

B l A C K O A K : The Blair witch

written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. BURKITTSVILLE WOODS - WINTER - 1785 - DUSK

Trees like ribs against a frozen sky. The wind bites. Snow hisses across the ground.

A SMALL PROCESSION trudges through the white: TEN TOWNSFOLK with torches, led by PASTOR BENJAMIN ARCHER (50s, rigid, hawk-eyed). Tied to a sled: ELLY KEDWARD (mid-40s, Irish immigrant; sinew, frost, stubborn flame).

They stop at a black-gnarled OAK whose roots tangle above earth like veins.

Archer faces Elly. He clutches a Bible and a leather strap.

ARCHER

Elly Kedward. You stand condemned
of witchcraft, of bleeding
children, of consorting with the
Adversary. By consensus of the
parish, you are banished to perish
beyond our bounds.

Elly lifts her chin. Steam coils from her breath.

ELLY (in Gaelic; subtitled)

The woods remember. The woods return.

A murmur. Witch's tongue. A MOTHER hides her daughter's eyes.

ARCHER (CONT'D)

Bind her.

They lash Elly upright to the trunk. Her wrists chafe. Blood beads and freezes.

ELLY (Gaelic; subtitled)

Benjamin Archer... I know your dreams. I know your hunger.

The wind rises, a slow, assembled howl. Snow eddies in a ring. Torches gutter.

Archer hardens. He nods. The townsfolk step back, abandoning her to the deepening dusk.

Elly's eyes find the dark between the trees — and hold.

SMASH TO BLACK.

TITLE CARD: BLACK OAK:THE BLAIR WITCH

CUT TO:

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - MARYLAND - PRESENT DAY - NIGHT

A quiet cul-de-sac under a low, heavy sky. Windows glow warm.
A distant rumble of thunder.

INT. RACHEL MARLOWE'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Books and colonial records sprawl across a table like a ritual spread. A laptop glows with scanned diary pages.

RACHEL MARLOWE (32, historian; sharp-eyed, sleep-starved capable) types notes. A mug of tea has gone cold.

On-screen: a DIARY, dated 1785. Margins clawed with coordinates. A phrase underlined thrice: "black tree by Tappy East Creek."

From the living room: the rapid gunfire puh-puh-puh of a video game.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

DYLAN (15, Rachel's son; compassionate, sarcastic when bored) thumbs a controller, eyes on zombies. Headphones around his neck rather than on.

Rachel leans on the doorway.

RACHEL

You promised the headphones would actually be on.

DYLAN

I promised to try. I'm trying adjacent.

She almost smiles. He pauses the game, reads her face.

DYLAN (CONT'D)

Found any new witches?

RACHEL

Maybe the witch. The actual woman behind the stories. The diaries are cleaner than the town records — less... deliberate forgetting.

Her phone buzzes. A text pops from TOM REYES: Storm's moving east. You still coming to the trailhead?
She replies: Wouldn't miss it.

DYLAN
You're still going out there
tomorrow? In a storm?

RACHEL
I have a grant deadline. And I
don't get to choose the weather.

He weighs that. Nods. Wants to say be careful. Doesn't.

DYLAN
Can I crash at Dad's instead of
here, then?

A micro-freeze. Rachel hides the sting.

RACHEL
Sure. Text me when you get there.

He nods. Unpauses. The game's audio snarls.

CUT TO:

EXT. BURKITTSVILLE - TOWN SQUARE - 1785 - NIGHT

Lanterns swing in a knife-cold wind. The church stands black against the sky.

TOWNSFOLK cluster, whispering. MERCY COLLINS (8) clutches a rag doll. RUTH ARCHER (40s, Archer's wife; pallid resolve) holds Mercy close — not hers, but protective.

A FARMER stumbles in, hatless, eyes like spilled milk.

FARMER
Jonathan's boy went to fetch
firewood before dark. He never came
back. There's— (chokes) There's
circles in the snow. No tracks out.

Murmurs cross themselves. Archer stands in the church doorway, framed like a gallows.

ARCHER
Return to your homes. Lock your
doors. I shall pray.

SILAS COLDWATER (30s, hunter) bristles.

SILAS
Prayer's fine, Pastor. But if
Kedward's not dead, let's end it
proper.

Archer's jaw tightens.

ARCHER
She is banished, not buried. The
Lord will judge.

Ruth watches her husband. Sees fatigue, something gnawing him
from inside.

CUT TO:

EXT. BLACK HILLS - TRAILHEAD - PRESENT DAY - MORNING

Clouds crowd low. Rain spits. A ranger pickup idles.

TOM REYES (38; park ranger, former military; practical
warmth) unfurls a laminated map as Rachel arrives with a
backpack and a borrowed trekking pole.

They shake hands — two people who like clean boundaries.

TOM
You're Rachel.

RACHEL
And you're the only ranger who
returns emails.

TOM
That's because no one else wants to
get yelled at by chat boards if
another viral missing-person
podcast starts up.

She smirks. He taps the map.

TOM (CONT'D)
The creek swells quick in storms.
Stay on my left when we cross. If
you hear anything — water, other
hikers — you call it. Cell coverage
dies after mile two.

RACHEL
I'm not here to get lost. I'm here
to get proof.

He eyes her gear. Approves.

TOM
Good. Because the woods have
opinions about both.

CUT TO:

EXT. WOODS - 1785 - PRE-DAWN

Archer jolts awake — outside, beneath the black oak. Frost
webs his lashes. He's alone, in shirtsleeves.

His breath fogs. He looks around, confused — how did he get
here?

From the tree's hollow, a faint humming. A woman's tune, old
and aching.

Archer staggers back, clutching his Bible.

ELLY (O.S.) (Gaelic; subtitled, a whisper behind him)
Benjamin.

He wheels — nothing. Only his own footprints... except they
trail into a ring and stop.

CUT TO:

EXT. BLACK HILLS - TRAIL - PRESENT DAY - DAY

Rain thickens. The forest deepens — older, draped in moss,
printless.

Rachel follows Tom. She glances at a handheld GPS: the margin
coordinates from 1785 tick toward zero.

They crest a small rise — and freeze.

WIDE CLEARING hung with dozens of rough STICK FIGURES, lashed
from fresh twigs and frayed cord. They creak softly in the
rain.

Tom's face closes. He sweeps his flashlight though it's
daytime.

TOM
These weren't here last week.

Rachel is already photographing, breathing shallow.

RACHEL

They're arranged by weight. Small
to large. That's deliberate. It's—
it's a language.

She steps into the clearing's center — a shallow depression.
The mud is darker there. She kneels, brushes back wet leaves.

A shard of something blond and coarse: braided hair,
lacquered by time.

RACHEL (CONT'D)

Jesus.

TOM

Don't touch it.

She doesn't. Her eyes, though, are fire.

RACHEL

This matches the diary. "Hair
offerings." 1785. If we can prove
these aren't modern—

From deep in the brush — a crack. Not wind. A footfall?

Tom turns. Stillness returns, heavy as a held breath.

TOM

We're done here for today.

RACHEL

I just need to—

TOM

We're done. Storm's going to flood
the creek.

He's calm but final. She swallows; nods, hides frustration.

As they leave the clearing, one hung figure spins against the
rain. It turns to face Rachel.

