

American Bittersweet

written by Jason Fenton

BLACK SCREEN:

The placid, trancelike VOICE of CALEB GREENLEE (12).

CALEB (V.O.)
Out of the mid-wood's twilight,
Into the meadow's dawn...

OPEN ON:

EXT. FOREST - MEADOW - DAY

A picturesque golden sunrise - like out of a reverie - peers through scraggly black spruce trees, into sleepy underbrush.

A FAWN stands at the edge of a clearing, safely shielded by a dense growth of shrubs. It watches, waits.

CALEB (V.O.)
Ivory-limbed and brown-eyed,
Flashes my faun...

INT. CAR - TRAVELING - DAY

POV - CALEB'S EYES BEHIND A BLINDFOLD. The slightest blur of a visual through a dark slab of fabric only teases a location.

Long, dark shadows flit past intermittently as the vehicle purrs along. Tires rhythmically chew up pavement.

Beyond the blindfold, stifled whimpers from a petrified Caleb.

BACK TO:

EXT. FOREST - DAY

The Fawn pokes gingerly at a shrub, retracts, trots with quiet confidence through the clearing.

CALEB (V.O.)
He skips through the copses
singing, And his shadow dances
along... And I know not which I
should follow - Shadow or song...

BACK TO:

INT. CAR - TRAVELING - DAY

POV - CALEB'S EYES BEHIND A BLINDFOLD. Darker sheets of shadows envelop the sparse light visible beyond the the fabric. Sounds of twigs, loose brush, and rocks that kick up under the tires.

Beyond the blindfold, Caleb's whimpers intensify.

The vehicle slows to a complete stop.

BACK TO:

EXT. FOREST - CREEK BED - DAY

A layer of dreamlike fog wafts through the air, like a reverie.

Tucked just inside the high brush near a gurgling creek, Caleb - in camo hunting gear - stands stock-still behind the draw of a compound bow, one eye closed as he aims.

Over his shoulder is DALE GREENLEE (35) - in camo, focused and deadlocked as well; his eyes fixed on Caleb's target. They calmly recite together...

CALEB / DALE
O Hunter, snare me his shadow, O
Nightengale, catch me his
strain...

BACK TO:

EXT. WILDERNESS - DAY

POV - CALEB'S EYES BEHIND A BLINDFOLD. OFFSCREEN SOUNDS OF FOOTSTEPS that trudge across the bosky forest floor, SOUNDS of the vast, wild landscape.

Beyond the blindfold - Caleb's whimpers grow more desperate.

CALEB (V.O.)
Else moonstruck with music and
madness...

BACK TO:

EXT. FOREST - CREEK BED - DAY

A layer of dreamlike fog wafts through the air, like a reverie.

Caleb holds his draw steadily and focused, then suddenly his non-dominant eye shoots open.

CALEB (V.O.)
I track him in vain.

BACK TO:

EXT. WILDERNESS - DAY

A gloved hand grips a hunting knife, slices through a zip tie that binds a teenage child's hands.

The gloved hand slices through a second zip tie that binds another teenage child's hands.

POV - EYES BEHIND A BLINDFOLD. Whimpers as the strip of fabric loosens and is drawn away. Just as daylight is revealed--

POV - 2ND PAIR OF EYES BEHIND A BLINDFOLD. The fabric loosens, is drawn away. A reveal of thick stands of black spruce under a moody gray blanket of sky as far as can be seen.

ANGLE - ON A DIGITAL WATCH

The face reads "10:00". A gloved hand presses a button and a countdown begins - "9:59, 9:58..."

ANGLE - CALEB AND SAGE GREENLEE (13)

A high-pitched, desperate, heartbreaking cry from Caleb carries off and into the unknown as the two sprinting boys disappear past the treeline.

SAGE (PRE-LAP)
Caleb...

BACK TO:

EXT. FOREST - CREEK BED - DAY

A layer of dreamlike fog wafts through the air, like a reverie.

Behind his trembling bow, Caleb's lip quivers in doubt.

ON THE OPPOSITE CREEK BANK

Sage holds a bullseye target in front of his chest, eyes locked on his brother.

SAGE
Caleb...

BACK TO:

EXT. WILDERNESS - DAY

Caleb slumps on the forest floor, eyes closed, head bobbing.

SAGE
Caleb! Wake up!

Caleb's eyes pop open, awakened from the dream. His body snaps to attention. He locks on his big brother standing above him.

SAGE (CONT'D)
Come on, we're wasting time.
(counts)
Three twenty-three, three twenty-four...

