)
I'm so sorry...Never again. I'll
never let anything happen to you,
do you understand?

Adam stares into his father's eyes. Confused.

ADAM
(weakly)
Okay...

Huddled against the wooden kitchen door Paul holds onto Adam with all his might. The room is dark, lit only by a small light over the kitchen sink. The sound of a small ticking wall clock fills the otherwise silent room.

Outside the kitchen window the ever present woods stand. Motionless. The blue moonlight casts a glow upon the colorless branches that hide what lies in the darkness just beyond.

INT. LAW OFFICE -- DAY

ROGER LANKINS, a well groomed man in a black suit sits behind a dark stained wood desk.

The walls of the office are covered in matching wood paneling.

Roger holds a stack of bound papers in his hand. He surveys them one last time before opening the stack and facing it toward the front of the desk.

ROGER

We just need to get both of your signatures here. We don't have to have both. But it certainly helps to make things go smoother.

He points with his finger toward the bottom of a page.

ROGER (CONT'D)

After that we can negotiate property. The house, cars, that sort of thing.

PAUL

I don't want any of it.

Paul sits in front of the large desk in one of two brown leather chairs. He wears an olive green sheriff issue windbreaker. His face rests in his hand as he leans against the back of the chair.

His attorney stares back at him for a moment. He speaks with concern.

ROGER

You know, Paul. I'm not a marriage counselor. In fact, I couldn't be any less of one. But I do remember something from high school...

Paul stares at Roger with no emotion as he speaks.

ROGER (CONT'D)

I had a friend who fell in love with a girl. They were perfect together. They said they were gonna get married. And as angry as it made her father, they did. Right out of high school.

Paul swallows hard as he listens.

ROGER (CONT'D)

They were happy for a long time. It's like they were made for each other... Then something really bad happened. An accident.

Paul breaks.

PAUL

Roger...

ROGER

Then something even worse happened. My friend blamed himself. But there was nothing he could do... not a thing. Then I got a call I never wanted to get... and I'm doing something I never wanted to do. Not for him.

PAUL

Roger.

Roger doesn't stop.

ROGER

And I could tell him that it wasn't his fault. That this world isn't fair to the best of us. That it tries to take away that strength that makes us feel right. It tries to make us lose trust in ourselves...

PAUL

Roger, I know you're trying to help...

ROGER

But you don't want to hear it. I know that. That's why I came in on a weekend and drew up the papers.

Roger closes the stack of papers, places them into a green folder and slides them across the desk. Paul stares at them for a moment before finally lifting them off the wood.

Paul stands and pauses.

PAUL

You said you know me.

No answer. Pain shines in Paul's eyes.

PAUL (CONT'D)

But you weren't there, were you?

Roger doesn't know what to say. He looks helplessly after Paul, who turns and moves to the door. Paul pauses in the door frame, slightly lifting the papers.

PAUL (CONT'D)

(re: papers)

Thanks Roger.

Paul leaves the office and shuts the door behind him. Roger Lankins sits in silence as the door latches.

EXT. MRS. BARRET'S YARD -- DAY

Donny stands precariously on the top of a aluminum extendable ladder. It rest against the roof of a small grey stoned house.

Donny wobbles unsteadily as he peers onto the roof.

MRS. BARRET
Can I offer you some hot cocoa?

MRS. BARRET, a fragile old woman with wispy grey hair stands at the foot of the ladder. She stands with a cane but has the eyes of a young woman. She holds a grey cat in one arm.

DONNY
No, thank you. I don't...I don't
see a ball Mrs. Barret.

MRS. BARRET
What's that?

Donny looks down her and almost loses his balance again.

DONNY
The ball you said the kids threw up
here... I, uh, I don't see a ball.

Mrs. Barret raises her eyebrows in overly dramatic surprise.

MRS. BARRET
Oh! Well, I must have been
mistaken.

Donny clutches to the gutter for dear life.

DONNY
Ok! I'm not too jolly on heights.
So, I'm comin' down.

Donny quickly, but carefully, descends the ladder.

MRS. BARRET
I'm so sorry. I could have sworn I
saw those boys throw a ball up
there.

Donny looks relieved just be alive.

DONNY
That's okay. No big deal. Should I
take the ladder back to the garage?

MRS. BARRET

No, that's alright. I have a boy
who shovels the walk. He can get it
for me.

Donny nods.

DONNY

Sure.

MRS. BARRET

So I hear you're new to
Laytonsville...

DONNY

Yes ma'am. That's right.

MRS. BARRET

And how are you liking it?

DONNY

It's a little different than I'm
used to. But it's definitely a good
kinda different.

MRS. BARRET

Yes, it certainly has character.

Beat. She sets down the grey cat.

MRS. BARRET (CONT'D)

Have they told you about these
woods, yet? The history of this
place?

DONNY

These woods?

The old woman smiles knowingly.

MRS. BARRET

I didn't think so. Not exactly
something you put in the brochure,
I suppose.

Donny looks intrigued.

MRS. BARRET (CONT'D)

The Indians had a story about this
place, you know? These woods, and
about what lived in them.

Donny listens.

MRS. BARRET (CONT'D)

Before the white men came, they say
the Indians lived in peace with a
creature that roamed the trees.

A soft wind blows through the ever present tree line.
Branches seem to come alive as they sway gently.

MRS. BARRET (CONT'D)

But when the Europeans came... they
didn't respect the creature or its
significance. They didn't
understand this place like the
natives. Until one night it came
for them. It took entire families.
Men, women and children.

Donny grimaces.

MRS. BARRET (CONT'D)

They later said it was a bear
attack. But what else could you
say?

DONNY

Were there any witnesses?

He realizes how he sounds.

DONNY (CONT'D)

In the story, I mean...

MRS. BARRET

Oh sure, neighbors who woke up to
the screaming or family members who
were lucky enough to find place to
hide.

Donny nods slowly. He listens intently.

MRS. BARRET (CONT'D)

Since then there've been stories of
witches in these woods, spirits in
the darkness. Stories of people
vanishing...What some people called
the wood devil, a creature that can
simply disappear into the side of a
tree trunk...

Donny nervously glances to the nearby tree line.

MRS. BARRET (CONT'D)

But the Indians called it "the
Windago." Of course, most people
around here don't believe those old
stories...

Donny looks unnerved.

DONNY
Do you?...Believe the stories?

Mrs. Barret looks at the sky thoughtfully.

MRS. BARRET
When I was a little girl... a schoolmate of mine went missing. They said he'd been hiking alone out there. They searched for days... Until one morning they found him... his body was in a tree some thirty feet off the ground. They said it was the witch. Do I believe it? I believe it enough to stay out of those woods... And after those hoofprints, I believe it enough to be locking my doors... I'd be careful Deputy Saunders. Wouldn't want to see you up in some tree, especially since you aren't too jolly on heights.

Donny's face tightens. The old woman smiles politely.

MRS. BARRET (CONT'D)
Are you sure I can't interest you in any hot cocoa?

INT. SQUAD CAR -- DAY

Paul drives down the two lane highway leading into Laytonsville. The divorce papers lie in a green envelope on the seat beside him.

Just beyond the "Welcome to Laytonsville, Maryland" sign sits the Laytonsville Methodist Church, an old, grey stone building with two large red double doors and a black roof.

As Paul nears the church, the large doors open and church members begins trickling out their morning service.

Paul slows the car to a stop and watches from a safe distance.

His jaw tightens as he watches the people of Laytonsville spill onto the sidewalk. They laugh and talk as a community. Paul sits alone in his car.

Donny, part of the congregation, spots Paul. He waves as he walks to the car. Paul rolls down his window.

DONNY
So how was Baltimore?

PAUL

It was fine. Just took care of some business...

Donny reaches the car and leans against it.

PAUL (CONT'D)

...with the state. Dropped off some paperwork for the state.

DONNY

I need to talk to you actually.

Paul looks guilty.

PAUL

I was seeing my attorney.

DONNY

What?

PAUL

I lied. I wasn't doing paperwork for the state. I was visiting my attorney.

Beat. They look at one another. An awkward silence hangs in the air.

DONNY

You gonna tell me any more?

PAUL

No.

DONNY

Alright.

PAUL

I'm sorry I lied.

Donny takes notice to Paul's odd behavior.

DONNY

Don't worry about it.

A odd sound slowly rises. Quiet at first. Growing louder. Like a DISTANT WATERFALL. Donny hears it first. He turns to the nearby woods that lie just beyond the church.

DONNY (CONT'D)

Do you hear that?

DISTANT FLUTTERING. AIR RUSHING. The sounds grow louder and closer. More intense.

Paul opens his door and slowly climbs from the car. Listening and staring at the treetops as the sound approaches.

The churchgoers have frozen in place. A concerned hush settles over them as they nervously stare toward the woods.

BIRDS. Thousands upon thousands of birds burst into vision over the top of the curtain of trees.

The sound is nearly deafening as the birds fill the sky.

They fly out of the woods, crossing directly over the small church.

The children and parents stare in awe as the cloud of birds crosses overhead.

PAUL

What is going on around here?

The cloud of birds nearly blot out the sun then, just as suddenly as they appeared, the flow of black birds ceases. A few straggle behind.

EXT. MAIN STREET -- CONTINUOUS

The tremendous flock makes its way over the town of Laytonsville. Its numbers too high to count.

People stop on the sidewalks and stare at the migrating animals. Drivers pull over to watch through their windshields.

Not one bird lands.

INT. DINER -- DAY

Paul and Donny sit at a small table against the wall of a cramped, outdated diner. One frazzled waitress works the entire restaurant, weaving around tables and patrons.

Two sandwiches sit in front of Donny and Paul. Paul takes a drink from a coffee mug as Donny loads pack after pack of sugar into his.

DONNY

I've never seen anything like that...

Paul shakes his head. Neither has he.

PAUL

Earl Lerner came up to me the other day.

He sets down his coffee mug.

PAUL (CONT'D)
He hunts around here.

Donny nods.

PAUL (CONT'D)
He says he's noticed something odd
the last few weeks.

DONNY
Tell Earl to join the club, huh?

PAUL
He says the wildlife's gone. The
deer, the squirrels, the birds.

DONNY
Well I think the birds are back.

Paul shakes his head.

PAUL
I don't think so. They weren't
coming back. They were leaving...
It's closer to spring than fall,
birds should be flying North. Those
birds were flying South.

Donny looks confused.

DONNY
What would make them do that?

PAUL
Earl said animals sometimes leave
an area if they sense a threat.
Maybe a new predator they aren't
willing to risk being around.

DONNY
Maybe those birds know something we
don't.

PAUL
Maybe.

DONNY
I, uh, I was over at Mrs. Barret's
place this afternoon. While you
were in town.

Beat. Donny clears his throat.

DONNY (CONT'D)
She uh, she mentioned some stories.
Some theories about what might be
goin' on...

Paul knows where he is going.

PAUL
Those are just stories, Donny.
Ghost stories. It's make believe.
They've been telling stories like
that for years.

Donny nods.

DONNY
Right... but what if they're not.
What if there is something wrong
about these woods? What if
something is out there?

PAUL
What did she tell you?

Donny looks embarrassed to mention it.

DONNY
She said people think these woods
are haunted. That the Indians knew
about a creature.

PAUL
You think there is a monster in the
woods, Donny?

DONNY
No! It's just...

He leans in and speaks in a hushed tone.

DONNY (CONT'D)
It's just that those stories she
was telling me sounded a lot like
what's been going on around here
lately. Noises in the trees.
Freakin' hoofprints on the ground.
People showin' up missin'... I
don't know...

Beat.

DONNY (CONT'D)
She mentioned a little boy when she
was growing up. He was up hiking
in the woods and went missing. They
couldn't find him until-

PAUL
-until they found the body in a
tree.

Donny nods.

PAUL (CONT'D)
This area has a lot of history and
a lot of folklore. And when all of
that history isn't written down or
some of it gets forgotten, people
fill in the gaps.

Donny listens intently.

PAUL (CONT'D)
They make up stories. Stories about
witches and devils and hauntings...

DONNY
I just think it's worth thinking
about. In the absence of any other
ideas...

He has a point.

PAUL
I'll keep it in mind.

Donny nods a "thank you".

PAUL (CONT'D)
That boy she mentioned?

DONNY
Yeah.

PAUL
When they found the body in the top
of those trees... they only found
the skin.

Donny recoils.

PAUL (CONT'D)
That little boy was murdered. No
monsters needed.

Paul looks to his plate.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Bad things happen because people
let them happen, Donny.
(MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)

And when people let them happen,
they try to blame it on things they
can't explain. Witches, monsters,
fate... Somebody is always
responsible.