CUT TO:

INT. RACHEL'S HOUSE - DYLAN'S ROOM - AFTERNOON

Dylan shoves clothes into a duffel. He pauses — frowns.

On his window, smeared in condensation, a small stick figure
shape. Childish, crude. He wipes the glass with his sleeve.
The shape smears but doesn't vanish. It's oily, like balm.

He checks the lock. Shivers.

Phone buzz: a text from Dad: Running late. Can you uber over?

Dylan thumbs a reply, glances back at the window. The smeared figure has shifted, its "arms" raised.

CUT TO:

EXT. WOODS - 1785 - DUSK

MERCY COLLINS trudges through snow, chased by her rag doll's limp arm dragging. Her lips are blue. Her breath is shallow.

She follows a BLUE-GLASS LANTERN swaying in the distance - a woman's silhouette holds it. It stops by a tree, waits. Mercy smiles, relieved, trusting.

Ruth bursts from the other direction, breathless, grabs Mercy up.

RUTH

Mercy! No- no, love, look at me.

Mercy screams at Ruth, not at the woods.

MERCY

She said come to the tree! She said
you're not my mother!

Ruth looks - the silhouette is gone. Only deepening dusk.

CUT TO:

INT. BURKITTSVILLE CHURCH - 1785 - NIGHT

Candles gutter. Archer preaches to a room of exhausted faces.

ARCHER

Temptation walks in the likeness of
a neighbor. It speaks with a
mother's tongue. It is a test. You
must not follow when it calls-

A cold draft snakes the aisle. Candles dim. A STICK FIGURE hangs above the altar, unnoticed, its shadow spidering across the wall.

Ruth's eyes track the rafters. She shivers.

CUT TO:

INT. RANGER STATION - PRESENT DAY - EVENING

Tom logs a "site disturbance" report. Rachel studies a laminated topo map, drawing a triangle between the clearing, the creek, and an old survey marker.

RACHEL

The coordinates triangulate around Tappy East Creek. Not at the creek — around it, like they're circling something that shouldn't be crossed.

Tom glances at the storm radar on a wall monitor: a churning mass.

TOM

You get one more hour. Then I'm driving you back before the creek turns stupid.

She nods, grateful for the hour. She takes a photo of the map for her notes.

CUT TO:

EXT. BLACK HILLS - CUTOFF PATH - PRESENT DAY - DUSK

They push into older growth. The storm's edge whispers through the crowns. Light thins.

Rachel stops at a tree with charred bark and a hollow like a dark mouth. She crouches, careful, photographing.

Inside: a bird's nest made of hair. Human. Strands ashy and pale. Tiny bones threaded through like beads.

She looks up. Across the hollow's inner curve — carved lines, faint: notches grouped in fives. Tallies. Too many.

RACHEL

These marks— they're tallying something. Days? People?

TOM

We're going.

He extends a hand to help her up. A crack again, closer now. Tom swings his light. It splashes off nothing.

They back away. The hollow seems to breathe.

CUT TO:

INT. RACHEL'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Empty. Rain needles the window. The back door's deadbolt is thrown, but the chain swings gently, as if only now stilling.

The house listens.

CUT TO:

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - NIGHT

Dylan, hood up, trudges through rain with his duffel and a cheap umbrella. Streetlights smear in puddles.

He stops. There, set neatly at the curb beneath a maple: a small twig effigy standing upright in a bottlecap. It's been left for him like a gift.

He looks around — no one. Picks it up. It is warm. He flinches and drops it.

His rideshare pulls up. He hesitates, then climbs in.

CUT TO:

INT. RIDESHARE - MOVING - NIGHT

Wipers click. The DRIVER glances in the rearview.

DRIVER

Where you headed, kid?

DYLAN

Dad's place.

DRIVER

You look like you saw a ghost.

DYLAN

Worse. I think I saw... marketing.

The driver chuckles, not really listening. Dylan's phone buzzes. Unknown number: Do not let your mother go into the woods.

He blinks. Text again: the same sentence, but older, as if typed by someone unfamiliar with a phone: Do not let your mother go into the woods.

He texts back: Who is this?

No reply.

CUT TO:

EXT. WOODS - 1785 - NIGHT

Silas and two HUNTERS stalk with muskets. Their breath plumes.

They find a deer — or what's left: hide flensed, insides arranged into a circle with a stick figure at its hub. The figure wears a braid.

Silas swallows bile.

SILAS

She'll not frighten me with dolls.

He steps into the circle, spits. Wind answers.

CUT TO:

INT. BURKITTSVILLE - ARCHER HOME - 1785 - LATE NIGHT

A simple hearth. Shadows deep as wells. Ruth sits awake, Mercy asleep on her lap.

Archer enters, snow still on his shoulders. He looks older than yesterday.

Ruth studies him.

RUTH

You were gone.

ARCHER

I dreamt the tree again.

RUTH

You walked there. In your sleep.

A silence. Archer kneels, ashamed.

ARCHER

I bound her. I left her. And the Lord is silent.

Ruth strokes Mercy's hair.

RUTH

If the Lord is silent, listen to me. The woods are not safe. You must burn what ties her here.

ARCHER

I will not profane the body of a woman, even a damned one.

Ruth nods — loving and furious.

CUT TO:

INT. SMALL-ROOM MOTEL - PRESENT DAY - NIGHT

Rachel sits cross-legged on a floral bedspread, transcribing notes, maps spread. The TV mutters storm warnings on mute.

She opens a scanned page of the 1785 diary. A line pops, coincidence humming:

ON SCREEN: The woods return what is owed.
Below it: a sketched triangle around a creek bend — exactly her map.

Her phone buzzes. Dylan.

RACHEL

Hey you. At Dad's?

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. DAD'S APARTMENT - ENTRY - NIGHT

Dylan stands just inside, damp. The apartment is dark.

DYLAN

Door was unlocked. He's not back yet.

RACHEL

Lock it. Two turns. Chain it.

He obeys. As he raises the chain — it lifts on its own the last inch, as if being helped. He freezes.

DYLAN

Okay, uh. It's locked.

RACHEL

You okay? You sound—

The STOVE clicks in the dark kitchen. Once. Twice. Then flames whoomp. Blue for a second before turning normal.

DYLAN

—fine. Just hungry. Go do your witch stuff. Be careful.

RACHEL

Always am.

They hang up. Dylan stares at the kitchen. The blue flame licks higher for a heartbeat without heat... then calms.

He forces a laugh at himself. Pulls out his phone, Googles: "Gaelic for 'the woods remember'". Results scroll incomprehensible.

CUT TO:

EXT. BLACK HILLS - MOTEL PARKING LOT - LATER

Rain now a drumbeat. Tom's pickup pulls in. He gets out carrying a Tupperware container.

He knocks. Rachel opens with a pencil in her hair, surprised.

TOM

You strike me as someone who forgets to eat when she's chasing a ghost. My sister overpacks. Chicken and rice.

Rachel's guard lowers. She accepts.

RACHEL

If I find something real tomorrow, you'll be the first to see it.

TOM

If you find something that wants to be left alone, I'll be the first to tell you to run.

They share a rueful smile.

TOM (CONT'D)

Sunup. We beat the flood or we don't go.