Caleb's eyes flit. He slackens.

CALEB
I'm too tired, I just wanna sleep.

SAGE
You can't go to sleep. That's why he kept us up all night. Let's go before I lose count!
(counts)
Three twenty-eight, three twenty-nine...

CALEB
Why can't we just sleep?

SAGE
If we sleep, we die. You got it? Now come on, just a little further and then we backtrack.
(counts)
Three thirty-four, three thirty-five, three thirty-six...

Sage continues counting, slides his forearm under Caleb's arms, pulls his brother to his feet. The boys proceed side by side, deliberate in their step pattern.

DALE (PRE-LAP)
Busted.

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. WOODLANDS - DAY

Dale stands in an area choked by chaparral brush.

DALE (CONT'D)
Come on out now.

The empty, lifeless brush rustles in front of Dale. Sage and Caleb - in camo gear, face paint - emerge from concealment.

SAGE
What gave us away?

DALE
(nods toward Caleb)
Rabbit's foot chain on the belt
loop. Shiny metal objects in the
brush, you might as well be
flashing a Bat Signal.

Caleb slumps as his guilty eyes look down at the rabbit's foot.

SAGE
I told you not to wear that stupid
thing!

CALEB
It's not stupid. It's for good
luck.

SAGE
How lucky was it for the rabbit,
buttass?

DALE
Knock it off. We go again.

SAGE
Again?

DALE
You're not gonna learn unless you
learn. We go again.

BACK TO:

EXT. WILDERNESS - DAY

Sage and Caleb continue at a deliberate, side-by-side running pace on a path through surrounding backwoods growth.

SAGE
(counts)
Five twenty-two, five twenty-
three, five twenty-four...

DALE (PRE-LAP)
Code of Conduct, Article III...

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. WOODLANDS - DAY

Sage, and Caleb - camo, survival gear - huddle in the shade of a growth of balsam poplars. Dale paces in front of the boys.

DALE (CONT'D)

Sage...

SAGE

"If I am captured, I will continue to resist by all means available. I will make every effort to escape and aid others to escape."

DALE

Article II - Caleb...

Caleb inhales, summons confidence.

CALEB

"I will never surrender of my own free will... If I..."

He gathers himself, concentrates but cannot shake the fluster.

CALEB (CONT'D)

"If in command...I will never command- I will..."

Sage shakes his head. Dale fixes patiently on Caleb.

CALEB (CONT'D)

I...
(tears up)
I forget.

SAGE

(frustrated, rapid-fire)
"I will never surrender the members of my command while they still have the means to resist."

DALE

Drop and give me twenty. Let's go.

The boys drop to push-up position. Sage huffs.

DALE (CONT'D)

Problem?

SAGE
 (indicates toward Caleb)
 It's just I always get punished
 because of your mistakes.

DALE
 (glares down at boys)
 On your count.

The boys dial in, begin push-up sequence. Dale paces.

SAGE / CALEB
 One...two...

DALE
 (through Sage/Caleb's count)
 Your survival depends on one
 another. If one of you slips, you
 both fall. If you're not prepared
 to survive as much as those who
 are willing to take you out, you
 will not survive.
 (kneels next to Caleb)
 Choose. To. Survive.

BACK TO:

EXT. WILDERNESS - DAY

Sage and Caleb amble side-by-side through the woody terrain.

SAGE
 Five ninety-eight, five ninety-
 nine, six hundred. Okay, stop.

The boys huff and puff during their well-earned pause. Caleb hunches over, still exhausted. Sage is dialed in. Gears turn.

SAGE (CONT'D)
 Okay. Ten minutes, that's six
 hundred seconds. He's just
 starting now. At about three miles
 an hour, we're maybe half a mile,
 maybe eight hundred meters ahead
 of him. We double back a hundred
 and twenty steps to the jump-off
 point, we're still way ahead when
 he bypasses us.

CALEB
 What if it doesn't work? What if
 he knows a faster way and catches
 us? What if we mess up?

SAGE

We won't mess up. We do not mess up.

A distant rumble in the graying sky. Sage looks up, scans.

SAGE (CONT'D)

Come on. Storm's coming. If it hits by the time we get to the jump-off, the wind and rain can help hide our tracks. Let's go.

He offers Caleb an arm, helps his brother to his feet.

Caleb reaches into the hand pocket of his coat, pulls out his lucky rabbit's foot, rubs it, stuffs it back into his pocket.

Sage shakes his head, but no time to gripe. The boys steady, place their footprints exactly inside the prints on the path.

SAGE

Ready?