Beat. Donny softly nods. He takes a drink of his coffee.

INT. DELI COUNTER -- DAY

Paul hands his ticket and a twenty dollar bill to the waitress working the register.

A man approaches. He wears a long sleeve denim shirt and jeans, RON JENKINS.

RON

Sheriff...

PAUL

Ron, how's it going?

Ron nods in response. Paul looks to Donny.

PAUL (CONT'D)

I don't know if you've had a chance
to meet Donny Saunders. He's our
new deputy.

RON

First deputy we've ever had in
Laytonsville. Ain't that right?

PAUL

Town's growing.

RON

Right.

Donny wipes his hand on his shirt, then extends it to Ron. They shake.

PAUL

This is Ron, he breeds horses here
in town.

RON

The finest horses in the state of
Maryland.

Paul nods and smiles.

RON (CONT'D)

That's actually the reason I
tracked you down. Can I get you
boys to look at something when you
finish up here?

Ron's polite smile has now changed to a look of concern. Paul nods.

PAUL
Sure.

EXT. HORSE BARN -- DAY

Ron rounds the corner of a wooden horse barn. Its wood has greyed from exposure. Paul and Donny follow closely behind.

The small, stone church sits at the bottom of the hill, less than a mile away. Paul catches himself eying the church uneasily as he rounds the corner.

RON
Past few days the horses have been real uneasy. Jumping around in the stalls like they's scared to death... they normally act that way before a big storm rolls in. But that don't last more than a few hours then they calm back down. I couldn't for the life of me figure it out... till last night.

Beat. They continue walking.

DONNY
What happened last night?

RON
About 3 o'clock I woke up to the sound of something bangin' on the side of this horse barn. Just beating the livin' hell out of it. I heard it all the way from the house.

He points to a two story farm house at the top of the hill. Over a hundred yards away.

PAUL
Did you see anyone out here Ron?

RON
Well, once I figured out where the banging was coming from I ran out here. Fired a rifle into the air tryin' to run 'em off...

The three men reach the large wooden sliding door to the barn. They stop.

RON (CONT'D)
This is what I found when I came
down...

Paul inspects the door as he steps closer.

The large wooden door has been beaten severely. Several boards have cracks and holes left behind. The door itself hangs weakly off of its bent track.

The sliding steel bolt, which latches the door closed, is badly bent. It has been hit with enormous force, leaving the wood surrounding the lock cracked and weakened.

Paul runs his hands over the surface of the door. He slowly turns to Ron who watches from a few feet away.

PAUL
And this door wasn't like this?

Ron shakes his head "No".

RON
Then I noticed the mud.

Paul and Donny look to the ground.

RON (CONT'D)
The tracks.

LARGE HOOFPINTS cover the mud at the base of the door. They appear around the corner and approach the door repeatedly.

PAUL
Ron, this is a horse barn.

RON
I shoed all the horses last week...
and these tracks ain't got any
shoes...

Paul kneels to the tracks. Ron's right.

He looks to the scarred structure as he slowly rises to his feet. Donny sends him a look that says, "you still think I'm crazy?"

INT. SHIELD'S HOME - FOYER -- EVENING

Keys can be heard in the lock of the Shield's large front door. After a moment the dead bolt clicks and the door opens.

Paul enters the foyer of his home, still wearing his green jacket. He carries the green folder, containing the divorce papers, under his arm.

The house is dark except for the light beaming in through the rear windows. There is no sound within the home. It's lifeless. Paul is all alone in every sense of the word.

INT. MASTER BEDROOM -- EVENING

Paul doesn't bother to turn on the lights as he enters. Noticing the flashing red light on the answering machine, he moves across the room and presses the PLAY button.

SUSAN (V.O.)
Hi Paul. It's me...

Paul recognizes Susan's voice and cringes slightly. It hurts to hear her voice.

SUSAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I wanted to thank you for taking
Adam last night, the council met
late and... well, just, thank you.

Paul moves to the queen sized bed as Susan's gentle voice continues to fill the air. He sits.

SUSAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Oh, and we have that teacher's
conference tomorrow.

She realizes how she sounds.

SUSAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Sorry, I know you probably know
that. Anyway, thank you for your
help yesterday. I...I love you.

Susan pauses, almost as if waiting for an answer.

SUSAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Bye.

The answering machine CLICKS, rewinding its tape.

Paul stares ahead at the picture frame which rests on his dresser. Paul, Susan, Timothy, and Adam all appear gathered around one another, embracing. They smile as if nothing in the world is wrong.

Paul pulls the green legal folder from beneath his arm. He stares at it for a moment. Standing from the bed, Paul lifts the edge of the mattress just far enough to slide the folder between it and the box springs.

INT. SQUAD CAR -- DUSK

Paul drives through town. The buildings reflect off his windshield.

Houses pass by Paul's windows. The white snow contrasts against the darkening evening sky.

He stares ahead with distant eyes. He drives in silence. The weight of stress and frustration covers his face.

INT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM -- EVENING

Paul and Susan sit side by side in small plastic chairs. They sit in front of a metal framed desk within a brightly lit classroom. Poorly drawn artwork scatters a back wall. Small individual desks fill the room in neatly aligned rows.

MRS. POPLAR, a woman in her mid forties, sits behind the desk. She wears a large collared black pantsuit.

She stares at Paul and Susan, moving her eyes back and forth between them disapprovingly. Both Paul and Susan sit in silence, looking at her in expectant confusion.

SUSAN

I'm still a little confused about
why we're here...

MRS. POPLAR

We are very conscious of our
students' behavior when they are at
school.

Paul and Susan still lean forward, waiting.

MRS. POPLAR (CONT'D)

Not just in the classroom, but in
the hallways, during lunch and, in
Adam's case, on the playground.

Paul raises his eyebrows.

PAUL

Adam did something on the
playground?

Mrs. Poplar continues on her small speech.

MRS. POPLAR

When children pick up a new word
they tend to say it constantly. It
only gets worse when they learn
that we don't want them to say that
word.

SUSAN

Adam said something offensive?

Mrs. Poplar straightens her back uncomfortably. Finally she grabs a small square of paper and scribbles something on it. She slides it across the desk.

Paul lifts the small piece of paper -- he furrows his brow like someone who knows they need to look upset.

Mrs. Poplar looks as if she is offended by even being in the room.

Susan tries to read Paul's face as he hands her the paper. She stifles a laugh. Paul sends her a panicked look that says "Don't laugh."

Susan hides her mouth with her hand as she begins to silently laugh. Seeing Susan breaking, Paul too begins to laugh under his breath. His eyes water.

Mrs. Poplar looks shocked.

MRS. POPLAR
Mr. and Mrs. Shields.

Susan looks up from the floor. She uncovers her mouth just long enough to speak.

SUSAN
"Fart"?

Paul continues to snicker. He looks to Susan's eyes and continues to laugh.

Mrs. Poplar looks indignant.

MRS. POPLAR
I assure you this is no laughing matter.

Paul covers his smile with his hand.

PAUL
I'm sorry.

SUSAN
We're very sorry.

MRS. POPLAR
Adam accused Billy Long of
"farting" on the playground on
Tuesday, now all the children are
saying it. We can't get them to
stop.

Paul immediate stifles another laugh.

MRS. POPLAR (CONT'D)
But as I can see, apparently some
people don't view this as quiet the
serious matter that it is.

Susan finally collects herself.

SUSAN
We do. We do. It's just... we'll
talk to him. We apologize, it won't
happen again.

Mrs. Poplar nods in skeptical satisfaction as she looks to a
piece of paper on her desk.

MRS. POPLAR
There is one other thing. And I
understand if you don't wish to
discuss it...

PAUL
What is that?

MRS. POPLAR
Did Adam receive any counseling
after what happened last summer?
With his brother's drowning?

Beat. The air deflates from the room. Paul and Susan sit
still. No more laughs.

SUSAN
He did.

PAUL
Why?

MRS. POPLAR
It's just that when he refers to
Timothy... he always seems to use
present tense. "Timothy is...",
"Timothy can..." I wasn't sure if
you were aware of that. I thought
if not, I'd bring it to your
attention.

Susan tries to hold back her protective anger.

SUSAN
Is there something wrong with that?

MRS. POPLAR
Well, it just seems unhealthy... To
be referring to someone who is
deceased in such a way.

PAUL

I don't see how that's a problem.

SUSAN

Or how that's your business.

MRS. POPLAR

I know that you two have become separated, and more times than not it is the children that get neglected...

SUSAN

Timothy is his brother! And my child can refer to his brother however the hell he likes!

MRS. POPLAR

I beg your pardon!

SUSAN

And don't you tell us how to raise our child! Do you understand me?

MRS. POPLAR

Mrs. Shields, I assure you that-

SUSAN

Do you understand me?!?

A tear runs down Susan's face as her eyes burn a hole into Mrs. Poplar.

Mrs. Poplar breathes in deeply through her nose. She nods.

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY -- EVENING

Paul and Susan emerge from the classroom doorway into a darkened hallway. Light comes from the windows at either end of the hall. A custodian pushes a wide cloth broom.

Susan immediately breaks down. She turns and buries her head on Paul's shoulder.

He stands rigidly, giving nothing back. Distant. No emotion.

Susan lifts her head from Paul's shoulder and looks into his eyes. He stares back with a cold fear. Closed off.

Susan nods softly to herself as she turns and walks away. Paul stands alone in his self-made isolation.

EXT. TREE LINE -- DUSK

The glowing orange sun slowly descends in the evening sky. It dips behind the dark curtain of trees towering high above the ground. Darkness swallows the town of Laytonsville.

INT. LIBRARY -- NIGHT

Paul approaches the librarian, NORA TAYLOR, 50s, who sits behind the only desk in the small, cramped town library. She smiles warmly as he approaches.

NORA
Sheriff Shields! How's that copy of
The Talisman treating you?

Paul smiles.

PAUL
Had to set it down. Reality is
strange enough on its own these
days. You mind if I take a look at
the town record microfilm? Some
research.

NORA
Burnin' the midnight oil, huh?

She smiles and places some keys on the desk.

NORA (CONT'D)
Just lock up when you're done.

INT. MICROFILM ROOM -- NIGHT

Paul sits before a glowing microfilm machine inside the darkened room. A small desk lamp and the glow from the projected screen are all that light the room.

He turns the controls as the machine WHIRLS to life. Black and white documents blur across the screen. Paul slows the machine to a stop.

A page of text appears on the screen. "LAYTONSVILLE DEATH RECORD: 1800-1820." Paul scans through the information.

His gaze lands on several key phrases:

"...DISAPPEARANCES IN THE SPRING OF 1814"

"...DRAGGED FROM THEIR HOMES"

"...BODIES WERE NEVER FOUND"

"...FAMILIES NEVER SEEN AGAIN"

Paul hastily flips open a large book on the desk beside him. The top of the page reads "FOLKLORE IN SOUTHWESTERN MARYLAND".

He traces his finger down the text until it lands on: "1814 - LAYTONSVILLE, MARYLAND."

The last paragraph on the page draws him in.

"...TRACKS FOUND AT THE EDGE OF TOWN."

"...LARGE TWO LEGGED HOOFPRINTS."

Paul swallows hard. His wall of disbelief begins to crumble.

"...SIMILAR TO A HORSE OR DONKEY..."

"...TWO LEGS..."

"INDIAN LEGEND OF THE MURDEROUS WINDAGO"

Paul stares at the book in the light of the glowing microfilm. The word "WINDAGO" stares back at him.

Paul reaches into his chest pocket and removes a photograph of two of the hoofprints in the snow, taken by Donny days before. Paul's eyes dance. Could it be?

He rubs his eyes before gathering a handful of papers together and standing.

The small desk lamp still illuminates the room as he powers down the microfilm machine and leaves.

INT. SQUAD CAR -- NIGHT

The green glow of the indicator lights on the dash highlight Paul's face as he drives in silence.

Through the side windows all is black. Through the windshield the headlights can be seen cutting the darkness of the two lane highway.

Trees line the road on either side, straying no more than ten feet from the edge of the pavement. They streak past a silver blur to Paul's eyes.

As Paul stares through the windshield and into the night, something becomes visible. A large mound lies in the middle of the road.

Paul brings the car to a crawl as he draws closer. The cruiser's headlights shine on the object. A DEAD DEER. Its brown fur twinges in the wind.

Paul lifts his walkie-talkie from the passenger seat.

PAUL
(into radio)
Donny, do you still have your radio on?

A moment of silence before his walkie-talkie squawks.