He heads back into the rain.

Rachel closes the door, leans against it — the momentary hush like being under a blanket.

Her eyes find a wet footprint on the carpet. Small. Bare. It leads from the door toward the bathroom.

She stiffens. Looks at the door – sealed, chain set.

RACHEL

Hello?

No answer. She follows the wet prints – they end at the bathroom threshold. Inside, dry tile. Empty.

She exhales, shakes it off. Writes it down anyway.

CUT TO:

EXT. WOODS - 1785 - DAWN

Silas returns with the two hunters. Their eyes are wrong, pupils dilated huge. They walk like sleepers.

SILAS

We tracked her to the creek. She walks with bare feet. She left no blood.

Archer stares – the men's boots are soaked, but the tops of their stockings are full of pine needles as if they were kneeling under a tree for a long time.

ARCHER

You will sleep in the church tonight.

Silas merely smiles, too many teeth.

CUT TO:

INT. CHURCH - 1785 - NIGHT

The three men lie on pallets. As Ruth watches from the doorway, all three sit up in the same heartbeat – heads tilted to the same angle. Listening to something only they can hear.

Ruth slams the door. Bars it.

CUT TO:

EXT. BLACK HILLS - TRAILHEAD - PRESENT DAY - DAWN

Rain has eased to a fine mist. Tom and Rachel gear up - headlamps, drybags, walkie talkies.

TOM

If the creek is above your knees,
we turn back.

RACHEL

Agreed.

They shoulder packs. Step into the trees.

MONTAGE - INTO THE WOODS:

- Boots sink in black humus.
- A crow hops sideways along a branch, watching.
- Rachel marks waypoints on a paper map with pencil ticks: 1... 2... 3...
- Tom stacks a small cairn at a junction.
- A line of stick figures appears along the trail like milestones. The last one is wet, wood newly cut.

EXT. TAPPY EAST CREEK - PRESENT - LATE MORNING

Water rages, high and white. Tom studies the ford: stones just below the surface.

TOM

We go together. Eyes up. Three
points of contact.

They cross. Water slaps thighs. Rachel grits, focuses on Tom's back, steps where he steps.

Midstream, her compass hanging on a cord flips end over end, spinning.

RACHEL

Compass just died.

TOM

It happens near ore veins. Keep
moving.

They reach the far bank, breathing hard. Behind them, the stacked cairn Tom made on the near bank... tips itself over, stones plopping into the water one by one like patient fingers.

Rachel watches. Stone. Plop. Stone. Plop. The last stone doesn't fall — it slides across the top stone without touching it, as if pushed by air.

RACHEL
You saw that.

TOM
I saw wind.

They press on.

EXT. INNER WOODS - PRESENT - MIDDAY

Here the forest is older. The light is green and submarine. Sound is dampened, like being under snow.

In a shallow dip ringed by beeches: the blackened oak. Its bark charred by some long-ago fire, its hollow like a yawning mouth.

Rachel approaches reverently, as if nearing a cathedral.

A faint humming rides the air — the same ancient tune Archer heard. Rachel frowns, searching for a source. Tom hears nothing.

RACHEL
Do you hear—

TOM
No.

He circles the trunk, scanning for recent disturbance. Rachel photographs the hollow, the notches, the hair nest.

She pulls a sterile swab from a kit. Hesitates. Tom raises an eyebrow.

TOM (CONT'D)
You about to poke the bear?

RACHEL
I'm about to swab a crime scene
older than the country.

She extends the swab toward the nest—

A blue flame whoomphs inside the hollow. A clean, gas-stove blue. No heat. No smoke. Just a color that shouldn't be here.

Rachel yelps, falls back, mud slicking her palms. The flame gutters out immediately, as if embarrassed.

Tom stares at the hollow, wholly recalibrating his skepticism.

TOM

Okay. We're done. Now.

A tree creaks nearby, loud as a ship. Another answers. Then another – a slow, surrounding wooden breath.

From around the ring, stick figures sway though there is no wind.

Rachel is shaking – part fear, part triumph.

RACHEL

It's her. She's here.

TOM

We're leaving.

RACHEL

Give me thirty seconds– just to mark the exact–

A whisper brushes Rachel's ear, intimate, ancient Gaelic. Her eyes film with tears without knowing why.

ELLY (V.O.) (Gaelic; subtitled)
The woods remember. The woods return.

Rachel turns. No one there. But the stick figures have rotated, all their twig "faces" pointed at her.

Tom takes her arm, not rough, but not asking. They back away.

CUT TO:

EXT. WOODS - 1785 - LATE AFTERNOON

Archer leads a dozen men. Ruth follows, not invited, but there. Mercy clutches her rag doll, tucked in Ruth's cloak.

They reach the black oak. The hollow smokes faintly though no fire burns.

Silas steps into the ring again, defiant.

SILAS

Show yourself, coward.

A hand made of bundled twigs extends from the hollow, quick as a striking fox, and snaps off Silas's hat brim. It falls at his feet, rim sliced clean as paper.

Silas staggers back, crosses himself without realizing.

Ruth drags Mercy behind her, eyes wide at the hollow's dark.

RUTH

She wants to be counted. That's
what those marks are. She counts
what's hers.

Archer grips his Bible like a cudgel.

ARCHER

God will not be moved by parlor
tricks—

The forest around them leans in, a creak of limbs like
bending knees.

CUT TO:

EXT. BLACK HILLS - GAME TRAIL - PRESENT - AFTERNOON

Rain returns in sheets. The creek they crossed now bellows.
The trail is a vein of mud.

Tom stops. The cairn he built on this side earlier is... gone.
In its place: a stick figure wearing a piece of ribbon —
dirty blue.

Rachel's breath catches.

RACHEL

Dylan.

TOM

What?

She steps close, fingers trembling. The ribbon is from one of
Dylan's hoodies — the color, the flecked weave. She knows it
like a mother knows a scar.

RACHEL

He was at his father's. He—
(pulls out phone, no
service)
He wouldn't come out here.

The stick figure tilts its head.

TOM

We're moving. Now.

They turn — the path behind has... shifted. Trees cross it like bars. The landmarks are slightly wrong, as if everything took one step left while they blinked.

RACHEL

The map— my ticks—

Her pencil marks look right. The world doesn't.

TOM

Look at me. We take bearings by sound now. The creek's the only thing not lying. We put it on our right and we get out.

A low humming answers — not water. Female, distant. The same melody Rachel heard at the hollow.

Tom draws a breath, steadying.

TOM (CONT'D)

Stay with me.

They move, fast but careful. The humming grows clearer if they veer left, fainter if they veer right. The forest is luring.

Rachel clenches her jaw and leans toward the fainter sound — Tom's plan, not the song's.

Behind them, the stick figure they left turns its head in increments, following.

CUT TO:

INT. DAD'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - EVENING

Dylan microwaves noodles. The microwave light flickers blue for a breath. He glances down.

On the counter: his phone lights. Message from UNKNOWN, again: Do not let your mother go into the woods. Attached: a photo. Grainy. Of Rachel and Tom... taken from behind a tree. Today. In the photo's corner, the edge of a blue-glass lantern.

Dylan's pulse kicks. He dials Mom. It fails. He grabs his jacket.

DYLAN

Nope. Nope. Nope.