Caleb nods. Together, side-by-side, they step backward directly into the tracks they made walking forward.

SAGE

One...two...three...

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. GREENLEE HOME - GARAGE - DAY

A survivalists's space - well-accoutered with tools, weapons, emergency/medical supplies. Sage leans over a sink.

DALE

Give it here.

Sage turns to Dale. A towel drops from his hand as he offers Dale his palm. Dale snatches Sage's wrist, pulls the boy's hand closer to reveal a nasty slice wound across the palm.

Caleb stands at the garage entrance, watches; skittish eyes.

Dale holds a flask over Sage's wound, douses it with alcohol. Sage cringes, pulls away, huffs in reaction to the sting.

DALE (CONT'D)

That sting? It's a reminder of how a ground mover is supposed to enter deep ditches - which is how?

SAGE
Feet first.

DALE
Why?

SAGE
To avoid injury.

Dale scowls at Sage, drives the message home. Sage grits his teeth, kneels to the ground in front of Dale, assumes a one-armed push-up position with his unscathed hand.

DALE
On your feet.
(off Sage's confused look)
You've already been punished for
your lapse in judgement.

Sage disguises his relief, rises, walks past Dale toward Caleb.

DALE (CONT'D)
Caleb.

Sage stops dead in his tracks. Dale turns toward the boys, locks on Caleb.

Sage and Caleb exchange unrestful looks. Caleb walks past Sage, stops in front of Dale. Sage backs into the doorway, starts to turn away.

DALE (CONT'D)
(to Sage)
Where are you going?

Sage freezes, turns in dread back toward Dale.

DALE (CONT'D)
A leader needs to learn that a
lapse in judgment can affect *his*
chances of survival...

Dale raises a swift backhand to Caleb's cheek. Caleb's head jolts sideways as he squeals. Sage blenches.

DALE (CONT'D)
and the survival of his team.

Dale blasts Caleb's opposite cheek. His face swells red, tears roll to his chin. He puffs, tries to look brave in the face of his father, though it's clear he cannot take much more.

ANGLE ON SAGE

He winces, recoils at an OFFSCREEN SLAP and WAIL.

BACK TO:

EXT. WILDERNESS - DAY

Sage and Caleb continue the backward path into their old footprints, Sage clearly being more sure-footed.

SAGE
forty-eight, forty-nine...

On the down step, Caleb nearly stumbles to the ground. Sage yanks Caleb's arm, forces him upright.

SAGE (CONT'D)
Come on, Caleb! We have to hit every step exact, or it won't work!

CALEB
(through fatigue)
It might not work anyway.

SAGE
It has to. You just gotta trust me. We're almost there, now come on!

Sage braces himself and his brother, exhales.

SAGE
(nods to Caleb)
Ready?

Both boys lift a foot backward into an old footprint, continue the backward trek.

SAGE
(rough estimate count)
fifty-eight, fifty-nine..

PRE-LAP - A DISTANT COYOTE HOWL

CALEB (PRE-LAP)
Sage?...

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. CAMPING TENT - NIGHT

A flashlight beam illuminates a canvas roof. A second flashlight ticks on, its beam shines alongside the first.

Sage and Caleb lie side-by-side in sleeping bags, backpacking and survival equipment stored inside the space along with them.

SAGE

Go back to sleep. It's just a coyote, and we have plenty of ammo.

Caleb stares up at the tent roof, seemingly past it.

CALEB

I don't care about the stupid coyote.

SAGE

Then what is it? I was having a really good dream.

CALEB

Do you think Mom wished she never married Dad?

SAGE

(scoffs)

Why would she wish that, genius, if there's no Dad, there's no "us". Don't you know anything about anything?

CALEB

Then why would she just leave?

SAGE

She didn't just leave. She was driving to Washington DC to talk to the politicians about helping to fix Dad after the war mixed up his brain. And she would've come back if that drunk guy in that truck didn't kill her.

CALEB

Dad said at least she didn't have to live to see the world crumble.

SAGE

Well sometimes grownups say dumb things. Even Dad.

Sage cuts his flashlight, rolls on his side.

SAGE (CONT'D)
Go back to sleep, dipwad.

Caleb ruminates, eyes still fixed past the lighted tent roof.

CALEB
Sage?...

SAGE
(opens eyes, puffs)
What?

CALEB
Do you think the world will
crumble?

SAGE
Anything that gets built can
crumble.

CALEB
What do we do when that happens?

SAGE
We survive the crumble.

CALEB
yeah...
And then?...