DONNY
(over radio)
Yeah, boss.

PAUL
(into radio)
I'm clearing a deer from the highway. We're going to have to pick it up tomorrow some time.

DONNY
(over radio)
Maybe it died of loneliness...

Paul stares ahead.

PAUL
(into radio)
Maybe.

Paul sighs heavily before opening his door and climbing out.

EXT. ISOLATED HIGHWAY -- NIGHT

The dead deer's fur shines in the bright directional light of the car's headlights as Paul slowly approaches. He carries a large metal Maglight.

Nearing the fallen deer, Paul slows. Something isn't right. As the far side of the deer comes into view, a large amount of blood is visible.

The deer's underside has been gashed open with razor sharp cuts. Inside portions of the animal spill onto the pavement. Its neck and legs lie broken and disjointed.

PAUL
Donny?

Paul looks down at the animal in shocked disgust, shining his flashlight over its body. The deer's lifeless, black eye stares back at Paul from the cold pavement.

DONNY
(over radio)
Yeah, boss?

MOVEMENT. In the trees. In the darkness.

Paul turns toward the sea of black that surrounds him. He raises his flashlight, aiming it toward the tree line nearest to his car door.

PAUL
(whispering)
Donny, I think there's something in
the trees...

Paul shields his eyes from the overpowering headlights that blind him to what lies in the darkness. He can see nothing.

DONNY
(over radio)
What's that?

Paul slowly lowers his radio from his mouth. He CLICKS it off. He takes a cautious step toward the trees.

TWIGS SNAP. From the other side of the road. The sounds are all around him. It's fast. Paul freezes mid-breath.

He stares into the trees. Darkness covers all but the first layer of branches. The hallow blackness CREAKS in the silence.

Without warning a RUSH OF MOVEMENT cuts through branches, leaves, and brush. The sound bursts from the woods toward the road. Toward Paul.

Paul's eyes widen in fear as he hears the sound grow closer. He frantically shines his light toward the noise.

The sound of breaking twigs ceases as the SOUND OF CLOPS on the cement fill the air. Hooves.

The hooves run across the cold paved road. Paul spins toward the sound, staggering backward in shock.

A THIN DARK FIGURE slices through the blinding headlights, casting a passing shadow across Paul.

The figure is silhouetted against the lights. It is almost impossible to see. It has two thin legs. They move lightning fast and with a graceful stride. Each step creates the pounding impact of hoof against concrete.

It crosses to the other side of the road. The sounds of its movement enters the woods. Then stops. It didn't go deep. It's watching...

Paul stands frozen. He swallows hard. He doesn't blink. He barely breathes.

Slowly he begins to take cautious steps toward the car. No sudden movements. His eyes remained locked on the trees. Only darkness stares back at him.

INT. CAR -- NIGHT

Approaching the driver side door, Paul eases it open. He quickly slides into the seat, slamming the car door shut.

Paul lifts a walkie-talkie from the seat and brings it to his mouth. Before he can press the button to speak, he looks out the windshield and freezes. His jaw hangs.

The deer is gone. A splattered pool of blood is all that remains where the animals once lay. No blood trail. No explanation. The dead animal simply disappeared.

Paul leans forward. His eyes dance, confused. He presses his forehead against the windshield, looking skyward out of the car. Bare tree tops stand motionless. The star filled night sky peeks through in small gaps.

Paul falls back in his seat. Whatever it was, it's gone now.

EXT. DONNY'S DOORSTEP -- NIGHT

Donny opens the front door to his apartment. From inside, he stares straight ahead, confusion covers his face.

Paul stands before him in the cold night air.

DONNY

Hey.

Paul looks at the ground distantly before looking up.

PAUL

Hi...

DONNY

Did you take care of that deer?

Paul slowly shakes his head "No".

INT. DONNY'S DEN -- NIGHT

Paul sits on a outdated brown chair in the center of Donny's apartment. The place is small and poorly decorated. The nicest piece of furniture is the medium sized TV.

Donny leans against a doorway.

PAUL

I think we're thinking about this
the wrong way...

DONNY

Okay.

PAUL

Are all the animals locked up?

Donny nods.

DONNY

Yeah.

PAUL

You talked to Tom Peterson? His cattle are inside?

DONNY

He said something about us being incompetent, but yeah, he only has a handful right now. I checked. Every horse and livestock in the area is locked away. What's going on?

Paul stares distantly at a spot on the floor.

PAUL

I think that deer was old... All the other deer are gone. But this one wasn't.

He convinces himself as he continues to talk.

PAUL (CONT'D)

It looked older. Maybe it couldn't keep up. Maybe they all left it behind... If that's the case. And all the livestock are locked away, it should be out of food.

DONNY

What should be out of food?

Paul finally looks to Donny.

PAUL

Tom Peterson's missing cow. We thought he'd left the fence open. That may not be right... I looked into some of what you heard from Mrs. Barret.

Donny squints, interested.

PAUL (CONT'D)

I'm not saying it's all accurate. But maybe there is something to it.

(MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)

Maybe there is something going on
that can't be easily explained...

DONNY

I think you're right. And I've been
doing some thinkin' about this.

Donny eagerly sits down across from Paul.

DONNY (CONT'D)

A few years ago, I heard on TV that
they caught some giant fish off the
coast of Taiwan, or somewhere.
Thing was as ugly as sin.

Paul isn't seeing the connection.

DONNY (CONT'D)

The point is, they thought this
fish had been extinct for millions
of years. It was supposed to be
prehistoric. But, BAM! There one
is, right under our noses the whole
time. What if what we've got here
is somethin' just like that?

Paul slowly nods.

DONNY (CONT'D)

Maybe the Indians were smarter than
us or maybe there were just more
back then. But what if this thing
we're after has been here all along
and we're just now findin' out
about it?

Paul listens intently.

PAUL

So why would it show up now?

DONNY

They said that fish came up because
of its food supply moved.
Migrated... Maybe it's hungry.

EXT. WOODS -- EVENING

Deep in the woods. Alone. All is silent and grey.

A large silhouette form lumbers across the forest floor. Low,
snow covered branches obscure its details.

Tall, but hunched in posture. Long legs. Dark fur. The fog of
its breath catches the moonlight in plumes as it steps
through the trees. It moves with power and grace.

As quickly as it appeared, it disappears. The sound of its movement through the twigs and branches slowly fades.

INT. CAR -- DAY

Houses move by outside the windows of the squad car. Paul and Donny sit in silence except for the hum of the engine.

Donny glances to Paul, almost nervous.

DONNY

Why haven't you asked me yet?

Paul sends Donny a confused look.

PAUL

Asked you what?

DONNY

The question you should have asked me when I was interviewed. Why a guy born and raised in New York would decide to up and move to what most people would consider the middle of nowhere.

PAUL

You got shot, Donny. That's reason enough for me.

Beat. Donny waits for more.

PAUL (CONT'D)

I know what it's like to have people look at you with pity. To have people tell you "it wasn't not your fault", like that makes things better.

Paul stares straight ahead as he speaks.

PAUL (CONT'D)

I know what it feels like to get sympathy over something that eats you alive, Donny. I don't need to know anything else.

DONNY

Are you a praying man?

Paul looks uncomfortable. Donny shrugs.

DONNY (CONT'D)

I wasn't. Until I was lying on the gurney lookin' at the sky, hearing people tell me I'm not going to die.

Donny looks to Paul.

DONNY (CONT'D)

I asked God. I said, "Why? Why did you let this happen?" I had a girl, I was movin' up in the force. So "why?" I asked.

Paul stares intensely through the windshield.

DONNY (CONT'D)

And I think I know why... Because I wasn't where I was supposed to be.

Paul isn't buying it,

PAUL

Is this where you are supposed to be Donny? Is this where you think God told you to be?

DONNY

We've all got a purpose. Ours is to protect people, right?

Paul doesn't answer.

DONNY (CONT'D)

Maybe I'm supposed to protect somebody here...

Donny gets an idea.

DONNY (CONT'D)

Or maybe you're supposed to protect me.

SQUAWK. Paul's CB radio comes to life.

FOREST RANGER

Forest station 12 to Laytonsville Sheriff Department. Do you copy?

Paul brings the handset to his mouth.

PAUL

This is Sheriff Shields.

FOREST RANGER

Sheriff, I've been trying to reach you by phone for the past hour. We've got a bit of a situation. Some campers went missing last night.

PAUL

Where were they last seen?

FOREST RANGER

We'll we've found their campsite and... well, we figured you'd better take a look at it before we do anything.

Donny sends Paul a concerned look.

FOREST RANGER (CONT'D)

How close are you to Leed's Bluff?

PAUL

Not far. We'll be there in less than five minutes.

FOREST RANGER

Copy that Sheriff. We'll see you here...

Paul places the handset back into its place on the dash.

DONNY

What's goin' on there?

PAUL

Probably nothing. People from the city like to come out here to feel like they're roughing it.

Donny nods.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Every now and then one of them drinks too much and gets lost. We normally find them the next day after they sober up and find their way back...

Donny nods again. Beat. They ride in silence.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Maybe you're supposed to protect them.

Donny smiles.

DONNY

Maybe.

EXT. CAMP SITE -- DAY

Paul and Donny follow closely behind a heavyset, brown haired FOREST RANGER. They follow him down a small incline.

FOREST RANGER

The best we can figure at this point is a bear attack... There is no sign of the men, but their campsite's been ripped all to hell.

Donny speaks up from the rear.

DONNY

You said it was a bear attack.
What, uh, what makes ya think that?

FOREST RANGER

No, I said I *thought* it was a bear.
And, well, have a look for yourselves.

Paul, Donny and the Ranger step into a snow covered clearing.

A mangled green tent hangs in shreds. Sleeping bags and three backpacks lie scattered in torn pieces around the site.

Paul approaches the tent, which has been shredded with sharp precision. He lifts a long strip of the tent with his hand.

FOREST RANGER (CONT'D)

We figure the boys mighta' run off when they saw the bear. Ya know, scared of it.

PAUL

But you doubt whether it was a bear.

FOREST RANGER

Well, there's some oddities about the whole situation, which is why I figured you'd better have a look.

PAUL

Oddities.

FOREST RANGER

Yeah... that for example.

He points to a tall slender tree. Paul's eyes travel up the trunk until he sees it. FOUR DEEP SCRATCHES have been carved into the trunk. Claw marks.

Donny slowly steps between the two men as they all look at the deep gashes in the grey trunk.

DONNY
Claw marks?

FOREST RANGER
Looks that a' way. 'Cept that's a foot or two higher than any bear in this area could reach without climbing. And they're out of season. It would take one early risin' bear to do something like this.

Paul's face shows concern.

PAUL
Any other ideas what could have done something like this?

FOREST RANGER
Haven't the foggiest...

PAUL
Any tracks?

FOREST RANGER
Not that I could find, it got pretty cold last night. Ground gets too hard.

Donny nods.

FOREST RANGER (CONT'D)
Probably nothin' right? Like I said, we just figured it would be best to let you boys know about this. Just in case.

Paul steps toward the tree as Donny looks to the Ranger and shakes his hand.

DONNY
Thank you. We appreciate it.

PAUL
Is there any forest work going on around here?

FOREST RANGER
Yeah, I think they opened a lumber camp 'bout 40 miles north of here earlier this month. Pretty decent sized operation. Think that has somethin' to do with this?

Paul shakes his head and smiles.

PAUL
Probably not.

The ranger turns to walk away. He stops and turns back.

FOREST RANGER
If anything else turns up, we'll
let ya know.

Paul looks to the tree tops.

PAUL
Thanks...

INT. RESTAURANT -- NIGHT

Paul and Susan sit at opposite ends of a small table in the center of a darkly lit steakhouse. Adam sits midway between them. An empty chair sits across from him.

Paul looks uncomfortable in his skin. He and Susan each have a steak. Adam works on an impressive burger. He smiles back and forth between his parents.

PAUL
Tell Mom about gym class today.

Adam looks excited.

ADAM
I hit three shots in basketball.

Susan raises his eyebrows in dramatic surprise.

SUSAN
You did?!

ADAM
One was really far back. Like the
free throw line.

PAUL
...and how many shots did Josh
Wiley hit?

ADAM
Zero.

PAUL
Zero!

Susan fights a smile through a stern look as Paul smiles at Adam.

SUSAN

Well... I am very impressed. I think we might have to order some ice cream to celebrate!

Adam's eyes light up. He looks to Paul, who smiles.

PAUL

I think so.

Paul looks to Susan. They lock eyes for a fleeting moment.

ADAM

What did Mrs. Poplar say yesterday?