He bolts for the door.

CUT TO:

EXT. BLACK HILLS - CREEK FORD - PRESENT - DUSK

The creek has swollen. What was thigh-deep is now waist. The roar drowns thought.

Tom assesses. Calculus behind his eyes.

TOM
We wait. Or we die.

Rachel's skin prickles. She looks upstream. On the opposite bank, half-veiled by rain... a woman stands. Colonial rags slicked to her body. Hair a frozen halo. She holds a blue torch that sheds no smoke.

Elly Kedward watches them, head tilted with... curiosity? Hunger? The flame licks sideways in wind that doesn't exist.

Tom follows Rachel's gaze. Sees nothing but rain.

RACHEL
She's there.

TOM
No one's there.

The woman lifts one hand, palm outward. A greeting. Or a claim.

ELLY (Gaelic; subtitled)
Return.

Rachel blinks tears she doesn't understand.

RACHEL
We're not getting across.

TOM
Then we go high and wait the crest.

Thunder gnashes. The humming comes again— closer now, behind them.

They turn. The stick figures crowd the trail, more than there were, multiplied in rain, their twig arms raised.

TOM (CONT'D)
Move.

They scramble upslope toward higher ground. Mud claws their boots. The woods seem to rearrange between steps — paths that should connect refuse to, trunks are new where there were none.

Rachel reaches a toppled oak, hauls herself over— her compass cord catches on a branch and tightens around her throat, yanking her back. She chokes. Tom's hand slashes down, knife flashing; the cord parts. She gasps, eyes watery.

RACHEL

Thank you.

TOM

Keep your lines tucked.
Everything's a hook here.

They huddle beneath a rocky overhang that offers meager shelter. Tom unrolls a thermal blanket. Rain threads down in silver bars.

TOM (CONT'D)

We wait. Dawn. The creek will drop.

Rachel nods, shivering, adrenaline spiking and ebbing.

Some distance through trees, the blue torch bobs — not near, not far, like a star that followed them.

CUT TO:

EXT. WOODS - 1785 - NIGHT

The parishioners huddle at the church. Outside, something circles. Footfalls that are not quite human. Children cry. Ruth holds Mercy tight.

Archer sits with his back to the altar, Bible clenched. He stares up. Only now does he notice the stick figure hung above — how long has it been there?

He stands to tear it down—

The church door shakes, a single violent BANG that rattles hinges. Silence. Then, from the roof — footsteps. A woman's bare feet patter above their heads.

Mercy lifts her face, enchanted.

MERCY

She's walking in the sky.

Ruth covers the child's eyes, voice a fierce whisper.

RUTH
Do not listen.

CUT BACK TO:

EXT. ROCK OVERHANG - PRESENT - NIGHT

Darkness clamps down. Rain slackens to a cold whisper. Tom and Rachel sit close beneath the tarp, lantern dimmed to a low pulse.

RACHEL
You said the woods have opinions.
What's yours?

Tom considers. Shrugs half a shoulder.

TOM
Forest is a machine. Inputs,
outputs. You treat it like a god,
it will act like one.

A beat. Rachel's fingers worry the ribbon she took from the stick figure - Dylan's. She didn't even realize she pocketed it.

RACHEL
My son's name is Dylan.

TOM
He's not here.

RACHEL
I know.
(beat)
Did you ever lose anyone?

TOM
Yes.

He doesn't elaborate. They sit with that.

From the dark beyond the tarp, a soft tapping begins. Twig on stone. Three knocks. Pause. Three knocks. Pause. Three knocks.

Tom switches off the lantern. They hold breath. The tapping stops. The world is all heartbeat.

Then- whispering. Not English. Not quite words. It seems to come from behind them, inside the rock, like something had learned to speak through stone.

Rachel fights the urge to answer. Her mouth opens anyway. It wants her voice.

TOM (WHISPER) (CONT'D)
Don't repeat what you hear.

The whispering changes pitch, imitates Tom's whisper, almost perfect:

VOICE (O.S.)
Don't repeat what you hear.

Tom's jaw tightens. He draws his knife. Useless, but human.

A shadow crosses the tarp – a woman's profile, hair wild, eye hollow. She stops. She turns. The shadow's head rotates too far, puppet-smooth. It looks right at Rachel as if the tarp were not there.

Rachel clamps her eyes shut. Her fingers crush the ribbon.

Silence. When she opens them, the shadow is gone.

RACHEL (WHISPER)
She knows my name.

TOM
She knows everyone's.

They wait, sleepless, as rain mutters and fades.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ROCK OVERHANG - FIRST LIGHT - PRESENT

Color seeps back into the world. Mist threads between trunks.

Tom peers out. The creek below has receded – still dangerous, but possible.

Rachel crawls out, bones stiff. She pauses – at the overhang's lip, someone has arranged little stones into letters. Not English. Old shapes. But she knows what they say.

RACHEL
It says, Return.

TOM
You read that?

RACHEL
I don't know how I read that.

The woods wait, patient as a held breath.

Tom shoulders his pack.

TOM
We go now. We don't stop till
truck.

They step from the overhang, into the pale maze.

A beat— then, from behind, in the shelter they just left, a blue light blossoms, bright enough to paint their backs. They do not look. They do not turn.

HARD CUT TO BLACK.

EXT. ROCK OVERHANG - PRESENT - MORNING

Mist unspools. The forest holds its breath.

Tom and Rachel shoulder their packs. Rachel tucks the blue hoodie ribbon in a pocket she can feel.

TOM
We keep the creek on our right. If
the trail splits, choose high
ground. If you hear your name, it
isn't me.

Rachel nods. They step out.

EXT. INNER WOODS - PRESENT - DAY

A hush like church. Their boots print the soaked duff.

They come upon a deer blind half-collapsed with age. Inside: tally notches carved into the post — not random. Fives upon fives.

RACHEL
Same hand as the tree.

Tom scans the ground. Points to a line of faint depressions.

TOM
Bare feet. Small.

Rachel's stomach drops.

A distant humming threads through trunks. Rachel stiffens; she forces her gaze to Tom's shoulders and away from the sound.

They move.

EXT. TAPPY EAST CREEK RIDGE - PRESENT - LATER

The creek roars below, a ribbon of white. A narrow animal path skirts the ridge.

Tom tests the ground with his pole. Solid... enough.

TOM

Single file. Three points.

They edge along. Halfway, the world tilts — not the ground. The day tilts, like a slow nod. Rachel's stomach flips.

Across the ravine: figures stand among trees. Still. Watching. Clothes from different centuries. One tiny figure raises an arm the way a child does when found.

Rachel blinks — gone. The humming recedes.

TOM (CONT'D)

Don't look across. Look at your feet.

They make it. Exhale.

CUT TO:

EXT. BURKITTSVILLE - OUTER WOODS - 1785 - DAY

The town has moved into the church: pallets, blankets, kettles. Doors barred. Windows shuttered.

Ruth steps outside with a pail, guarded by Silas. Snow grinds underfoot.

In the trees: effigies newly hung. Dozens. Some woven with scraps of cloth, locks of hair, bits of blue glass.

Ruth squints at one. The glass is from a lantern once hers — given to Archer when they wed.

RUTH

She wears our house.