BACK TO:

EXT. WILDERNESS - DAY

The boys step backward into their old footprints. Their path is near a large, rotting log that lies between them and acres of bushy, tree-dotted forest.

SAGE
(through labored breathing)
One hundred eighteen, one hundred
nineteen, one twenty.

Sage grabs Caleb's shoulder. The boys halt in their tracks.

SAGE (CONT'D)
Okay, this is the jump-off point.
Ready?

CALEB
Uh-huh.

SAGE
 Alright. Just like we planned.
 Careful, we got one shot at this,
 Caleb.

CALEB
 Got it.

Sage surveys the acreage just off to his side, beyond the log. He nods after he determines a workable point of entry.

The boys lock eyes. Sage nods.

SAGE / CALEB
 One...two...three.

On three, Caleb gingerly lifts a foot out of his footprint, throws his arm around Sage's shoulder, steadies his leg as Sage cradles Caleb's leg just under the knee and supports it in the air. Caleb lifts his other foot out in the same fashion.

Sage holds Caleb in his arms, cradles both of Caleb's legs under the knees. Sage looks toward the acreage past the fallen log, then back to Caleb.

SAGE
 Ready?
 (off Caleb's nod)
 One...two...three.

On three, Sage tosses Caleb over the fallen log where he lands effortlessly into a dirt patch amidst the surrounding brush. He smiles, gives his big brother a thumbs up.

Sage nods, steadies, lifts a foot out of his print. He balances, stretches his hoisted leg toward the log, carefully leaps over it and into the dirt patch alongside Caleb.

Sage's hands sweep underneath a nearby bush until he snatches a loose branch with leaves that fan out like a peacock's tail. His look pans their surroundings. He locks on something nearby.

SAGE (CONT'D)
 (indicates with nod)
 See the beehives on those trees?
 (off Caleb's nod)
 Dad says bees never go far from
 water. If we follow where they're
 going, we'll probably hit a stream
 and can cover our tracks.

Caleb nods. *Good thinking.*

SAGE (CONT'D)
 Okay. Let's go.

The boys rise and advance into the bushy, tree-dotted acreage. Sage drags the loose branch behind them in an effort to conceal their fresh tracks.

PRE-LAP - THE SOUND OF WHIZZING, ROTATING METAL, THEN A CLICK

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. GREENLEE HOME - LIVING ROOM / KITCHEN NOOK - DAY

Sage stands in the middle of the room, his foreboding gaze trained OFFSCREEN to the source of the sounds. He listens.

OFFSCREEN - THE WHIZ OF ROTATING METAL, THEN A CLICK

Sage takes slow, apprehensive steps toward the sounds. He crosses the living room, moves toward an archway that leads to a kitchen nook.

OFFSCREEN - THE WHIZ OF ROTATING METAL, THEN A CLICK

Sage's brow furrows, his jaw clenches. He steps slowly forward.

SAGE'S POV

as he crosses the threshold of the archway into the--

KITCHEN NOOK

Dale is seated at a dining table, his back toward Sage.

OFFSCREEN - THE WHIZ OF ROTATING METAL, THEN A CLICK

SAGE

pauses just past the kitchen nook entrance.

SAGE

Dad?...

No response. The boy's anxious eyes take in the scene. He studies Dale, then his eyes fall on--

OPEN ENVELOPES STREWN ON THE KITCHEN FLOOR AT DALE'S FEET

Three or four of them torn open, all addressed to Dale Greenlee. The sender address - Department of Veterans Affairs.

SAGE

Cautious steps toward Dale.

OFFSCREEN - THE WHIZ OF ROTATING METAL

SAGE'S POV

moving forward. Dale comes into full view. He holds a revolver. Its chamber spins, then slows, then halts.

Dale looks at Sage. His thousand-yard stare locks on the boy.

SAGE

gauges his father, gulps. The boy's look pans to the far end of the dining table, where he sees--

A FIVE-GALLON METAL GAS CAN

on the dining table. Underneath the can, the letters from the envelopes on the floor.

A closer look reveals glimpses of the correspondence - "NOTICE OF DISAGREEMENT"... "NO EVIDENCE THAT POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER IS ROOTED IN YOUR SERVICE RECORD"... "...DECISION THAT YOUR APPEAL HAS BEEN DENIED"...

Sage's eyes widen, his chest heaves. His look shifts to Dale.

Dale stares through Sage. He slowly lifts the revolver's business end upward - between him and the gas can; maybe toward his chin...maybe toward Sage...

Sage heaves, his jaw clenches, struggles to keep a brave face.