SUSAN

That's a brave subject.

She takes a bite.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

She said you aren't watching any more of those cartoons your dad lets you watch.

PAUL

I don't know what you're talking about...

Beat. Adam looks upset.

ADAM

Why can't I watch them anymore?

Susan smile victoriously at Paul who drops his fork in exaggerated frustration at Adam.

Adam stirs at his food.

ADAM (CONT'D)

Mom, when are we going home?

SUSAN

After dinner, but I do need to run by the store on the way.

ADAM

I meant home with Dad...

Susan and Paul stop eating. Susan looks at Paul to gauge his reaction.

SUSAN

Let's not talk about that right now, okay?

She smiles. Adam looks pleadingly at both his parents.

ADAM
Why not?

SUSAN
Adam...

PAUL
Just eat your dinner.

Beat. Adam doesn't move.

ADAM
I don't want everyone to be sad
anymore.

Susan pains a smile.

SUSAN
Who's sad? Everyone's happy
tonight!

ADAM
I see you crying sometimes. You
always pretend like you weren't.
But I see you.

PAUL
(sternly)
Adam.

ADAM
Do you still love each other?

Susan looks up at Paul.

SUSAN
Sweetie, I don't think-

PAUL
Yes.

Susan looks to Paul. Surprised.

PAUL (CONT'D)
But sometimes it's harder than
that.

Beat. Susan looks back to her food.

The Shields family slowly resumes their meal in silence.

INT. LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Adam sits in on the floor front of the television set. He laughs out loud at the flashing cartoon on the screen. His small Pomeranian lies on the floor beside him.

Paul enters carrying a filled trash bag. He stops and watches the television for a moment.

On screen, a cartoon cat is being chased by a cartoon dog. The cat visibly passes gas. The dog pursuing him turns green in the face, stiffens, then topples over.

Paul furrows his brow as his picks up the remote from the coffee table.

PAUL
Are you trying to get me in trouble?

Paul changes the channel from the cartoons to a regional news broadcast. Adam sighs in frustration. Paul leaves the den, walking into the kitchen.

On screen a woman news anchor speak with a colorful graphic of several trees over her shoulder.

NEWS ANCHOR
...the sudden influx of wildlife into the Washington D.C. area all seems to have come from the dense forests to the north.

A MAP appears on screen. Large arrows indicate the wildlife movement from the north. Laytonsville appears near the top of the map as a small dot indicating its location.

NEWS ANCHOR (CONT'D)
Local zoologists from the University of Maryland continue to be baffled by the apparent unexplained migration of several species from their homes.

Adam turns from the television in disinterest. He leaves the room, the screen still on.

EXT. BACKYARD NEAR TREE LINE -- NIGHT

Paul exits the back door carrying two large trash bags. He lifts the lid of the dumpster and tosses both bags inside.

He stops halfway to the door and turns to the woods lining his back yard. The house's floodlight casts a series of stark shadows over the trees.

Paul stares. His eyes look to the treetops.

SNAP. A twig cracks. Deep in the woods.

Paul hears it. He freezes. Listens.

POP. SNAP. Growing closer. The sound moves quickly and more intense as it nears the treeline.

Paul reaches to the pistol on his hip. He unsnaps the holster quietly. He slowly inches toward the woods.

HEAVY FOOTSTEPS echo through the trees. It draws close. Mere feet from the light. From being seen.

Paul raises his weapon as the sound bursts from the trees.

A MAN. He stumbles from the woods. He staggers in exhaustion. His young face is covered with mud and scratches.

Paul lowers his gun in surprise as the man runs toward him. The man grabs Paul by the shoulders as he struggles to stand.

YOUNG CAMPER

Please!

PAUL

Are you alright?

Panic covers the man's face.

YOUNG CAMPER

We have to hide!

Paul turns his gaze to the dark veil of trees, then back to the camper.

YOUNG CAMPER (CONT'D)

Run!!

INT. SHERIFF'S STATION BREAK ROOM -- DAY

The Young Camper sits in a small metal chair across a table from Paul.

The room in which they sit appears to be more of a break room than anything else. A microwave rests on the counter. A refrigerator sits in the corner.

The camper stares at the table in front of him, his face drained of all expression.

YOUNG CAMPER

I left the tent at about two in the morning to use the bathroom.

(MORE)

YOUNG CAMPER (CONT'D)
When I left, both Ryan and Steve
were asleep.

PAUL
What happened then?

YOUNG CAMPER
I was outside the camp. Cause
that's what they say to do, you
know? Then I heard something. It
was quiet at first. Like it was far
away.

He looks up at Paul. His eyes reflect fear.

YOUNG CAMPER (CONT'D)
But then it started getting closer.

PAUL
It?

YOUNG CAMPER
Something running through the
trees. Branches breaking. I
froze... then I heard them
screaming. In pain. They were
screaming in pain. I could hear
them fighting with it. The tent
being torn. And I ran. I ran like
a coward.

He looks sick with himself.

YOUNG CAMPER (CONT'D)
I wandered around all day. Until it
got dark again. I was afraid
whatever came the first night would
find me this time. Then I saw your
light. On the back of your
house...

PAUL
You heard noises. Did you see
anything?

YOUNG CAMPER
No. It was too dark. The fire had
already gone out.

Paul speaks in a comforting tone.

PAUL
The Forest Department started
searching for your friends this
morning.

YOUNG CAMPER
Don't bother... They're already dead.

INT. SHERIFF'S STATION -- DAY

Paul and Donny stand in the hallway on either side of a closed door. The Young Camper still sits in the next room, visible through a window. He has calmed but looks exhausted.

DONNY
The other two haven't turned up?

PAUL
They could walk out of the trees later today for all we know.

DONNY
What he's saying sounds like-

PAUL
I know.

Beat.

PAUL (CONT'D)
I've been thinking... Assuming there is some sort of animal. An animal in these woods that's never been discovered. I wondered how that could be possible. How could something like that go unnoticed for so long?

Donny looks interested.

PAUL (CONT'D)
But if it's been here as long as your prehistoric fish, maybe it could have evolved over time. Adapted to its surroundings. What if it learned how to hide? How to run? What if it was smart enough to know that we're a threat? To learn how to fight us in safety before it fights us head on? Maybe it was smart enough to avoid us until it had no choice.

DONNY
That would be a very dangerous animal.

Paul looks back to the Young Camper.

PAUL
Yes it would.

EXT. SUSAN'S DRIVEWAY -- DAY

Donny stands with his head under the hood of Susan's minivan. Susan stands off to the side.

SUSAN
Thank you again for doing this,
Donny.

Donny pulls a broken belt from the van.

DONNY
Not a problem at all. Just needed a
new fan belt.

He tosses the belt into the trash.

SUSAN
I saw you at church the other day,
but you were across the way.

DONNY
Yeah, I meant to say "hi," but Paul
was just rollin' in from Baltimore
when we let out.

SUSAN
Baltimore?

DONNY
Yeah. Something about a lawyer.
I'm sure you know all about it.

Susan thinks. It hits her. The lawyer. Pain. She forces a smile.

SUSAN
(lying)
Oh yeah. The lawyer. Right.

Donny slams the hood closed, blows heat into his hands and turns to Susan.

DONNY
But, yeah. She should run fine.
Let me know if you have any other
problems with it.

Susan stares distantly for a moment. She's miles away before she snaps back to the moment.

SUSAN
Thank you Donny.

Donny sees the pained look on her face. He suddenly gets it. She didn't know about the lawyer visit.

DONNY
-I'm an idiot.

Susan shakes her head and smiles painfully.

SUSAN
No, it's okay.

DONNY
I'm sorry.

Donny doesn't know what else to say. Susan's eyes sadden.

SUSAN
No. I think I know where I'm at
now...

INT. MASTER BEDROOM -- DAY

Paul sits on the corner of the large bed. A bedside lamp illuminates the room. Paul's divorce papers lie on his lap, still in their large green folder.

Slowly Paul thumbs through the pages of the packet. He runs his fingers down the page, feeling the texture of the print.

A small green adhesive flag points to a line appropriated for a signature. It glares at him from the page.

He reaches to the bed beside him, grabbing a silver pen.

The pen approaches the page with reluctance.

ADAM
Dad?

Paul jumps suddenly. He quickly closes the folder and turns to look over his shoulder.

Adam stands in the doorway, holding onto the door frame with one hand.

PAUL
Hey pal!

Paul places the closed folder on the floor at his feet.

ADAM
Donny's here...

Paul looks surprised by the news. He nods.

PAUL

Okay.

INT. FOYER -- DAY

Paul descends the staircase leading into the foyer. Donny stands at the base of the stairs. He eagerly looks up.

DONNY

Do you have a map?

Paul stops at the bottom of the stairs.

PAUL

Yes.

INT. KITCHEN -- DAY

Paul unrolls a large map across the oak kitchen table. Laytonsville and the areas surrounding it can be seen in relatively high detail.

DONNY

I'd just come back from Susan's when we got a call from Don Lofton, the sheriff up in Woodsboro.

Donny points to Woodsboro on the map. It lies about 20 miles northwest of Laytonsville.

PAUL

How is she?

DONNY

Huh?

PAUL

Susan.

DONNY

She's fine. Car's running now. Anyway, he tells me he's been meanin' to call us. Seems last week they had what he thought was a cattle thief come through town. Cows disappearin' out of their fences.

Paul raises his eyebrows.

DONNY (CONT'D)

He was callin' to warn us that they we should keep an eye out.

PAUL

A week late. That was nice.

DONNY

Anyway. Woodsboro is up here.

Donny points to Woodsboro.

DONNY (CONT'D)

And we're south east.

Donny points to Laytonsville.

DONNY (CONT'D)

So I figured if what took their cattle is the same thing that's around here, like at old man Peterson's. Maybe it just passed through Woodsboro. But why is it moving? So I asked if anything unusual is going on to the north, that would cause this thing to head south.

Donny points to a point in the forest north of Woodsboro.

PAUL

The lumber camp...

Donny traces his finger along an invisible line that goes from the lumber camp to Woodsboro to Laytonsville.

DONNY

The forest work. They flushed it out right toward us.

Paul looks at the map.

PAUL

There's no more forest to the south.

DONNY

It's trapped...

PAUL

That's a very bad thing.

The telephone hanging on the kitchen wall RINGS.

DONNY

I would think so, yes.

Paul answers the phone as Donny hovers over the map.

PAUL

Hello?

Paul listens. He looks concerned.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Sure, Earl. Stay put. We'll be
right over.

INT. SQUAD CAR -- NIGHT

Paul pilots the car down the dark, winding. He glances to the backseat. Adam sleeps with his head against the window. Donny and Paul speak in hushed voices.

DONNY
Earl Lerner? The guy with a bigger
arsenal than the US Marine Corp...
and he sounded nervous.

PAUL
Yes he did.

Donny laughs as he jokes.

DONNY
This is all making me feel really
good. Guy could take out an
invading army from his front porch
and we're comin' to save the day.

Donny laughs again. Paul stares through the windshield. In his own world.

PAUL
When are you going to ask me?

Donny looks up.

DONNY
Ask you what?

PAUL
Timothy. My son. You haven't asked
me how it happened. And I doubt
anyone's told you...

Donny's smile fades. He doesn't know what to say.

PAUL (CONT'D)
He was playing in the yard by
himself. A basketball goal we got
him for his birthday. A small one.
Susan had taken Adam to a friend's
house. I was working on the roof.
I made him play in the side yard so
I could see him. I took my eyes
off of him for less than a
minute...

Paul pauses. Donny doesn't move.

PAUL (CONT'D)

We had a small plastic pool in the side yard. I had filled it up earlier and forgotten to empty it. I noticed that it got quiet. I didn't hear his ball anymore. When I looked down he was lying in the pool. Facedown. They think he slipped on the bottom and hit his head.

Donny winces.

DONNY

I'm sorry, Paul.

PAUL

My five year old son died because I was too busy installing television antennae on my house to watch him. To protect him.

Beat.

PAUL (CONT'D)

And the worst part about it, nobody except me acts like they know that.

Paul looks to Donny, who has no response.

PAUL (CONT'D)

You asked if I was a praying man. The day it happened I asked God for two things: to forgive me for not taking care of my little boy and to keep me from ruining anyone else's life more than I already have.

Paul stares back to the road.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Don't pity me, Donny. I haven't earned it... but you deserve to know who your working with.

Donny turns back to the road as they ride in silence.

INT. LERNER'S FOYER -- NIGHT

Earl Learner swings the large wooden front door open. Paul, Adam and Donny stand outside, behind the screen door. Earl doesn't smile.