SILAS

Then we tear her house down.

Silas yanks an effigy. The twig arms snap back, slicing his knuckles. He hisses, sucks blood from his hand — and goes very still.

SILAS (CONT'D)
She asks for a tithe.

Ruth studies him. His pupils swallow his irises.

RUTH
We owe nothing.

SILAS
Woods remember what's owed. Men
forget.

He walks away without the pail. Ruth stands alone, the snow suddenly louder.

CUT TO:

INT. DAD'S APARTMENT - ENTRY - PRESENT - DAY

The door is left ajar. Dylan's duffel gone. On the floor by the jamb: a twig figure flattened like it was stepped on. It's wet.

The stove clicks; a gust of blue licks and is gone.

CUT TO:

EXT. RURAL TWO-LANE / TRAILHEAD - PRESENT - DAY

Dylan climbs from a rideshare, jacket zipped. He checks his phone — No Service.

Ranger signage: Trail Closed During Flood Conditions. The sign has been turned sideways.

DYLAN
Mom?

No answer. He hesitates, then steps onto the path.

EXT. OUTER WOODS - PRESENT - DAY

Dylan keeps close to the creek sound. He studies cairns like breadcrumbs. He doesn't see that one stone in each stack is blue glass, half-buried.

His phone buzzes though there's no bars.

UNKNOWN: Stay near water. Do not answer when it speaks.

He types: Who are you?

No reply.

He pushes deeper.

CUT TO:

EXT. HOLLOW OAK - PRESENT - DAY

Rachel and Tom return to the blackened tree. The hair nest sits where it was. The blue flame is not.

Rachel tucks a sampling vial away - shaking, but methodical.

Tom circles, attentive to sound. Every creak is a footstep that almost is.

TOM

We pull out. You have more than
anyone gets.

Rachel's eyes snag on a new notch under the others. Fresh. Still damp.

RACHEL

It's counting. Since yesterday.

Tom doesn't answer.

A toy lies near the roots: a rag doll's button eye. Old. Cracked. Rachel crouches, throat tight.

RACHEL (CONT'D)

She takes their names off them.

From deep in the trees, footfalls approach - soft, bare. They stop when Tom and Rachel look up. Resume when they look down. Closer. Closer.

TOM

We're leaving.

They back away, never turning.

CUT TO:

INT. CHURCH - 1785 - DUSK

The congregation eats thin stew. Archer prays over bowls but his eyes are far away.

Ruth steps up, voice steady.

RUTH

She wants a tithe. Give her you.

Gasps. Archer stares at his wife, wounded, proud.

ARCHER

You ask me to—

RUTH

You tied a woman to a tree and
called it righteousness. Give her
the one she asks.

ARCHER

She asks for everyone.

Ruth lifts Mercy into her arms. Mercy's doll has only one
button eye.

RUTH

Then stop pretending prayer is
action.

Silence breaks into argument, fear-hum, sudden fervor. Archer
watches it churn and knows he's lost the room.

The church door thumps once, gentle as a knock. Everyone
freezes.

MERCY (WHISPER)

She's here.

CUT TO:

EXT. SWITCHBACKS - PRESENT - AFTERNOON

Rain needles again. Tom and Rachel switchback down toward the
creek. The path doubles on itself— a loop that wasn't there.

After the third pass by the same uprooted stump, Tom stops.

TOM

She's folding it. We go off-trail.

He draws his knife, slices a strip from his own sleeve, ties
it to a branch at shoulder-height.

TOM (CONT'D)

Rule two: mark where you don't want
to return.

They cut cross-country. Branches comb hair. The light does a
wrong thing — dimmer here than under cloud.

They find Tom's strip again.

RACHEL
That's impossible.

TOM
We're not moving. It is.

He pulls two flares from his pack. Waits. Nothing moves — and yet the forest is closer than it was.

Tom snaps a flare. It blooms magnesium white. For an instant, the trunks are spines, the hollows mouths, and a woman's shape is standing three trees away — hair stiff with frost, eyes like winter sun.

Rachel inhales a sob. The flare sputters and dies to an ember.

TOM (CONT'D)
We go to sound. We go to cold. Keep
your eyes low.

They push toward the creek.

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTER WOODS - PRESENT - DUSK

Dylan crosses a small log bridge. The creek hisses below. He breathes like he's outrunning a dare.

He pauses. On a branch: a blue-glass lantern shard catches stray light. A reflection moves within it when he moves — but the reflection doesn't match him. It's Rachel, wet, older, staring right where he is, as if through a window.

DYLAN
Mom?

The shard slips, falls into leaves. He scrabbles; it's gone. He swallows panic and keeps going.

CUT TO:

INT. CHURCH - 1785 - NIGHT

The congregation sings to drown the footsteps on the roof. The hymn wobbles. Breath steams.

The stick figure above the altar has multiplied. Ten. Fifteen. The shadows look like people at prayer.

Archer's voice cracks.

ARCHER

We will go to the tree at dawn. We
will end this.

Ruth meets his eyes. He's decided on violence again, and it
will be righteous again, and God is quiet.

Outside, a woman laughs — not cruelly. Not kindly. Weathered,
amused. Familiar.

Mercy lifts her head.

MERCY

Grandmother?

Ruth clamps a hand over the child's mouth. Shakes her head.
Mercy's eyes shine with tears she does not understand.

CUT TO:

EXT. CREEK FORD - PRESENT - NIGHT

Dark sooner than it should be. The water is lower than last
night by inches that matter.

Tom tests the current. Nods.

TOM

We go now.

They step into the water. It is numbing, knife-cold. The
creekbed shifts underfoot, sly rocks rolling.

Halfway across, voices rise from the water like radio static.
Not words — memory. Laughter under a summer tree. A lullaby.
Dylan, younger, laughing as he runs through a sprinkler.

Rachel falters. Tears flood without permission.

TOM (OVER ROAR) (CONT'D)

They're yours. They're not now.

Rachel locks eyes with him and forces her feet to step where
he steps.

They gain the far bank. Collapse to knees. Breathe.

Behind them, in the water, two figures stand ankle-deep —
silhouettes in rags — and then are not.

RACHEL
She let us cross.

TOM
She let us cross the wrong way.

He points. The cairn he built on this bank is ahead of them – as if they'd never left.

RACHEL
No, no, no—

TOM
Up. Move.

They hurry – and stop. A house stands in the clearing beyond.

Stone foundation. No roof. Only angles and shadows. The Parr ruin that shouldn't be here.

Rachel and Tom share a look.

TOM (CONT'D)
We didn't pass this coming in.

RACHEL
We're not where we think.

TOM
No. We are exactly where she thinks.

A blue light flickers in a corner of the ruin.

CUT TO:

EXT. PARR RUIN - PRESENT - CONTINUOUS

They step into what was a house. The corners are wrong – narrow as closets, tall as gallows.

Rachel's breath fogs. The blue flame resolves to a lantern set on a toppled beam. The glass is old. Familiar to Rachel without reason.

A whisper slides along the stones behind her ear.

ELLY (V.O.) (Gaelic; subtitled)
Return what is owed.

Rachel turns. The corner closest to her has a human indent in the dust. As if someone had stood facing the wall until time polished it.

Tom's jaw locks.

TOM
We do not stand in corners.