Dale slowly lowers his aim toward the gas can, eyes still locked on Sage. He squeezes the trigger. The hammer clicks.

BACK TO:

EXT. WILDERNESS - A STREAM - DAY

The boys pant and slosh through a shallow current of water at a quickened pace. Sage leads.

SAGE

Keep going. If we're lucky, this leads to a town, or somebody's farm where we can get help.

CALEB

If not?...

SAGE

Just trust me. Keep going.

Sage's pant leg brushes a branch from a log jutting out of the water. The pants rip and catch on the branch. He halts.

Caleb puffs, continues to run a few paces past Sage before he finally registers what happened. As he looks back at his brother, Caleb trips over a boulder that parts a rapid in the creek. He falls forward, lands face-first into the water.

Caleb lifts his face out of the murk, but looks up to see a pair of boot-laced legs standing right in front of him. He shrieks in horror.

Sage looks up from his pant leg. His eyes land on the gloved stranger - MICHAEL TOLBERT (45) - hunting gear, long-range rifle. He glares, tosses an object in front of Caleb--

CALEB'S LUCKY RABBIT FOOT

plops into the water, bobs at his feet, drifts in the current.

Sage sees the rabbit's foot, shuts his eyes in disappointment.

Caleb looks down at the rabbit's foot, sobs.

Sage kneels in the shallow water behind his brother. He eyes Michael with caution; no false moves.

SAGE

Please...

Michael grips the rifle, undeterred.

CALEB

(through tears)

You don't have to do this.

Michael passes the rifle to one hand, unzips his coat with the other, reaches for an inside pocket, retrieves an item.

The boys are shown the item.

Their expressions shift. Caleb turns to Sage. The boys share a look, then shift back to Michael and the item.

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. WILDERNESS - DAY

A Brown Centipede crawls around the insides of an empty glass preserve jar, air holes punched through the lid.

HOLDEN TOLBERT (11) holds the jar in front of his face, gazes admiringly at the centipede.

Sage and Caleb appear directly behind Holden. They stand side-by-side, look on with derisive faces.

SAGE

Hey, kid...

Holden turns to the boys, surprised by their presence.

SAGE (CONT'D)

You like playing with insects?

HOLDEN

It's actually a predatory arthropod. *Lithobius forficatus*; commonly known as the Brown Centipede. They're not so hard to find, but really hard to catch 'cause they run for cover very quickly once they're revealed.

CALEB

(extends arms to Holden)

Can we hold it?

HOLDEN

Sure. Just be super careful.

Holden hands the jar to Caleb. Caleb grins at Sage, grips the jar for a better look. Sage leans in, squints at the centipede.

SAGE

Wow, that is one ugly fuckin' bug.

HOLDEN

(shrugs)

Your opinion. I think they're kinda cool, actually.

(thumb to chest)

I'm Holden.

SAGE

If you had to eat it to survive, do you think you could do it... 'Holden'?

HOLDEN

I dunno. You can't eat 'em raw, though. You have to smoosh 'em into a powder or they're toxic to humans.

SAGE

(scoffs, extends arms to Caleb)

Give it here.

Caleb smirks, hands the jar to Sage. Sage winks at Caleb, extends the jar toward Holden. Just as Holden reaches for it, Sage feigns losing his balance and his grip.

SAGE

Whoa...whoawhoawhoa!

Holden gasps as Sage play-topples, fumbles with the jar. Just before the jar hits the ground, Caleb kneels and scoops it into his hands. Holden exhales, relieved. Sage and Caleb chuckle.

CALEB

Just kiddin'. Here ya go.

Caleb tosses the jar at Holden's chest, but Holden is taken by surprise and yelps. The jar thuds against his chest, falls to the ground where it shatters on some loose rocks.

Holden looks on, mouth agape. The centipede scatters away before Holden can react. Sage and Caleb stifle cackles.

SAGE

(feigns contrition)

You're right. He got away. Fast little fuckers.

Deflated, Holden stares at the broken glass. The brothers sneak a smirk. Sage nudges Caleb with his elbow.

SAGE(CONT'D)

Hey, uhh, Holden, maybe someday after school we'll take you hunting for a new centipede. 'Kay?

Still fixated on the broken glass, Holden offers a weak nod. The boys grin, walk away.

CALEB

See ya in school..."Holden".

Holden is left alone, crestfallen.

EXT. RURAL HIGHWAY - BUS STOP - DAY

A school bus halts along the road shoulder. Its doors hiss open and closed. The bus rumbles down the highway. Holden stands on the shoulder, totes a backpack.