EARL
Sheriff.

PAUL
Earl.

INT. LERNER'S LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

A television against the wall displays the doppler radar from a regional news station. A bright red storm front moves across the map.

WEATHER MAN (O.S.)
...with the wintry storm expected to settle over the area by tomorrow night. Expect widespread road closures through the mountain passes as we're expecting heavy snowfall in the rural areas surrounding Fountain Mills, Laytonsville and Woodsboro.

Donny sits on the couch facing the television as Paul takes seat beside him. Earl MUTES the television as Donny makes conversation.

DONNY
Sounds like we're in for a storm...

Earl doesn't respond as he approaches the television and inserts a VHS tape into the VCR. Concern covers his face.

Ethel Lerner stands, worried, against the far wall in a nightgown and rollers. She bends down to Adam's level.

ETHEL
Adam baby, why don't you come in here with me and we'll find you somethin' to eat.

Adam looks to Paul, who nods as Ethel takes Adam by the shoulder and leads him into the kitchen.

EARL
I have a camera I put out in the woods from time to time. It's made for deer hunters. Runs on batteries. If a deer goes by in the middle of the night, that camera will see it and start recording on tape. It helps for knowin' if an area is populated.

Paul nods. He knows what's coming.

PAUL
But this is not footage of a deer.

Earl shakes his head nervously.

EARL
I found the camera lying on the ground this morning. And I think you oughta take a look.

He presses "play" on the VCR and takes a seat in a nearby armchair.

The TV screen fills with snow before an image finally appears on the screen. A small wooded clearing. The trees appear STARK WHITE in the grainy, colorless image. The darkness appears pitch black.

EARL (CONT'D)
It recorded over three hours last night. I couldn't figure out what kept settin' it off.

PAUL
What am I looking for Earl?

EARL
You'll know it when you see it...

Paul and Donny stare intently at the screen. Branches sway softly. All else is still. Lifeless.

Paul slowly leans in closer. Looking for anything unusual in the image. Just trees. All is calm.

Something massive crosses in front of the camera and fills the screen. Too close to see what it was.

Paul and Donny jump in their seats, startled.

The image tilts plummets to the ground, shaking with the impact. The picture comes to a rest at an angle. Clumps of snow, inches from the lens, come into focus. All else blurs.

DONNY
How 'bout a little warning?!

Earl ignores him. He stares at the screen.

PAUL
That could have just been a deer Earl.

EARL
That's what I figured...till I looked at the photos.
(MORE)

EARL (CONT'D)

Whatever it was knocked the tape out, but it still takes 35mm pictures. I got 'em back just before I called.

Earl pulls several large prints from his jacket. He places them on the table.

Paul and Donny lean over the prints.

The first page shows the blurry camera's perspective from its position on the ground. The trees appear only as blurry grey images, but still identifiable.

EARL (CONT'D)

Here's the first... and the second.

Earl removes the first print. The second image comes into view. The tree line remains blurry in the background.

A BLURRY, THIN STALK, maybe four inches thick, protrudes from behind the trunk of a tree. Earl point to the spot.

EARL (CONT'D)

There it is. Now look at the next one.

Earl reveals the third photo. From the blurry trees emerges a FIGURE. The think stalk, now clearly a leg, has taken a step from behind the tree.

Paul and Donny's eyes widen in shock. Earl breathes deeply.

Though out of focus, vague details can be seen: It is tall. Maybe six feet. It walks on two strong, thin legs. Large powerful arms hang down. It steps in a slumped forward position. Not apelike. But not human. Like nothing we've ever seen.

Earl flips the page again. Nothing but trees. With that, it disappears into the darkness of the night.

Paul and Donny sit in stunned silence.

EARL (CONT'D)

Ethel didn't want me to leave after seein' the pictures. So what do ya think?

Beat. Paul can barely form words.

PAUL

Can- can I see the third one again?

DONNY

Yes, I would also like to see the third one again.

INT. SQUAD CAR -- NIGHT

Paul, Adam and Donny ride in the squad car. Paul and Donny each stare straight ahead.

ADAM

What was on the video tape?

Silence. Donny opens his mouth to answer. He reconsiders.

Paul acts as if he didn't hear the question.

INT. SHIELD'S FOYER -- NIGHT

Paul, Adam and Donny enter through the front door, shedding their coats. Paul places his pistol in an entrance table drawer.

PAUL

First door on the left, Donny.

Donny gives nods as he moves down the hall into a doorway. Paul pats Adam on the back, sending him toward the stairs.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Head for bed, pal.

EXT. SHIELD'S SIDE YARD -- NIGHT

CREATURE POV: A RASPY BREATHING courses through the night air as a lumbering perspective emerges from the thick brush. The glowing light of the Shields' home comes into view in the near distance.

INT. SHIELD'S FOYER -- NIGHT

Adam's small Pomeranian runs past Paul and begins BARKING wildly at the front door. He growls and yaps loudly.

Paul watches the dog curiously as Adam stops midway up the stairs, staring at the commotion. The dog's hair stands on end as it barks furiously at the front door.

ADAM

Sammy!

Sammy runs protectively to Adam, who sits on the stairs and tries to calm him. The dog GROWLS intensely at the door.

Paul looks from Adam and Sammy back to the front door.

INT. BATHROOM -- NIGHT

Donny washes his hands in the small bathroom sink. Behind him a ground floor window is blackened by the night.

A RUSH OF MOVEMENT bolts past the outside of the window. Something large. Too fast to see. Donny didn't notice.

INT. SHIELD'S FOYER -- NIGHT

BOOM. The exterior dining room wall next to Paul shakes from a powerful impact.

Paul and Adam jump in terror. Adam runs to hide behind Paul.

Donny hurriedly emerges from the bathroom as the dog barks wildly at the wall.

DONNY

What the hell was that?

Paul takes a cautious step toward the wall.

PAUL

I have no idea...

Paul steps toward the wall. He leans his ear toward it. Listening. An unnerving silence broken by --

A SHATTERING WINDOW in the far end of the house.

PAUL (CONT'D)

(urgent whisper)

The bathroom!

Paul bolts toward Adam and Donny in the central hallway, steering them toward the bathroom.

Paul stops halfway down the hall. His gun. In the drawer by the front door. Before he can move toward it --

SLAM! A tremendous impact rattles the large door. Paul freezes. He looks to the drawer mere feet from the front door. Too risky.

INT. BATHROOM -- NIGHT

Paul hurries Adam and Donny into the bathroom. The small dog scurries in behind them, terrified.

Paul shuts the door behind them. He flips off the light just in time to hear the thunderous CRASH of the front door giving in.

PAUL

(whispering)

It's in the house...

Paul, Donny and Adam all breathe with short, panicked breaths as they crouch against the far wall. Adam hugs close to Paul in the blue moonlight of the nearby window.

DONNY

The dog...

Donny stares uneasily at the dog. It cowers against Adam's leg. Quiet...for now.

HEAVY HOOF CLOPS on the wood floor of the foyer. It draws closer.

Paul looks to Donny's hip. He's not wearing his gun either. Paul cringes. They're defenseless.

The sound of HOOVES grow louder.

IN THE HALL

The tip of a RAZOR SHARP CLAW drags across the surface of a hallway table mere feet from the bathroom door.

CLOSE ON -- two huge hooves step powerfully across the wood.

INSIDE THE BATHROOM

Paul tenses. The hoof clops stop just outside the thin bathroom door.

HUFF. Like a horse exhaling its powerful breathing can be heard through the door.

Paul and Donny look to the small dog. Any sound and they're dead. The dog looks up at them nervously. Almost as if he gets it.

CLOP. CLOP. The hoof steps resume and progress past the door.

The clumsy sounds of furniture and glassware being knocked to the floor fill the house from the direction of the kitchen.

The hoof steps slowly fade, circling through the house and back to the front door before exiting the way they came.

Paul and Donny exhale a tense breath and lean against the wall in relief.

EXT. SHIELDS' SIDE YARD -- MORNING

The sun slowly rises over the snow covered treetops. The clear, winter sky grows brighter with each passing moment.

A blanket of yellow sunlight drapes across the side of the Shields' home.

INT. BATHROOM -- MORNING

Bright morning sunlight floods in through the window. It hits Paul in the eyes, waking him.

A TELEPHONE RINGS from the kitchen. Paul slowly stirs, turning his head from the light.

He sits on the floor against the bathroom wall. Adam sits, asleep, under Paul's arm. They slept in the bathroom last night. Paul sits up uncomfortably, looking toward the tub.

Donny sits up from within the bathtub, rubbing his stiff neck. He still wears his clothes from the previous night.

Paul rises slowly and follows the sound of the telephone out of the bathroom.

INT. HALLWAY -- MORNING

Paul walks toward the kitchen. Donny and Adam follow behind, groggily surveying the damage from the night before.

Tables and chairs lie on their sides in the kitchen at the far end of the hall. The front door hangs open.

Donny crouches down, bringing the surface of the hallway table to eye level. He runs his finger along the deep scratch left by the razor sharp claw.

Paul can be heard answering the phone in the kitchen.

PAUL (O.S.)
(into phone)
Hello?

Donny looks to the floor. Large muddy hoof prints trace down the hallway and into the kitchen.

PAUL (O.S.) (CONT'D)
(into phone)
Yes.

Donny pushes around pieces of a broken vase with his boot.

PAUL (O.S.) (CONT'D)
(into phone)
We'll be right there.

Paul reenters the hallway walking quickly.

DONNY
What's goin' on?

Paul throws on his jacket. Adam steps out of the way.

PAUL
We have to go.

Paul grabs Donny's jacket from the bathroom and tosses it to him.

PAUL (CONT'D)
They found the other campers.

EXT. TREE LINE -- DAY

A snowflake. Then another. A light flurry begins to fall as Paul and Donny approach the tree line. Their squad car sits along the highway behind them. *

Solemn, the Forest Ranger waits at the edge of the woods as they approach.

FOREST RANGER
It's this way fellas...

He steps into the trees. Paul and Donny follow.

EXT. DEEP WOODS -- DAY

Paul and Donny step through the trees as the Ranger comes to a stop. Paul shivers against the cold wind that slices through the trees. Nothing in the area appears unusual. Confused, he looks to the Ranger for an explanation.

Donny looks skyward and his jaw drops.

DONNY
Oh my God...

Careful to keep his eyes down, the Ranger motions skyward with his head. Paul slowly turns and raises his gaze to the treetops. His face pales at what he sees.

Hanging from a branch high above the forest floor is what is left of the BODY OF A MAN. Silhouetted against the bright sky, barely more than skin remains of the mutilated body.

FOREST RANGER
The other's over there.

Paul pulls his eyes from the tree to the Ranger, who points over his own shoulder to another tree. ANOTHER BODY. The limp skin drapes over a branch. A shred of t-shirt flaps in the wind, caught on a nearby twig.

The Ranger stares off into the trees. He can't look.

FOREST RANGER (CONT'D)
We found it this mornin'. Looks
like nothin' more than the skin.
Two separate victims. We figured
it had to be those boy that went
missin'. God knows how they got up
there.

Paul's eyes dance. Donny speaks in a hushed tone.

DONNY
(whispering)
Just like the boy from the story...

He realizes something.

DONNY (CONT'D)
(whispering)
This thing has nowhere else to go.

FOREST RANGER
What kinda sick monster could do
somethin' like that?

Donny looks to the Ranger.

DONNY
You have no idea.

PAUL
As soon as the coroner gets them
down you need to get your men out
of the woods.

The Ranger looks startled.

FOREST RANGER
Why?

PAUL
Whatever did that is still in these
trees.

FOREST RANGER
What do ya mean "whatever"? If
you're thinking this is a bear like
we talked about-

PAUL
Windago.

The sheriff squints. He laughs but stops himself when he
sees Paul isn't joking. He looks to Donny, who doesn't smile
either.

PAUL (CONT'D)
You've heard the stories?

He looks to the tree before looking back to Paul in sudden
fear. He nods softly.

Paul looks to the surrounding woods.

PAUL (CONT'D)
...and it doesn't seem to have any
trouble finding us.

FOREST RANGER
I'll get them out of here as soon
as I can.

PAUL
Before dark.

The Ranger nods as he backs toward a group of Rangers that stand nearby.

FOREST RANGER
Yeah. Sure thing.

He means it.

Paul turns back to Donny.

PAUL
Roads through the gap are nearly
snowed over already. No chance of
getting everyone out.

DONNY
That storm comin' in tonight ain't
gonna make it any easier. How long
will it take for them plow?