A child runs past the doorway — a blur. Laughter chimes, wrong pitch.

Rachel's whole body leans toward the sound. Tom catches her elbow. Hold.

The blue lantern sputters and goes out.

CUT TO:

EXT. PARR RUIN — EDGE OF CLEARING — PRESENT — MOMENTS LATER

A flash of red — Dylan's jacket between trunks.

RACHEL
Dylan!

She tears toward him. Tom lunges, catches her pack, is dragged two steps, lets go rather than pull her off her feet.

Rachel crashes into underbrush, bursting into—

EXT. MIRROR CLEARING — PRESENT — CONTINUOUS

—an impossible twin of the parr clearing. Same stones. Same angles. No Dylan.

Only effigies hung in the four corners — each wears a tatty fabric bit from Rachel's life: a concert tee she loved at eighteen; a strip of baby blanket; the blue hoodie ribbon she thought was in her pocket.

Her hand flies to her pocket. Empty.

RACHEL
She took it.

The effigies turn, twig heads creaking.

Tom arrives, breath hot, knife loose in hand.

TOM
Rachel, back to me.

They back toward the treeline. Between trees: Dylan stands, expression mild, water beading on his hair.

DYLAN

Mom.

Rachel's breath breaks open. She steps — Tom blocks with an arm, not letting her pass through the spot where the boy stands.

TOM (LOW)

Where'd you get the jacket, kid?

Dylan doesn't answer. He smiles — small, heartbreakingly familiar — and raises a blue lantern.

DYLAN

Return.

The lantern casts light without throwing shadows. Rachel's hand trembles toward him.

Something in the light catches Tom's eye — not Dylan's shape, behind it. For a blink, he sees the woman holding the lantern with the boy's hand, bones like sticks inside a sleeve that is not cloth.

Tom moves fast. Switchblade snick. He cuts Rachel's pack strap. The weight jerks her backward a step; the spell flickers.

The boy's expression does not change. His lips don't match the voice when he says—

DYLAN (CONT'D)

Come into the corner, Mom.

Tom throws his flare. It pops, white-hot. The boy blinks out like a blown candle. The flare dies with a hiss before it should.

Silence chokes back in. Rachel trembles, sudden rage boiling through grief.

RACHEL

Don't do that again.

TOM

You're welcome.

They stare each other down, then break eye contact — too much truth in both faces.

CUT TO:

EXT. WOODS - 1785 - DAWN

Archer leads men to the black oak. Ruth follows with Mercy and a handful of women, faces set.

They circle the tree. It looks bigger.

Archer lifts a Bible and a hatchet.

ARCHER

By the Word and by the work of our hands.

He swings. The hatchet skids off bark like on iron. The handle splits; wood stings his palms. He shakes it off, swings again with the broken haft like a club.

From the hollow, a hand made of sticks reaches, plucks the Bible from him, and pulls it into the dark. The pages flip by themselves as if in a strong wind. The book doesn't reemerge.

The men stagger back. Mercy giggles - hysteric, afraid.

Ruth steps forward.

RUTH

Elly Kedward. You were wronged. But this is not justice.

The hollow breathes. A voice from no visible mouth.

ELLY (O.S.) (Gaelic; subtitled)
Justice is a circle.

Ruth closes her eyes. In a much older tongue than the town knows, she answers - Gaelic, broken but there, an inheritance.

RUTH (CONT'D)

Then break it. Take me. End it.

Archer spins, horrified.

ARCHER

No.

RUTH

I will not let you count our child among your offerings.

A blue flame licks inside the hollow. Ruth's hair lifts as if underwater.

ELLY (O.S.)
Return what is owed.

Ruth steps closer. Archer drags her back. They fall. The men scatter and reform, bravery fraying.

Mercy twists free, runs to the tree, presses her hands to the char. Her palms stick. She screams.

Ruth lunges, tears her free – skin sloughs like candle that won't harden. Mercy sobs, hands blistering cold.

Archer looks at his family – at what the woods has taken and at what he won't pay – and a doctrine cracks behind his eyes.

ARCHER
We leave this place. All of us.

SILAS
There is nowhere to go. She's everywhere.

ARCHER
Then we go where she is not.

RUTH
There is no such place.

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTER WOODS / POWERLINE CUT - PRESENT - DUSK

Tom and Rachel break into a powerline corridor – a raw scar through trees. The sight of it makes Rachel cry with relief.

In the open, the compass points north. The sky, true. Civilization hums a half-second away.

Tom exhales his first easy breath in hours.

TOM
We're out.

A small prayer of gratitude lives behind the words.

Rachel swallows. Looks down the cut– towers stepping away like giants.

Down the slope, a truck sits at the next access gate. Ranger green. Someone leans against it. Tom squints.

TOM (CONT'D)
Hart? That you?

The figure lifts a hand. Nods. Starts the truck. Headlights wash the grass – blue for a heartbeat before turning normal.

The relief sours in Tom's chest.

TOM (CONT'D)
We're not out.

They move cautiously. As they near, the truck remains the right shape, wrong angles. The badge reads P A R R where it should say Ford. The tires leave no tracks in the mud.

The driver's window rolls down. Inside: Dylan, older by years that didn't pass, eyes glassed.

DYLAN
Mom. Get in.

Rachel's body flinches toward him and stops itself like she's learned where her edges are.

RACHEL
No.

Dylan smiles. The same smile he had at five when he learned to ride a bike.

DYLAN
Please.

Tom steps between the truck and Rachel, palms out.

TOM
We're walking.

The truck idles without sound. The engine doesn't shake the hood. A blue halo films the windshield at the corners like swamp gas.

Rachel's voice is barely a thread.

RACHEL
Where are you?

Dylan's eyes tick – just enough movement to suggest listening to someone else.

DYLAN
In the corner.

The truck winks out. Not drives away. Not vanishes. Edits to absence. The imprint of its weight remains in the grass for a breath and then fills.

The sky dimples. Distant thunder. Tom re-centers.

TOM

We go to the service road. We do
not wait at the gate. We do not
look down the cut again.

They move.

CUT TO:

INT. CHURCH - 1785 - NIGHT

The congregation has thinned. Beds empty that were full. No
one saw anyone leave.

Archer kneels in front of Ruth and Mercy.

ARCHER

There is a road that skirts the
creek and runs east. Past the three
stones. If we leave at moonset, we
might—

The church shudders. Rafters croak.

Ruth takes his hand. Not kindly. Not unkindly.

RUTH

It will not let you go the way you
understand leaving.

He looks at his family. At the tally of his choices. He
stands.

ARCHER

Then we go the way I do not
understand.

He opens the church door.

Outside, the blue lamp glows by itself on the stoop, warm as
a hearth. The wind is still. It feels like mercy.

Archer does not touch the lamp.

CUT TO:

EXT. SERVICE ROAD - PRESENT - NIGHT

Mud road cut through trees. Tom and Rachel power-walk. Rain
threads. The storm's voice has moved elsewhere.

RACHEL

When we get out... I'm going to tell them. All of it.

TOM

No one will come if you do.

RACHEL

Then I'll bring them. I'll drag them.

He almost smiles. He likes the fight in her; hates what it'll cost.