He pauses, surveys all directions before he determines it is safe to walk toward an intersecting road choked by woodlands, where houses are seen in the distance. He moves cautiously, as if looking out for something or someone.

ALONG THE INTERSECTING RURAL ROAD - MOMENTS LATER

Holden paces timidly, preoccupied with his overly quiet surroundings. He tries to tame his breathing; a light sigh of relief as he proceeds without incident.

Then, several yards behind him, from out of a stand of trees, Sage and Caleb emerge. Both don tactical gear.

SAGE
(calls out)
Hey, Holden.

Holden blanches, freezes, turns to the voice.

SAGE
Time to play centipede again.

Holden shoots a helpless look toward the brothers.

EXT. WILDERNESS - DAY

Rapid footsteps squash the forest floor. Quick panic breaths.

Holden stumbles his way aimlessly through the woodlands; quick glances over his shoulder, from left to right. He trembles with a sense of impending doom.

SAGE (O.S. REVERB)
Ohhhh Hollllll-dennnn! Tiiiiime's
uuuuuup!...

Holden winces, defeated. He finds himself cornered by a stand of trees and a cliff edge. He turns around, squats, cowers on the wilderness floor.

Sage and Caleb emerge just behind Holden, toting hunting rifles. Chuckles as they approach.

CALEB
You're dead again, Holden.

SAGE
Jeez you suck at this. I thought centipedes ran for cover quickly once they're revealed.

CALEB
You obviously ain't no centipede.
You'll never survive out here.

Holden's look drops to the ground. He stiffens. The brothers halt in front of him. Sage raises the butt of his rifle barrel, over Holden's head. Holden whimpers, flinches. Sage retracts.

SAGE

Nah. Too easy.

Holden looks up. A length of nylon utility rope slaps against his face. He recoils.

CALEB

No fun just squashing a centipede.
We'd rather tie you up and roast
you like a wild pig.

Holden quavers. The boys laugh.

INT. TOLBERT HOME - BARN DOOR GARAGE - DAY

Holden leans over a workshop table, labels insect specimens. He jots details down on a piece of paper inside a binder notebook.

OFFSCREEN - KNOCKS ON A WINDOW

Holden looks to the sound; an ominous flush across his face.

OFFSCREEN - KNOCKS ON A WINDOW. Slower, foreboding.

Holden gulps, considers. He exhales, tears a plain sheet of paper from his notebook, writes hastily on the sheet.

EXT. WILDERNESS - DAY

Holden whimpers as he marches reluctantly through the woodlands. Sage and Caleb follow closely behind, tote hunting rifles; smirks on their faces. They reach a cliff area where the trail drops off high above a stream.

SAGE

Sooo pathetic, Holden. You're
never gonna learn until you learn.
(after a few more paces)
Stop here. Turn around.

Holden complies. Caleb throws a length of nylon utility rope at Holden. Holden flinches, sinks.

CALEB

Time to tie you up and roast you
like a wild pig again.

Holden snuffles, shakes his head.

HOLDEN

Please. No more. I don't wanna
play this anymore.

SAGE
 (undaunted)
 Who's playing.
 (raises rifle)
 Time to roast, piggy piggy.

Holden stands his ground but shivers in fear.

HOLDEN
 Come on, you guys. Please. I
 just wanna be friends.

CALEB
 (raises rifle)
 You heard him, piggy.

Holden trembles, chokes on tears.

HOLDEN
 No, I can't. I said I don't want
 to...

Holden backs away, unaware as he nears the cliff's edge. Sage notices. His mischievous grin shifts to concern.

SAGE
 Hey...Hey, Holden...

Holden quavers, backs up closer and closer to the edge. His pleas drown out Sage's voice.

HOLDEN
 Please, you guys, no more. I don't
 want to. I don't want to.

CALEB
 Holden, lookout, you're gonna-

HOLDEN
 No more, I said. No mo-

On a down step, Holden slips on loose dirt at the cliff's edge. He gasps, fights for balance. The brothers look on, wide-eyed, too shocked to react in time.

Holden shrieks. His legs upend, he bounces against the edge, claws for a grip but cannot clamp on. He shoots rapidly downward. A crescendoing scream finally ends with a distant thud, followed by silence, shock, disbelief.

Sage and Caleb peer over the cliff edge, downward toward--

THE STREAM

Holden's dead body lies on the bank, impaled by a sharp tree branch. His lifeless eyes seemingly judge the brothers.