PAUL
Assuming the storm's passed by
morning, the forest department will
clear them at sunrise.

The implication hits them both. They're trapped.

PAUL (CONT'D)
We have to get everybody in this
town together before nightfall.
This thing isn't leaving. We can't
risk someone getting attacked
tonight in their home. And we
don't have the manpower...

Donny nods. He understands.

DONNY
Lock down before dark. Where at?

Paul thinks.

PAUL
In the church. It has lights. This
thing doesn't like to be seen.
Lights might run it away if it
finds us. The church can easily be
locked down from the inside...
(MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)
It's stone. It could hold if it
came down to it... It has to.

DONNY
What do we tell people?

PAUL
The truth.

Donny looks unsure of it himself.

DONNY
The truth... Tell them it's a
Windago?

Paul looks back in contemplation. The gravity of the situation washes over him.

EXT. MAIN STREET -- DAY

Thick snowfall descends from overcast clouds. As evening falls on Laytonsville, a heavy blanket of snow covers all that is in sight. A chilling wind swirls snow between buildings and over cars.

Thick overcast clouds drape a blanket of grey over the earth below. As evening falls on Laytonsville, a chilling breeze blows through the main street.

A snowflake. Then another. A light flurry begins to fall.

American flags along the street begin to stir in the moving air. A page of newspaper tumbles down the sidewalk.

INT. SUSAN'S KITCHEN -- DAY

Susan rushes through the kitchen, packing three meals in brown paper bags. Paul stands against the wall as Adam enters wearing his backpack and looking confused.

SUSAN
Did you pack your toothbrush baby?

Adam nods, still looking confused.

SUSAN (CONT'D)
How bad is this Paul?

Paul hesitates.

PAUL
Everything will be alright... It's
just a precaution.

Susan looks into his eyes for a moment before turning to Adam. She hands him a brown sack meal.

SUSAN
Are we ready?

ADAM
Yeah.

She ushers Adam past Paul and out the door into the WHISTLING wind and snowfall. She locks eyes with Paul as she walks past. Worry reflects in her eyes.

SUSAN
You've never been a good liar,
Paul...

He looks away. She's right.

EXT. CHURCH YARD -- EVENING

Paul stands outside the large double doors of Laytonsville Methodist Church. Large shuttered windows line the side of the grey stone building. A cross adorns the roof high above.

The snowfall builds, falling in thick curtains, clinging to every surface.

Several families approach Paul, who stands along the small sidewalk leading to the entrance. Donny moves through quickly, carrying a handful of chains.

Anxiety hangs over Ron Jenkins, the horse rancher, who approaches with his wife and children.

RON
Is it true what Donny said? About something coming out of the trees?

Paul nods. Ron looks inside to his young family. Truly concerned.

RON (CONT'D)
You keep an eye on 'em for me,
Sheriff.

Paul grimaces. Ron isn't staying.

PAUL
I can't recommend enough that you stay, Ron. I've seen what can happen-

Ron nods in understanding.

RON
Those horses are our livelihood,
Sheriff. They're all we've got...
(MORE)

RON (CONT'D)
and I've gotta protect that.
There's nobody else I'd trust.

There will be no convincing Ron. Paul shakes his hand and nods understandably. Ron backs toward his truck parked alongside the road.

Donny pulls closed one of the large shutters that hinge on either side of each stained glass window. It CREAKS as it swings and SLAMS closed.

Paul steps up as Donny wraps a chain over the latch that binds the shutters.

DONNY
Everyone here yet?

Paul looks at his watch.

PAUL
No. Ten more minutes. That's all we can afford.

Donny picks up his pace.

PAUL (CONT'D)
I put three rifles in the pastor's office. Under the desk. It's big. Rifle rounds stand a better chance... if it comes to it.

Donny stops for a moment. He quietly nods. Paul looks nervously to the sky.

PAUL (CONT'D)
It's getting dark.

Donny follows Paul's gaze toward the sky. An ominous wall of dark clouds approaches from the west. The fierce storm bears down on Laytonsville.

INT. CHURCH -- EVENING

Paul makes his way down the center aisle of the church. Pews line either side of him as he moves over the wood planked floor. People have gathered in their seats, many have sleeping bags and pillows. All look concerned.

As Paul nears the front of the church, he spots Susan and Adam seated on the end of a pew. Adam looks around nervously.

Paul kneels down at the pew. Eye level with Adam.

PAUL
How are you doing pal?

ADAM

Okay.

PAUL

Don't be scared. I won't let anything happen to you. I promise. Understand?

Adam nods. Paul smiles. He stands and walks toward the pulpit.

Paul passes Tom, the old cattle rancher, as he walks.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Are your cattle locked up Tom?

TOM

A lot better than we are... What in the hell are we hidin' from?

Paul runs onto the stage, stopping in front of the pulpit. He faces the crowd. The room slowly quiets.

PAUL

(speaking to crowd)

Alright everyone. In just a minute I'll tell you all everything I know. This should only be for tonight. Until we know it's safe... It's good that you all came.

Paul looks across the crowd.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Donny is locking down the shutters outside. If we can get a few people to give him a hand, that would help. Everything's going to be okay. We're in a safe place.

Paul looks to the large doors at the rear of the church, then down to Pastor Moore standing on the floor.

PAUL (CONT'D)

(To pastor)

We're going to need to barricade those doors.

The Pastor looks to the doors, then back to Paul. The seriousness of Paul's intentions hits him. He nods fearfully.

EXT. CHURCH YARD -- EVENING

The sky has grown darker. The snow and wind have grown stronger. Night crawls across the church yard. The trees behind the church all but surrender to the darkness as they sway in the heavy gusts of wind.

Donny and another MAN, 40s, struggle to close a large shutter against the violent air pressure. The snow stings their faces as the shutter SLAMS. They yell over the wind.

MAN

Need any more help?

DONNY

We're good. Head inside. She isn't going to let up out here!

Paul moves up beside them and throws the latch down, locking the shutters together. Donny wraps a chain over the latch.

DONNY (CONT'D)

That's the last one.

Heavy snowfall shrouds the trees as the bend and CREAK. Branches POP as they crash into one another.

PAUL

Alright. Get inside and turn off the lights.

Paul looks into the darkness.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Let's not attract any more attention than we have to...

Donny and the other man quickly move toward the front side of the building.

Paul stares into the woods with the small church to his back. The sole beacon of hope, the lights on the outside of the building go dark. He takes a deep breath, shielding the pelting snow before jogging toward the doors.

INT. CHURCH -- NIGHT

A large wooden beam drops into metal brackets across the church's double doors. Like the doors of an ancient castle.

No light penetrates the dark stained glass windows.

Donny stands in the back of the church, he brushes his hands on his pants. He nods to Paul.

Paul stands behind the pulpit at the front of the small church. The people gathered inside now fill almost every seat. They all look to Paul expectantly. Trustingly.

PAUL

You all know about the tracks that were found going through town this week, the hoofprints... and most of you have probably heard about the young men that we found today.

The room remains deafeningly silent.

PAUL (CONT'D)

These two events... were connected. The same thing that left those tracks through our yards on Tuesday morning, attacked and killed those campers. We're certain of that.

Several in the crowd look shocked.

PAUL (CONT'D)

A lot of people have long believed that something lived in these woods to our north. The Indians had stories of a creature in this area. They called it a "Windago."

Several in the crowd nod fearfully.

PAUL (CONT'D)

It's beginning to look as if these stories weren't just stories. There is something out there. Something that has been in hiding... until now. And I didn't want to alarm anyone until I knew for sure... and now I do.

They hang on his every word.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Three weeks ago they opened a logging camp about 40 miles north. Deep woods. We think it pushed the creature south. With the animals on the run, it's been looking for food.

Beat.

PAUL (CONT'D)

And it found us...

The people grow uneasy. Children look to their parents with fear in their eyes. Paul speaks louder to overpower the murmur. Tense concern rings in his voice.

PAUL (CONT'D)

It's strong. It's fast, and it's smart. This is not just a ghost story anymore. This is real... and we're going to make it through together.

He has everyone's focus.

PAUL (CONT'D)

We've barricaded the doors and windows to keep anything out. We'll keep the building locked down until morning.

RICHARD

(from second row)

How many nights do we have to stay here?

PAUL

That's a good question. In the morning everyone needs to pack up. We'll leave town until the people who take care of this type of thing can do just that.

Richard nods and takes a deep breath.

MAN 1

(from back)

How long will that take?

PAUL

The Forest Department has been made aware of the situation. Once the roads clear tomorrow morning they'll have Rangers crawling all over these woods to hunt this thing down.

MAN 2

How many Rangers?

PAUL

Dozens...

The gravity of so large a number settles over the crowd. This is a serious threat.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Again, they are aware of the situation we face.

PAUL (CONT'D)

We just have to make it through the night. And we will.

MAN 2

How do we know this thing won't just find us all here, trapped like a bunch of damn rats?

Paul won't lie.

PAUL

That's possible.

MAN

So what the hell are we doing here?

Paul doesn't hesitate. He speaks with absolute certainty.

PAUL

Because this is where we are supposed to be. And there's no better place to be. When that morning sun breaks through the trees... you'll be safe.

Paul looks the man right in the eyes.

PAUL (CONT'D)

You'll be safe.

The man stares back. He nods softly. He's convinced.

Paul scans the crowd with his eyes. They all look to him. They look frightened. Scared. Paul doesn't. He is solid.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Tomorrow we be here sooner than you know.

INT. CHURCH HALLWAY -- NIGHT

Susan walks down a small darkened hallway in the front of the church. Her chestnut hair has been pulled back into a pony tail. She carries several blank pieces of paper in her hands.

Paul enters the other end of the small hall. They stop and face one another. The light from the sanctuary bounces around the corner, casting a soft light into the hallway.

Paul looks to both ends of the hall casually. They are alone. Susan gives a smile.

SUSAN

Hi.

PAUL

Hi.

Susan holds up the pieces of paper.

SUSAN

Adam's bored. He wants to draw. I think he's just excited to get to stay up.

Paul smiles.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

You were good in there.

PAUL

Thank you.

SUSAN

I'm serious Paul. Those people out there are terrified. But they all believe the same thing, that you will protect them. That no matter how bad things get, they can believe in you.

Susan focuses on Paul's eyes. Paul stares back into hers.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

It wasn't your fault, Paul.

Paul immediately breaks eye contact. His eyes begin to flood slightly. He can't look at her for more than an instant.

PAUL

Don't...

A tear rolls down Susan's cheek.

SUSAN

He loved you too much. Timothy wouldn't want you to be sad...

Paul's eyes flood with emotion.

PAUL

I should have been there with him... I should have been where I could get to him.

He looks her in the eyes for what seems like the first time.

PAUL (CONT'D)
I'm sorry.

Susan's eyes plead with him.

SUSAN
I still need you. You don't think I do, but I do.

Paul doesn't respond. Pain in his eyes.

SUSAN (CONT'D)
Have you seen all those people out there? Have you looked in their eyes? They trust you. They believe in you.

Paul looks away, not buying it.

SUSAN (CONT'D)
They are all scared senseless, but with you in the room... they think everything will be alright. They know everything will be alright. That's who you are Paul. We all know it.

PAUL
What if you're wrong?

Susan grabs Paul's face in her hands. She forces him to look directly into her eyes.

SUSAN
(certain)
I'm not.

Paul looks at Susan with a reluctant warmth.

Susan extends her hand at waist height and holds it open for Paul to take. Tears still wet her face.

Paul looks down and sees it. He slowly reaches over with his hand and takes Susan's. She leans her head into his chest as they stand together in the dim light.

INT. CHURCH -- EVENING

Mrs. Barret sits alone on the end of a pew, her hands folded in her lap. Donny takes a seat beside her as she smiles.

MRS. BARRET
Donny Saunders. Two meetings in one week, I'm beginning to think you're putting the moves on me.

Donny laughs before a nervous apprehension drapes over him.

DONNY
You know what's going on.

Mrs. Barret's smile fades slightly.

MRS. BARRET
I've just been around long enough
to know that understanding the past
is more than a little helpful in
understanding the present.

DONNY
You said the natives knew this
thing, this creature, had a
significance.

Mrs. Barret smiles and nods softly as she recollects.

MRS. BARRET
About 30 years ago, lightning
struck a tree and started a
terrible fire out past the Bluff.
Burned for days. They brought water
trucks from all over the state
trying to put out those flames. But
try as they might, they couldn't do
it.

Donny looks lost.

MRS. BARRET (CONT'D)
Flames burnt for days before they
simply stopped. Rain came and did
what hundreds of men and their
equipment couldn't do. Acres upon
acres were destroyed. Trees burnt
to the ground. And do you know what
happened after that? To all that
scorched earth?