Ahead — taillights bleed red in mist. A real ranger truck this time by every measure that matters — fenders dented, antenna whipping, sound where sound should be.

Tom raises both hands. The truck slows. The driver's silhouette — HART (40s, another ranger) — leans out.

HART

You two look like—

He stops. His mouth moves, but the words don't arrive. Like the forest stole the end of his sentence and kept it.

Tom doesn't notice the lapse. Rachel does. The way her eyes narrow says she's writing the world down even as it unravels.

TOM

We need a lift to the station.

Hart nods. Puts the truck in park. He opens the door—

A flood of creek water spills out of the cab, pouring onto the road, cold as knives. Froths around their boots. It smells like winter.

Hart's seat is empty.

Tom and Rachel jump back. The truck bleeds water until it's dry as bone. The radio crackles: static and a woman laughing under it, the way a creek laughs over stones.

The taillights blink blue and go black.

RACHEL

She won't let us leave.

Tom's jaw tightens.

TOM

Then we don't ask.

He shoulders his pack. Starts running.

Rachel runs with him. The road rises into darkness.

CUT TO:

EXT. BLACK OAK - 1785 - NIGHT

The tree fills the frame. The hollow breathes; blue flame licks like a tongue tasting snow.

Silas steps into the ring. He kneels, bows his head like a penitent. His face is peaceful.

SILAS

Take me.

Nothing happens.

He looks up — panic cracking peace.

SILAS (CONT'D)

Take me—

The branches shift above him. The snow at the edges rises like fog lunging. Silas vanishes up without a jerk. Quietly. As if lifted by a careful mother.

Ruth watches. Her face is absolute horror and absolute understanding.

CUT TO:

EXT. CUTOVER / OLD FENCE LINE - PRESENT - NIGHT

Tom and Rachel crash through brush and onto a fence line that marks the park boundary, chest-high wire, posts sawed from oak. Hope flares like pain.

A No Trespassing sign faces them. On it, someone has traced a stick figure in mud. Its arms are down.

Tom grips the top wire, about to climb—

RACHEL

Wait.

She points to the mud. It's wet though there's no rain. The figure's arms begin to raise.

TOM

Go.

He throws himself over. Rachel follows, denim tearing. They drop in a ditch on the far side.

The woods beyond the fence do not look like the same woods. They look younger. A road hum rides the night like hope.

Rachel laughs – broken but real. Tom grips her shoulder once.

From behind them, over the fence, the blue light swells – slow, inevitable. No feet. No breath. A weather system of hunger.

Tom and Rachel run.

CUT TO:

EXT. SUBURBAN EDGE - PRESENT - PRE-DAWN

They burst from treeline into the back edge of a neighborhood: chain-link fences, a swing set, trash cans tipped by wind.

Rachel staggers to a stop. She looks like a person dragged from under ice.

RACHEL

We made it.

Tom listens. The humming is gone. The world has its wrongness again – traffic sigh, a dog bark half a mile off, a plane's thin thread.

He nods. He believes in nothing and in this.

A porch light flips on in a nearby yard. A woman in a robe peers out with suspicion and simple suburban fear of strangers.

WOMAN

You okay?

Rachel wants to tell her run. Wants to say nothing. What she says is–

RACHEL

Phone?

CUT TO:

INT. RANGER STATION - PRESENT - MORNING

Fluorescents. Coffee. Maps. The reality of forms like talismans.

Tom wraps a blanket around Rachel's shoulders. Steam gusts from fresh coffee. He dials County Sheriff. Rachel calls Dylan. Voicemail.

Tom catches his own reflection in the window - pale, older.

TOM
You're calling him from a landline.
He might not-

The door opens. Ranger Hart steps in, dripping. Alive. Real. He stops when he sees them, relief breaking over his features.

HART
You two-

The end of his sentence arrives this time.

HART (CONT'D)
-are a sight. You're lucky. They're
still dredging for those hikers
from June.

Rachel stands, steady despite the tremor in her bones.

RACHEL
We need a search party. A teenage
boy is in the woods. Name's Dylan
Marlowe. Red jacket. He's fifteen.
We need- (her voice catches) -we
need everyone.

Hart and Tom lock eyes - old knowledge shared between people who ferry others into dark places and sometimes back.

HART
Storm chewed the trails. We can put
five in by noon. More by afternoon.

Rachel nods too hard. Her hands knot.

Tom touches her sleeve, gentle.

TOM
You'll sit ten minutes. Eat. Then
we go.

She looks like she might refuse. She nods instead.

Her phone rattles on the table. UNKNOWN. She answers.

RACHEL

Dylan?

Only creek noise. And then — a woman's voice. Not cruel. Not kind.

ELLY (PHONE) (Gaelic; subtitled)
Return what is owed.

Rachel closes her eyes. She hears another voice under it — Ruth — speaking in the same old tongue, urgent, loving.

RUTH (PHONE) (Gaelic; subtitled)
Don't come to the tree.

The line dies.

Rachel opens her eyes. Fire there now. Fear, yes. And fight.

RACHEL (CONT'D)

We go now.

Tom sees the look and does not argue.

CUT TO:

EXT. CHURCH - 1785 - DAWN

The door yawns. The pews are empty. Ruth stands alone at the threshold with Mercy in her arms. Snow billows like flour from a sack.

On the stoop, the blue lantern burns. Ruth takes it.

RUTH

All right, Elly. We will go your
road.

She steps into the snow.

CUT TO:

EXT. BLACK HILLS - VARIOUS - PRESENT - DAY

A SEARCH PARTY forms under bruised cloud: Hart, Tom, two VOLUNTEERS, a K-9 dog named Mabel shaking rain from her ears. Rachel pulls on an orange vest, the color loud against the day.

Hart hands out radios.

HART

Channel 3. Call out every five. If you see the creek, you mark it and report. If you hear your name and you can't see the mouth that said it, you put your fingers in your ears and you walk.

The volunteers swallow. Mabel whines. Rachel ties the blue hoodie ribbon — somehow back in her pocket — around her wrist like a promise.

They step into the trees.

MONTAGE - THE GRID SEARCH:

- Orange vests slide between trunks.
- Flagging tape flashes like wildflowers.
- Mabel's nose never lifts from ground; she pulls toward something she doesn't want.
- A volunteer calls Marco; the forest answers with Marco, three beats late.
- Hart plants a cairn; a minute later, it is a stick figure instead.

Rachel moves with a map in her head — this bend, that ridge — and despite the forest's games, she is close.

EXT. FALSE MEADOW - PRESENT - AFTERNOON

A meadow opens that shouldn't. Wildflowers in a month that can't grow them. The air warmer. The sound softer.

In the center: Dylan, sitting cross-legged, back to them, looking at something in his hands.

RACHEL

Dylan—

Rachel runs. Tom swears and lunges, but she is faster.

She reaches the boy, drops to her knees, hands on his shoulders— the body is twigs strung with reeds and ribbon. The face is a sack of moss. A child's jacket hangs on a frame that was almost a boy.

Rachel recoils, gagging grief. The effigy turns its head toward her without moving. It smells like cold and old kitchens.

Mabel growls, low and deep. The meadow ripples — clover to snow and back.

Rachel stands, feral now, voice iron.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
Elly. Take me. Return him.