Sage and Caleb look at each other. *What have we done!*

PRE-LAP - THE DYING WHINE OF A POLICE CAR SIREN

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. GREENLEE HOME - DAY

Sage and Caleb sit on front porch steps, hangdog looks.

A police patrol car is parked on the edge of the property, which borders a two-lane highway.

A uniformed POLICE OFFICER (CLYDE) is flanked by NEIGHBORS who look on and whisper as MR. JENSON (50s) has the officer's ear.

MR. JENSON

It's all a misunderstanding,
Clyde. Dale's had a rough ride
these last years - losing his wife
and all - and he just every now
and then needs to blow off steam.

(gestures to onlookers)

These busybody folks, they're new
in town. They don't understand.
Dale'll lose his temper and he'll
get to yelling' at his boys, maybe
frighten 'em a bit, but you and I
know Ol' Dale, he's not a harm to
anybody.

(gestures to Sage and Caleb)

He's trying to raise them boys,
and them are good boys, you see?

POLICE OFFICER

I understand, Mr. Jenson, but if
we get a phone call from the
neighbors on suspicion of
immediate child endangerment, we
gotta check it out, no matter how
well we might know the parties
involved. I'm sure you're right;
Dale's out blowin' off steam and
he'll be home in time for supper.
We'll just wrap things up here,
and let everyone get back to their
business.

ON THE PORCH STEPS

Sage and Caleb look past the hectic scene outside their home, toward the woods on the other side of the road--

IN THE ROADSIDE WOODS, IN THE DISTANCE

Dale appears from behind a stand of brush. He rises from a military crawl, donned in old fatigues and toting a rucksack, face covered in camo paint. He remains strategically hidden while he observes the scene outside the house.

ON THE PORCH STEPS

Sage and Caleb eye Dale with solemn looks.

INT. GREENLEE HOME - LIVING ROOM / KITCHEN - NIGHT

ON A TELEVISION - shots of missing person posters with Holden's picture and description, POLICE OFFICIALS huddle and discuss strategy, SEARCH PARTY huddled and strategizing.

TV NEWS REPORTER (V.O.)

Still no new clues in the search for a Scowa County boy who went missing nearly a month and a half ago. 11-year-old Holden Tolbert disappeared on a school day afternoon when his father Michael arrived home from work and failed to locate his son on or near his property. Authorities cannot confirm, but they suspect that...

Report continues as--

AT THE KITCHEN TABLE, SAGE AND CALEB

sit across from each other, concerned looks.

CALEB

What do we do if they find where we buried him?

SAGE

(emphatic)

They'll never find him, because we covered our tracks, and we're never going to tell anyone.

Caleb studies Sage. *Is he sure?*

CALEB

We could turn ourselves in. It was just an accident.

SAGE (CONT'D)

(stern)

"I will never surrender the members of my command while they still have the means to resist."

Caleb inhales. He understands.

BACK TO:

EXT. WILDERNESS - A STREAM - DAY

ANGLE BEHIND MICHAEL

Stands in front of Sage and Caleb - rifle in one hand. The boys kneel in the water. Michael holds a sheet of paper up for them to read. Their eyes fall on the page.

Caleb turns to look at Sage. Sage gulps, heaves.

MICHAEL

Holds the sheet of paper. It reads - "IF ANYTHING HAPPENS TO ME, SAGE AND CALEB GREENLEE DID IT"

PRE-LAP - KNOCKS ON A WINDOW

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. TOLBERT HOME - BARN DOOR GARAGE - DAY

Holden gulps, considers. He exhales, tears a plain sheet of paper from his notebook, writes hastily on the sheet.

He stuffs the sheet in a sleeve inside the notebook.

THE SHEET OF PAPER

In large letters - "IF ANYTHING HAPPENS TO ME, SAGE AND CALEB GREENLEE DID IT"

Parts of the letter in smaller text - "THOUGHT THEY WERE FRIENDS"... "FORCE ME TO PLAY A HUNTING GAME"... "SO SCARED I HOPE THEY DON'T KILL ME"

HOLDEN

closes the notebook, trepidatious steps toward the garage door.

PRE-LAP - AN ANSWERING MACHINE BEEPS

INT. TOLBERT HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Michael sits in a reclining chair in front of a t.v. screen; the same news report witnessed by Sage and Caleb. Michael lowers the volume as a phone message plays.

DETECTIVE COLLINS (V.O. FILTERED)

Mr. Tolbert, this is Detective Collins, following up on your son's missing persons case. We've hit a bit of a wall as far as leads are concerned, so if you have new information that might help us at all, please give me a call at the number on my card. Thank You, sir.