Donny shakes his head.

MRS. BARRET (CONT'D)
It grew back stronger than ever.
That fire burnt up all the weeds
and undergrowth chokin' out new
trees. A cleansing fire.

Donny's eyes land on Paul, who follows Susan into the
sanctuary. Mrs. Barret continues.

MRS. BARRET (CONT'D)
The Indians understood that.
(MORE)

MRS. BARRET (CONT'D)

Sometimes we have to fight the flames to get rid of those weaknesses and failures that otherwise would just hang around, choking out the good things in life...

DONNY

Like a test?

MRS. BARRET

I like to think of situations like this more like a chance to defeat your demons... for redemption.

Across the room, Paul stands at a distance and watches Susan hand Adam some paper and a pen for him to draw. He looks at his family longingly, but remains distant.

MRS. BARRET (CONT'D)

But I'm just some old woman, what do I know?

DONNY

I think you know a lot more than you let on.

Donny looks back to Mrs. Barret.

MRS. BARRET

History's one big circle Donny, sometimes things just look a little different when they come back around.

Donny looks back across the room, as Paul is grabbed by a concerned woman. He allows himself to be pulled away from Susan and Adam. Susan looks up just in time to see Paul stepping away. Hurt reflects in her eyes.

EXT. CHURCH YARD -- EVENING

Gusting wind rips through the church yard. The flag atop a tall metal flag pole in front of the church flaps violently in the wind. The long metal chain TINGS repeatedly against the cold steel.

Deep snow piles around the church, covering every inch of earth. It sticks to the surface of the stone building, glazing it in white.

INT. CHURCH -- NIGHT

Donny and Paul sit on the edge of the stage.

Many of the people sleep uncomfortably in the pews as the raging wind HOWLS outside. A small circle of children wearing cartoon pajamas lay asleep in sleeping bags on the floor.

Susan and Adam lie on the floor nearby. Asleep.

PAUL

Beginning to think "the middle of nowhere" isn't the place for you?

DONNY

We'll see how this goes then I'll get back to ya.

INT. RON JENKINS' PICKUP TRUCK -- NIGHT

Ron Jenkins sits behind the wheel of his lifeless pickup truck. The moonlight pouring into the darkened cab illuminates a rifle lying across the seat beside him.

As the wind beats against the truck, Ron stares through the windshield, his breath clouding out in front of him in the unheated cab. He keeps a watchful eye on his horse barn roughly twenty yards away.

He rubs fatigue from his eyes as he reaches for a thermos in the seat beside him. He bumps it with his hand, knocking it into the floorboard.

RON

Damn it...

He lies in the seat, reaching to the floor. He grabs the thermos, rising back to his seated position behind the wheel.

A CLOUD OF FOG on the glass of the passenger side window. The recent breath of something on the other side of the glass. It slowly fades in the cold air.

Ron sees the glass. Fear floods over his face. He looks to the barn through the veil of wind and snow.

Something large and brown strides around the corner. Ron barely catches a glimpse. Terror pierces through him.

Ron slams his hand onto the HORN, blaring it into the night.

INT. CHURCH -- NIGHT

The sound of the horn from Ron's truck less than a mile away catches everyone's attention. People turn toward the windows. Those awake hurriedly wake those asleep.

Paul and Donny jump down from the stage and run toward the commotion. Paul leads the way, gently pushing his way through the crowd that has pressed together.

Paul approaches a window and tilts his head, peering through the small crack between the shutters.

In the distance, Ron's truck slips in and out of view through the blinding storm. Its high beams come on as the horn blaring continues.

People within the church become vocally frightened.

A look of determination covers Paul's face as he backs away from the window. He turns to see Donny in his path, shaking his head.

EXT. HORSE BARN -- NIGHT

Ron forces the door open against the gusting wind and climbs from the truck. He raises the rifle as he quickly moves toward the barn. He struggles to see through the snow slicing across his face.

BANG! Ron fires a warning shot into the night sky.

INT. CHURCH -- NIGHT

Donny stands in Paul's way. Paul hears the shot.

PAUL
We've got to do something.

DONNY
Goin' out there is only gonna get
you killed.

Paul tries to step past him. Donny steps into his path. He isn't letting this happen. He speaks in hushed urgency.

DONNY (CONT'D)
You told that man we'd protect his
family. That's the *only* thing you
need to do. And how are we gonna do
that if you end up in the top of
some tree?

Paul looks to Ron's family. They fearfully peer out a window. He sighs and runs his hand over his face. Donny's right.

Several people huddle against the shuttered windows, trying to see out. Others sit fearfully in the center of the room.

People make space as Paul and Donny angle their view between the shutter cracks.

Movement can be seen beside the barn. Too far to see details.

EXT. HORSE BARN -- NIGHT

Ron presses against the wind as he approaches the barn.

SCRATCHES. Claws on the far side of the barn. The sliding barn doors RATTLE violently just out of sight.

Ron stops a few feet from the corner. He tightens his grip on his rifle. His breathing quickens.

Panic in his eyes, Ron locks up. His hands shake. He takes a retreating step toward his truck, away from the barn.

CRUNCH. From the darkness just behind his truck's headlights. The sound of a hoof step in hard-packed snow.

Ron's eyes dance in frantic fear. He raises his rifle and frantically swings it from the truck to the barn and back.

TICK. A quiet, but distinct sound reaches Ron's ears. He freezes. No idea where it came from.

Unseen to Ron, a large, fur covered figure peers down over the edge of the barn roof. Before Ron notices, IT LUNGES --

INT. CHURCH -- NIGHT

POP. POP. The distant sounds of the final shots from Ron's rifle reach the church. An AGONIZED SCREAM. Then silence.

EXT. HORSE BARN -- NIGHT

Ron runs frantically through the snow. He clutches a shoulder soaked with blood as he bolts through the open field.

Behind him, the creature bursts from the darkness in pursuit. Six feet tall. Long legs. Powerful arms. The definition of ferocious. Its fur sheens in patches of moonlight as it runs.

It gains on Ron in an instant.

SLICE. Its claws slash across Ron's back as it strides past.

Ron's lifeless body falls to the ground, staining the white snow with a blanket of scarlet.

INT. CHURCH -- NIGHT

People retract from the windows in saddened horror. Panic begins to set in. One Man speaks over the others.

MAN

We've got to get out of here!

Paul jumps in, not letting this take root.

PAUL

There is no better place to be than
right here. I promise you that.

The man lowers his voice to a frantic hush.

MAN

That thing's right outside that
wall!

Paul doesn't miss a step.

PAUL

And we are right here!

He locks eyes with the crowd.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Together. No matter what.

The Man calms as people protectively hug close to their families.

SLAM. An impact from the front wall of the church echoes through the building. People jump in startled fear as they spin toward the intense sound.

Donny steps up beside Paul. Both stare at the front wall.

DONNY

Boss...

The people slowly press toward the back of the room.

Susan and Adam step to Paul's side. Susan wraps one arm around Paul as he places an arm on her shoulder.

Donny steps forward, toward the sound. He waits.

SLAM. Another impact. The impact is followed by a scratching sound near the height of the ceiling.

PAUL

(to himself)

It's climbing.

Donny stands at the foot of the stage. He stares straight up.

THUDS from the roof. The entire room looks up. The small children hug close to their parents.

Paul walks over to the Pastor, who stares at the ceiling.

PAUL (CONT'D)

The metal door on the side of the
building. By your office.

The Pastor pulls his gaze from the sky.

PASTOR
It's locked.

More THUDS on the roof.

PAUL
Do you have the key?

The Pastor fishes around in his pocket.

PASTOR
Here. Here you go.

Paul places the key in his shirt pocket and moves away from the group to Donny.

DONNY
Maybe it will leave. Like at your house...

Scratches and thuds move toward the rear of the church's roof.

PAUL
I don't think so.

Donny looks to Paul.

DONNY
Why not?

PAUL
It wasn't hungry...and we just took the rest of its meal out of that tree.

The movement stops. You could hear a pin drop inside the church.

A PIERCING, ANIMALISTIC SHRIEK cuts through the night. Several people inside cover their ears.

EXT. CHURCH TREE LINE -- NIGHT

In the distance, the outline of the hunched creature stands atop the church roof as its SHRIEK pierces the wintry air. The powerful predator paces, searching the rooftop for a way into the structure.

INT. CHURCH -- NIGHT

THUDS and SCRATCHES continue overhead. Then stop. Silence.

Light scratches come from the shutters of a side window. Several women scream and gasp.

The shutter violently moves against the chains. Everyone presses toward the opposite side of the church.

Another SHRIEK pierces through the church. Then nothing.

An ominous silence hangs in the air. The shutter stops moving. The room stands motionless. All is still.

SLAM. The two large barricaded doors recoil from an impact.

A shockwave moves through the crowd. They all press backward.

Paul and Donny cut their way through the crowd toward the doors.

SLAM. The doors rock against the wood beam securing it.

Paul and Donny stop mere feet from the doors.

DONNY
It'll hold right?

SLAM. Another impact shakes the building.

Paul sends Donny a look that is unsure at best. He turns to the crowd as the doors are rocked once again.

The people look panicked.

PAUL
We're alright. Everything's going
to be okay.

SLAM.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Everyone to move to the center of
the room. Stay away from the
windows.

Beat.

PAUL (CONT'D)
It'll be alright.

His eyes land on Susan's. She smiles softly through the fear. She trusts him.

SLAM. Paul turns back to Donny.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Turn on the outside lights. We can
stop trying to hide.

DONNY
Think it'll scare it off?

Paul looks at the doors.

PAUL
No. I don't...

Another powerful SLAM hits the door. Each impact seems to loosen up the two reinforced doors.

Donny breathes deep before turning and jogging toward the rear of the church. Paul stands staring at the doors as Donny disappears through the crowd.

The doors give with each resounding collision. The metal brackets holding the beam in place are loosening from the door. It's weakening.

EXT. CHURCH -- NIGHT

The large lights mounted on the corners of the church flash on. They create a halo of light in the falling snow that shrouds the building.

INT. CHURCH -- CONTINUOUS

Paul still stares at the doors. Donny, Susan and Adam join him as they all gaze at the crippled barrier. Everyone in the room inches forward in amazement.

The outdoor lights glow from underneath the doors. Two thing shadows dance in the light. Its legs. They move in step with each slam to the door.

Paul feels Susan and Adam beside him. He holds his arm in front of them protectively.

SLAM. The bolts holding the brackets weaken more.

PAUL
(to Donny)
The box in the office. Go get it
ready...

Donny realizes what he wants. The gun. He backs away slowly.

DONNY
Yeah. Okay...

Paul takes Susan's hand in his. He faces her.

SUSAN
What are you doing?

PAUL

Those doors aren't going to hold.

Susan's eyes widen.

SUSAN

No! No, it'll be okay! That's what you said, remember? The doors will hold. It'll-

PAUL

I love you.

Tears roll down Susan's face. She nods understandably.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Thank you for not giving up. For being better than I've ever deserved or earned...

Susan shakes her head softly.

PAUL (CONT'D)

I had the best thing in the world and I almost threw it away. I love you...

Beat. Susan cries. Paul's eyes redden.

PAUL (CONT'D)

I'll always love you.

SUSAN

I love you too.

Donny jogs back up beside Paul.

DONNY

It's... it's ready.

Paul kneels down in front of Adam.

PAUL

Give me a hug pal.

Adam hugs Paul with a bit of confusion.

ADAM

Where are you going?

Paul pulls back.

PAUL

I've gotta take care of you and your mom, okay? Everything's gonna be fine.

Paul swallows hard.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Look after her while I'm gone,
okay?

Adam nods. Paul rises to his feet. He looks to Susan who painfully smiles through her tears.

PAUL (CONT'D)
I'm going to earn it...

She flinches and nods. She understands.

PAUL (CONT'D)
(to Donny)
Okay.

He turns and disappears into the crowd. Donny follows behind.

INT. CHURCH HALLWAY REAR -- NIGHT

Paul and Donny stand nearly in the dark against a steel door. Paul holds a rifle in his hand. He places a magazine into the gun and slides the bolt forward. Loaded.

The distant POUNDING of the doors echoes throughout.

PAUL
Don't open those doors. No matter
what you hear. Do you understand?
Unless I say it's clear.

Donny nods.

DONNY
Yeah...

PAUL
If I... if you don't hear from me,
and it's those doors don't hold...
these families need you-

DONNY
I'll fire everything I've got.

Paul nods. Donny speaks with waivered certainty.