The meadow does not move. A breeze lifts a single blue flame at the far edge — a beckon.

Tom lifts his radio.

TOM
Hart, we're at a false meadow,
approximate seven-forty from the
cut. We're being led.

HART (RADIO)
Copy. Stay in grid. Do not—

The rest edits out. The radio hisses like rain in a tin bucket.

Rachel sets her jaw. She pulls the blue ribbon off her wrist and ties it to the effigy's twig arm.

RACHEL
You wanted this. Now you know his
name.

The effigy's twig hand twines the ribbon around its wrist like a lover.

The far blue flame fattens.

TOM
She wants you at the tree.

RACHEL
Then we go to the tree.

TOM
It's a trap.

RACHEL
Of course it is.

She looks at him, daring argument. He sees there is no alternative.

Tom nods once. Turns to Mabel, to Hart, to the grid and the rules that feel small against a thing that is not a storm and not a man.

TOM (TO RADIO)

All teams converge on the old oak
coordinates. Do not enter the ring.
Do not stand in corners. If you see
blue light, close your eyes and
count to thirty. If you hear your
name, it isn't us.

HART (RADIO) (faint)

Copy—

The radio dies.

Rachel faces the humming and the cold that is somehow warm
where it hurts.

She breathes. She steps.

Tom falls in beside her.

They walk toward the black oak and the thing inside it that
remembers.

SMASH TO BLACK.

EXT. WOODS - 1785 - NIGHT

The black oak looms. Its hollow breathes, glowing faint blue.

RUTH carries Mercy, blistered hands wrapped in cloth. ARCHER
follows, gaunt and hollow. A handful of TOWNSFOLK stagger
after — fewer than before.

They circle the oak. Effigies dangle from branches, each
wearing scraps of the townsfolk: a bonnet, a buckle, a lock
of hair.

ARCHER

(hoarse)

We burn it. We end it.

He raises a torch. A gust extinguishes it instantly. The
hollow flares blue.

RUTH steps forward.

RUTH

No fire will end her. She wants
balance.

The wind hushes. For a moment, even the snow seems to wait.

RUTH (CONT'D)
 Elly Kedward. Take me. Let the
 others go.

The hollow exhales — a sound like a laugh through teeth.

ELLY (O.S.) (Gaelic, subtitled)
 Return what is owed.

ARCHER
 No! If she takes you—

Ruth turns on him, fierce.

RUTH
 You bound her. You left her. You
 owe her.

The ground trembles. The men drop to their knees, clutching
 their ears. The oak's branches groan and bend.

Ruth lifts Mercy, whispers.

RUTH (TO MERCY) (CONT'D)
 Close your eyes, little one.
 Remember your mother's song. Not
 hers.

Mercy squeezes shut her eyes.

The hollow flames blue, swallowing Ruth in its glow. She
 stiffens — then vanishes. No scream.

Mercy sobs. Archer drops, broken. The townsfolk scatter like
 spooked cattle.

The tree is silent. The tally marks inside have grown.

EXT. WOODS - PRESENT - NIGHT

Rachel, Tom, Hart, and two VOLUNTEERS with the search party
 approach the same clearing. Their headlamps catch the black
 oak, now vaster than logic, roots veined across the ground
 like a living heart.

EFFIGIES hang from every branch, hundreds, swaying without
 wind.

The K-9, Mabel, whines, tail tucked.

RACHEL

Dylan!

Her voice echoes strange — as if the forest repeats it a half-beat later.

A blue light swells in the hollow. Elly Kedward steps forth: skin frostbitten, eyes like ice coins. She holds a lantern.

Behind her: SHADOW FIGURES. Still. Watching. From every century.

Rachel freezes. She sees— Dylan among them. Still, pale, holding a lantern too.

RACHEL (CONT'D)

Dylan— baby, come to me.

He doesn't move. His lips part — but the voice is Elly's.

DYLAN / ELLY

Return what is owed.

The volunteers bolt in panic. Mabel barks — then yelps, dragged into shadow. Silence swallows her.

Tom steadies Rachel as she trembles.

TOM

Don't look at him. Look at me.

But she can't.

RACHEL

(pleading)

Take me. Not him.

Elly tilts her head. Lantern flame gutters.

ELLY

Owed cannot be bargained. Owed returns.

Rachel steps forward, shaking.

RACHEL

Then count me. Count me.

She rips the blue ribbon from her wrist, ties it to an effigy.

The effigy's head snaps to face her. The others follow, one by one, until every hundred effigies stare at Rachel.

Tom grips her arm — she wrenches free.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
(crying)
You wanted names. Now you have
mine.

The oak's hollow surges with light — and the ground beneath Rachel splits.

She's dragged inside by invisible hands. Tom dives, seizes her arm, pulls with all he has.

Inside the hollow: Ruth's face flickers for an instant, mouth forming words.

RUTH (V.O.) (Gaelic; subtitled)
Do not stand in the corner.

Rachel gasps. She tears her hand free of Tom's grip—willingly. The hollow swallows her.

INT. THE HOLLOW - BEYOND TIME

Rachel is in a void of roots and ash. Figures surround her: Archer, Silas, nameless children. All face the oak's inner walls, silent.

At the center: Elly Kedward. Human no longer. Her body braided of sticks and frost. Her eyes voids with fire inside.

Rachel forces her voice.

RACHEL
Give me my son.

Elly steps close. Whispers in her ear, Gaelic sliding like knives.

Rachel doesn't flinch.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
Then take me instead.

The void shudders. Effigies rustle.

A boy's hand touches hers — Dylan. Alive, flesh warm.

DYLAN
Mom?

She clutches him. Relief floods.

Elly looms, towering now, arms branching like antlers.

ELLY

Return what is owed.

Rachel meets her gaze.

RACHEL

Then keep me.

Elly inhales. Rachel is wrenched back against the wall — like the others, forced to face the corner.

Dylan screams. His voice echoes into the woods.

EXT. OAK CLEARING - PRESENT - CONTINUOUS

Dylan stumbles out of the hollow, coughing, alive. Tom catches him, pulls him away.

The oak rumbles. Effigies clatter.

Tom yells to Hart.

TOM

Go!

They drag Dylan, sprinting. The forest reshapes to stop them — trunks closing, branches clawing. But they push through.

Behind them, Rachel's scream echoes — then cuts off.

The blue light dies. Silence returns.

EXT. SUBURBAN EDGE - PRE-DAWN

Tom and Dylan stumble out of the woods. Muddy, bleeding, alive.

Dylan collapses to the ground, sobbing.

Tom crouches beside him. Holds him. Silent, haunted.

Behind them, in the trees, faint in dawn's first light: a stick figure sways. Its arms are raised. A ribbon flutters from its wrist — blue.

EXT. BLACK OAK - 1785 - MORNING

Archer kneels before the hollow. Alone now.

ARCHER
Lord, forgive me.

The hollow answers with silence.

Archer rises. Steps into the hollow. His form is swallowed whole.

Effigies clatter. The tally marks grow.

EXT. BLACK OAK - PRESENT - MORNING

The oak stands quiet, innocent. Birds sing.

But inside the hollow, new tally marks are visible - the last one still damp.

FADE OUT.

TITLE CARD:
The woods remember. The woods
return.

CUT TO BLACK.