Michael stares down at--

A BUSINESS CARD

with the detective's contact information. Michael's hand and the card shift OUT OF FRAME, as he sets the card aside.

On his lap, Holden's notebook. Michael opens the notebook, reveals a sheet of paper tucked in a sleeve inside. He holds up the paper, which shows the lines in large text - "IF ANYTHING HAPPENS TO ME, SAGE AND CALEB GREENLEE DID IT"

MICHAEL

studies the page, gears turning.

CUT TO:

INT. MICHAEL TOLBERT'S CAR - DAY

Caleb whimpers. He and Sage are cramped in the back seat, hands are zip-tied, blindfolds dangle from their necks.

Michael sits in the driver's seat, scowls at the boys.

CALEB

Why are you doing this to us?

Michael unzips his jacket, reaches for an inside pocket, retrieves the sheet of paper, shows it to the boys - "IF ANYTHING HAPPENS TO ME, SAGE AND CALEB GREENLEE DID IT"

The boys gulp, their hearts sink.

MICHAEL

Because you know what you did...

(MORE)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
 And now you're going to tell me
 everything.

BACK TO:

EXT. WILDERNESS - A STREAM - DAY

Michael holds the item - the sheet of paper - in front of the brothers, as a reminder. He glares at the boys; resolute eyes.

Caleb winces. He is ready to crack.

CALEB
 Sage...

SAGE
 Shut up, Caleb!

Michael eyes the brazen Sage.

SAGE
 (matches Michael's glare)
 He can't kill us. We're the only
 ones who know everything...
 (raised eyebrows; mocks)
 or maybe we don't know anything.

Michael's jaw clenches.

SAGE (CONT'D)
 And if he kills us...he'll never
 know.

Michael scowls at Sage.

SAGE
 (emphatic, to Michael)
 "If I am captured, I will continue
 to resist by all means available."

Michael pockets the sheet of paper, hoists the rifle, aims at Caleb, cocks the hammer. He looks at Sage - *your move, kid.*

Tense pause. Sage calls what he thinks is Michael's bluff.

SAGE (CONT'D)
 "I will make every effort to
 escape..."

Michael's rifle barrel locks on Caleb, aims between his eyes.

SAGE (CONT'D)
 "and aid others to escape."

Sage scoops water into his hands, launches it with force into Michael's face. Michael flinches, steps back. Sage rushes Michael, clamps onto the rifle, drives Michael backward while they fight for control of the weapon.

SAGE
Run, Caleb!

Caleb begins to rise from his knees.

Michael yanks the rifle away from Sage's grip. The momentum causes both to lose footing and fall into the stream. On their way down - A CRACK FROM THE RIFLE; A SHOT GOES OFF.

Michael - on his back in the water - twists to his side, cradles the rifle from Sage. Sage is first to scramble to his feet, decides to abandon the fight for the rifle. Instead, he stomps through the water, away from Michael.

Michael extends the rifle in front of Sage's stride, trips him up and into the stream face-first. Sage bounces right back up.

SAGE
(turns to Caleb behind him)
Caleb, run!

Something bumps Sage's legs. He lurches forward, almost loses his balance. He halts, looks down to see--

CALEB'S DEAD BODY

face down, leaking a trail of blood, bobbing at Sage's ankles.

Sage eyes the body. His face drops, lip quivers, eyes tear up.

CALEB'S DEAD BODY

drifts through the water at Sage's feet, then is caught by the current. It carries him further downstream and away from Sage.

Michael rises, his grip still on the rifle. He watches the body float away. His look shifts toward Sage.

Sage trembles, turns to face Michael.

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. GREENLEE HOME - DUSK

Seen from the highway shoulder, a warm light from a living room window illuminates Sage and Caleb. They stand side by side, look toward the road.

IN THE FOREGROUND - DALE ENTERS FRAME. He emerges from the shoulder brush; military fatigues, tactical gear. He walks across the highway, toward home and his boys.

In the distance, Sage and Caleb walk away from the frame of the window. The front door opens. The boys walk outside, onto the porch, halt at the bottom of the porch steps to wait for Dale.

BACK TO:

EXT. WILDERNESS - A STREAM - DAY

Michael and Sage face one another in the middle of the current, separated by the rifle in Michael's hands.

Sage locks on Michael - heartbroken, regretful, but resigned to his fate, whatever that may be.

Michael locks on Sage - heartbroken, regretful, but he must make a choice, whichever it may be.

CUT TO BLACK:

A SINGLE RIFLE BLAST

THE END