DONNY (CONT'D)
I'll see ya in a minute boss.

Paul slings the gun over his shoulder and reaches into his shirt pocket. He removes the key and places it in the lock. Slowly he turns it. Quietly.

He eases the metal door open, preventing the wind from catching it. A gust of snow swirls inside.

EXT. CHURCH BACKYARD -- CONTINUOUS

Paul slides through the doorway. He eases it closed until it latches.

He brings the rifle around his body until it rests in his hands. His shoulder against the stone wall, he begins to slowly edge toward the rear corner of the building. The wind whips through the trees and against the church.

Paul slowly leans his head around the corner. The line of shuttered windows runs down the length of the building.

The rhythmic POUNDING of the doors from the front of the church pulses into Paul's ears.

Paul tucks the rifle under his arm and moves alongside the small church. The exterior lights of the building shine down on him as he nears the front.

SLAM. Another hit. The doors sound more and more unstable.

SLAM. Paul inches closer to the front of the building. He is mere feet from the corner.

INT. CHURCH -- CONTINUOUS

The citizens of Laytonsville stand with their eyes glued to the doors, which appear beaten and crippled.

SLAM. The doors give more and more.

Silence. The pounding stops. No more noise comes from outside.

Donny, Adam and Susan hold their breaths. They wait.

EXT. CHURCH YARD -- CONTINUOUS

Paul presses against the front corner of the building. He takes one final breath and swallows.

He swings around the corner, raising his rifle to his face.

Nothing. The bright lights shine on the empty front door. Fresh hoofprints mar the otherwise untouched snow.

Paul quickly scans the darkness with his eyes. He moves to the front door.

Deep cracks run down the two tall doors.

*

Branches and twigs snap in the trees. In the darkness just outside of the range of the bright lights. Leaves rustle.

INT. CHURCH -- CONTINUOUS

Susan and Adam stare at the door. Their faces clouded in fear.

EXT. CHURCH YARD -- CONTINUOUS

Paul takes a cautious step toward the trees. Then another. He aims the rifle into the darkness. He can see nothing but the first layer of thicket illuminated by the church lights.

FROM INSIDE THE TREES, we see Paul approaching. His rifle moves with his eyes as he searches the darkness.

He enters the woods. The darkness nearly swallows him.

TWIG SNAP. Paul swings his gun toward the sound and fires. The bullet soars into the darkness and into the night. Miss.

Paul quickly lowers his gun and pulls back the bolt. MOVEMENT. It runs through the invisible trees as Paul slams the bolt forward again.

Backlit by the lights of the church, a hunched silhouette runs behind Paul. Paul turns takes aim toward the creature.

It stands, partially behind the trunk of a tree. The edge of its brown fur glows around the silhouette from the lights behind it. Its fur is raised. It stares at Paul.

He has a shot, but the church is directly behind the creature. Hit or miss, firing might send the bullet into the building.

As if sensing Paul's reluctance, the creature charges. It crashes through the branches that hang in its way.

PAUL
(to himself)
No...

Paul barely has time to react before the creature is upon him. He attempts to roll behind a tree.

Barely moving out of the way, Paul loses the grip on his rifle. CRACK. It makes contact with the creature as it strides past. The gun tumbles into the darkness.

The rifle's gone. He stumbles around the opposite side of the tree and bolts toward the church. Branches slice across his face as he runs.

Behind him comes the sound of a raging beast. It is quickly gaining.

EXT. CHURCH YARD -- CONTINUOUS

Paul bursts out of the trees. He runs toward the church's doors with every fiber of his being.

The creature emerges from the woods and into the light. We see it clearly and directly for the first time.

Its fur is thick and dark. Its legs are strong, but narrow at the ankles. Its arms are long, hanging near its knees. Heavy claws protrude from its apelike hands. Its body is thick. Its long face snarls, revealing large, blood stained teeth. Its fierce, yellow eyes shine in the light.

It charges, back hunched, after Paul. Paul sprints across the sidewalk and reaches to his belt. His pistol.

The creature is nearly on top of him and Paul leaps toward the doors. He rotates in the air.

The creature lunges for the kill. Paul's back slams full force into the wooden doors. His pistol aims at the beast from his stomach.

The creature's claws are a fraction of an inch from sinking into Paul's flesh.

POP. A flash. A pained SHRIEK. A mass of fur soars over Paul's head as he falls to the ground. The creature's head collides with the door above him, rattling the entire church.

INT. CHURCH -- CONTINUOUS

The collision shakes the large wooden doors from the outside. Everyone in the room holds their collective breaths. No sound from outside.

EXT. CHURCH YARD -- CONTINUOUS

Paul flops onto the concrete, gun in hand. The large beast lies nearly on top of him. Its body motionless and crumpled against the doorway.

Paul breathes heavy. He stares at the monstrous animal from his contorted position on the pavement. Blood slowly pools under the creature. It lies still. Dead.

As if nature itself calms, the wind and snow begin to lessen.

Paul tosses his pistol into the dirt and lifts the creature's powerful arm off of his legs.

PAUL
(speaking to the door)
Donny.

He breathes heavily.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Open the doors...

INT. CHURCH -- CONTINUOUS

Susan exhales an emotional breath. Relief covers his face. She pulls Adam close to her side. He still looks frightened.

SUSAN
He's okay.

Donny rushes to the two large doors.

DONNY
Give me a hand here!

Another man steps from the group. He and Donny lift the weakened beam from across the crippled doors. It falls to the ground as the people slowly crowd around the exit.

Donny pulls against one of the massive doors. It GROANS open. Cold air rushes in.

The dead creature slumps onto the floor of the church. Its yellow eyes stare lifelessly across the room.

The people gasp and recoil.

Susan sees Paul. He stands on the sidewalk. Scratches and mud cover his face and arms.

EXT. CHURCH YARD -- CONTINUOUS

Susan rushes past Donny. Past the fallen creature. She runs to Paul.

They embrace. He holds her tight. Closing his eyes, he rests his face on her hair.

She pulls back. She looks him over.

SUSAN
Are you okay?

He nods.

PAUL
Yeah...

She takes his face in her hands, looking deep into his eyes.

SUSAN
Are you with me now?

He smiles.

PAUL
Yeah.

He looks to the crowd.

PAUL (CONT'D)
(to crowd)
Everything's fine.

The once violent storm now remains as nothing more than a serene snowfall.

The citizens of Laytonsville nervously make their way through the door and over the dead creature. Adam exits with Donny.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Hey buddy!

Adam runs and hugs his father.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Are you okay?

Adam still squeezes his father. He nods into his shoulder.

Paul smiles as Earl Lerner approaches him, glancing back at the lifeless animal on the ground.

EARL
Sheriff, can I talk to you?

Paul releases Adam and stands. He walks to the side with Earl. He smiles at him. Earl looks concerned

PAUL
What is it Earl?

EARL
It's just that... what we saw in that video and the pictures. And I could be wrong... but I coulda sworn what we saw was taller than this... taller than this by at least a foot.

Paul's smile fades as he looks back at the beast.

Earl walks back to the body and crouches down over it. He looks worried.

EARL (CONT'D)
I could be wrong...

Paul squints in disbelief.

ADAM
Dad.

Paul turns to Adam, who stares at the trees in fear.

SUSAN
(whispering)
Paul...

Paul turns his gaze to Susan. She stares at the crowd of people, who still stand near the door. Paul quickly follows her eyes.

The entire group stands frozen, all looking toward something near the treeline behind Paul, Susan and Adam. Donny stands in the front of the group. He swallows hard.

Earl, too, now stares at the trees.

Paul looks back to Susan and Adam as he slowly turns around, toward the direction the crowd stares.

Tall. Ferocious. A LARGER BEAST stands about twenty feet in front of Paul, Susan and Adam. Its shoulders is wider. Its head larger.

Its eyes look over the crowd. Then it sees it. The other creature lying in a heap in the church doorway. The larger beast seems to focus in on the dead one.

The beast SHRIEKS an ear piercing shriek of sorrow and anger. Its large teeth glint in the light. The crowd shakes from the sound, but no one moves.

DONNY
(whispering)
There were two...

Paul, Susan and Adam stand exposed. The rest of the crowd stands helplessly on the opposite side of the sidewalk.

Paul slowly brings his hand to his holster. Its empty. His gun lies in the dirt near the door...an eternity away.

The creature hunches forward as if about to rush.

PAUL
(whispering)
Donny...

Donny sees Paul's empty holster. Slowly he moves his hand to his. He finds it. He gently UNSNAPS his holster.

The beast instantly turns its head toward the sound.

PAUL (CONT'D)
(Whispering)
Stop!

Donny's hand freezes. The crowd of people behind him hold their collective breaths.

Again the creature turns its furious stare back to Paul. Back to Susan. Back to Adam.

Paul slowly looks behind him to his wife and child.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Step backwards slowly.

They do. They both take one painfully slow step toward the church doors.

The creature lowers its head. It snarls its teeth.

PAUL (CONT'D)
(whispering)
Stop!

Susan and Adam instantly freeze.

Paul looks back to them. Fear covers their faces. Susan's eyes show pure terror. Paul slowly turns his head back to the creature. Its fur stands on end.

Paul makes his decision.

PAUL (CONT'D)
(whispering)
Donny.

Donny turns his eyes, not his head, toward Paul.

PAUL (CONT'D)
(whispering)
When I tell you...

Donny looks down to his gun. He looks back to Paul nervously.

PAUL (CONT'D)
(yelling)
Right here!

Paul throws both arms into the air high above his head. He quickly steps to his left. Away from his family. Away from the crowd.

PAUL (CONT'D)
(screaming)
You won't hurt them!

The beast instantly bobs its head in surprise. It turns its entire attention toward Paul. It hunches its back and lowers its head.

Paul's voice cracks with emotion.

PAUL (CONT'D)
(screaming)
Come on! Right here! Right here.

Donny looks on nervously. His hand still hangs over the gun. He doesn't move an inch.

The beast emits another powerful SHRIEK. The sound cuts through the night like a knife.

The powerful animal instantly lunges forward. It moves with blinding speed.

PAUL (CONT'D)
(screaming)
ME!

Its claws slice through the air as it closes in on Paul. It bends its legs for its final attack.

PAUL (CONT'D)
(yelling)
Now!

Donny pulls his pistol from its holster. He raises it. No time to aim.

Paul closes his eyes. His arms outstretch beside him.

POP. POP. POP. Then darkness.

Paul slowly opens his eyes. The creature stands five feet in front of him. It takes a staggered step forward. It looks at Paul with an animal intensity. It grunts and exhales through its nose.

Its arms fall limp. It struggles to hold its head up. Blood gushes from its neck and ribs.

Its legs give way. It falls to the ground.

Paul lowers his arms. The beast lies on its back, staring into the night sky. It breathes heavy. Then slowly. Then not at all. Dead.

Paul turns to Adam and Susan. Tears of appreciation stream down Susan's face.

Paul walks to his family. He wraps his arms around his wife and child. Susan cries in relief. Adam buries his face into Paul's stomach and squeezes him with both arms.

Paul looks to Earl Lerner, who glances up from the second dead animal. Earl nods. That was the one.

Paul exhales a breath he's been holding for months. Standing in front of the small stone church, he holds onto his family with all of his being.

EXT. MAIN STREET -- DAWN

Laytonsville awakens as the warm sun peeks over the treetops. Yellow sunlight grows across the buildings. Cars and trucks make their way through the snow plowed street.

Storekeepers and residents shovel snow from their sidewalks. The sign on the diner door reads "OPEN."

Peaceful.

INT. FOYER -- DAWN

The Shield's large front door swings open. Paul, Susan and Adam all enter. Paul hits the light as he closes the door. He and Susan stand in the entrance.

SUSAN
(to Adam)
Get ready for bed baby.

Adam nods and begins running up the stairs. He stops.

ADAM
Are there any more monsters?

Paul smiles.

PAUL
No. Everything's okay now.

Adam seems satisfied as he turns and runs up the stairs.

Paul turns back to Susan.

PAUL (CONT'D)
You think I should go back out and
help?

SUSAN

I think the Forest Department and
National Guard can handle it from
here.

He smiles and nods. A genuine smile.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

There you are...

She smiles at him playfully.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

Mind if I stay over?

Paul raises his eyebrows and smiles.

PAUL

What you your mother think?

Susan grins.

SUSAN

Oh, she's out of town! She doesn't
have to know...

Paul laughs as he wraps his arms around Susan.

Susan rests her head on her husband's shoulder. She looks
safe. Secure. Together they look complete.

FADE OUT: