

THE WINTERERS

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. NORTH PINE RIVER - DAY

Mist traces a dark ribbon of water.

A body floats into view, carried along like driftwood. CRIES of excitement - those of unseen children - accompany its journey from a wooded bank.

The body twists in the current. Face-down. Barefoot. Scalp hacked down to bone white skull.

A figure leads a pony from the treeline onto a gravel-bar.

CHUMANI, Sioux, 30s, draped in a blanket, watches the corpse snag in the shallows. She makes the sign of the cross.

ERASTUS WILKES, mid-50s, a grizzled trapper wrapped in furs, joins her at the water's edge. He leads a mule laden with beaver traps and dead muskrats.

BOY, 7, and GIRL, 8, gather to watch as Erastus and Chumani wade out and haul the body back to land.

EXT. SOUTH PINE RIVER - REED CABIN - DAY

First light crowns distant foothills beyond open prairie.

SUPER: NORTHWEST TERRITORY, 1840.

The hem of a dress wavers in the water's flow -

TESS REED, early 30s, stands in the river to her thighs. She clutches a cross pendant to her chest. Eyes closed. A careworn soul praying for the strength to hold on.

GIRL'S VOICE (O.S.)
(distant)

Ma!

Tess teeters, almost as if willing the river to take her.

GIRL'S VOICE (O.S.)
(closer)

Ma!

Tess opens her eyes. Her breath returns in a gasp.

EXT. REED CABIN - DAY

A cabin nestles above the river between forest and open prairie. A small corral holds a horse and pony.

Goats stare through the brushwood rails of a roofed pen. A half-circle of pickets stakes the boundary of an adjoining enclosure.

MOLLY REED, 6, a quiet child never far from her mother's side, watches Tess hammer pickets into the dirt. Molly's left arm hangs loose, withered from palsy.

BARKING O.S. Tess looks to the river.

A HOUND paces the bank, barking a warning.

Downstream, the BECKETT BOY, 10, emerges from the prairie onto the opposite bank. He carries a BRASS KETTLE to the water. Beyond him, an open wagon heads out onto the plain.

BECKETT SENIOR, late 20s, follows him out. He raises his hat to Tess in greeting. Helps the boy fill the kettle.

A sadness overtakes her. Tess turns away, unable to bear it.

AGGIE (O.S.)

What are you doing?

AGGIE REED, 15, headstrong, the awkwardness of youth in her gait, hurries from the cabin.

AGGIE

They might know something!

She takes off, her dress threatening to trip her as she races towards the river.

EXT. SOUTH PINE RIVER - DAY

Aggie tears along the wash.

AGGIE

Mister Beckett! Mister Beckett!

Father and son retreat after the wagon. The distance already too great for her voice to carry above the rumble of water.

EXT. REED CABIN - DAY

Tess pounds a new picket into place.

INT. REED CABIN - DAY

A single window lights a cramped space. A heavy door separates a back room. A bed pulled to the corner. A double-barreled shotgun rests on wall pegs.

Aggie sits at a table plucking feathers from a dead hen.

Tess enters with Molly. She empties a pail of milk into a jug. Not a flicker of acknowledgment from Aggie.

TESS

That's the last bird, no waste now.

Aggie bristles, fingers picking over the bird with a sullen intensity.

TESS

Firewood needs bringing in. Molly Girl, where's your brother?

Molly toes the dirt floor - something to hide.

EXT. REED CABIN - OUTSKIRTS - DAY

Tess, shotgun on her hip, follows the hound as it bounds up an incline towards a rock outcrop. She keeps one eye on the surrounds. Ever watchful.

EXT. LOOKOUT POINT - DAY

The forest gives way to a bluff overlooking the prairie. The river rumbles fifty feet below.

Dust traces the Becketts' wagon into the distance. Tess stares after it, absorbed. A muted WHIMPER pulls her back.

TESS

You can't keep doing this. Got more chores than daylight and I can't be up here hunting on you.

JOSEPH REED, 7, skinny, unwashed, crouches behind a boulder, trying in vain to quieten the hound from giving him away.

JOSEPH

Molly's a tattle-tale.

Tess returns her gaze to the wagon.

TESS

What I'd do without her.

EXT. BLUFF'S TRAIL - RISE - DAY

The Beckett Boy wanders the crest of a rise. Below, Beckett Senior leads the wagon's mule team on foot.

EXT. BLUFF'S TRAIL/BECKETTS' WAGON - DAY

MRS. BECKETT, late 20s, scans the prairie from the wagon seat. She checks on a BLOND BOY, 5, and BLOND GIRL, 6, riding in back. They peer over the top board, watching their brother traverse the bluff.

MRS. BECKETT
You sure this the trail?

BECKETT SENIOR
This the trail.

MRS. BECKETT
The right trail?

Beckett Senior tightens. Pretends not to hear.

MRS. BECKETT
Don't see why he couldn't just wait on us. You oughta have insisted. Lord knows Tom Noakes' a man of poor character.

(no reply)
You hear me? I know you hear me.

BECKETT SENIOR
This the right trail. He'll be here.

MRS. BECKETT
Well, he ain't here now and that's what he gave his word to.

She turns to the bluff to see her son paused, his attention drawn to something beyond the rise. She frowns.

EXT. BLUFF'S TRAIL - RISE - DAY

The Beckett Boy stares into a crease in the land, trying to make sense of what he sees:

Two horses stand hobbled. A third lies dead. A campfire smolders; bedroll strewn nearby. A wine jug on its side.

The Beckett Boy gasps at the sight of a DEAD MAN. He lies sprawled in the dirt. Barefoot. His scalp cut free.

TWO FIGURES hunker in the shade of a tree, rifling through the dead man's possessions.

The smaller of the two alerts his companion to the Boy. A frozen beat as they stare at one another across the distance - caught in the act.

EXT. BLUFF'S TRAIL/BECKETTS' WAGON - DAY

Mrs. Beckett studies her eldest in growing concern.

BECKETT BOY (O.S.)

Pa!

Beckett Senior looks up at the bluff.

INT. REED CABIN - NIGHT

At the table, Aggie, Molly, Joseph and Tess sit with their heads bowed. A bowl of steaming broth set before each.

Joseph sours a look at Molly. She shrinks, guilty.

AGGIE

...Gracious God, pardon our sins, and
bless these mercies for our use, help
us to eat and drink to Thy glory.
Amen.

MOLLY/JOSEPH/TESS

Amen.

They take up spoons and eat.

MOLLY

Ma, where was they going?

TESS

West.

MOLLY

But where?

TESS

Nowhere particular. Just moving on.

JOSEPH

They'll get lost and ate by wolves.
That's if scalpers don't get them
first-

TESS

Joseph.

JOSEPH

That's what Pa says-

TESS

I don't want such talk at the table.

MOLLY

Ma, is Pa lost?

TESS

No. He'll be home soon enough.

Aggie abruptly shifts her chair. She stares across the room, her face a mask of contempt.

The children pause, feeling the sting of Aggie's challenge in the silence.

Tess continues eating, refusing to be baited.

TESS

There's a hungry dog will eat what ungrateful children won't.

A glare from Aggie sets the children back to their meal.

LATER

Aggie sits darning clothes at the table.

Joseph tussles with the hound - a close bond between them.

Tess huddles with Molly by the fire. She talks to the child in hushed tones. Pulls her close. A tender moment.

Aggie watches them. She catches her mother's smile give way to a worried frown.

INT. REED CABIN - BACK ROOM - NIGHT

Joseph and Aggie sit on a bed. They watch Molly twitch in her sleep - in the throes of a nightmare.

JOSEPH

She'll mess the bed again.

AGGIE

We'll wake her before that.

JOSEPH
You can sleep in it.

He flops down out of the way.

Aggie takes Molly's hand, gently rubs her palm. Molly stirs awake. She sobs, scared and confused. Aggie comforts her.

INT. REED CABIN - NIGHT

Shadows flicker in the firelight.

Tess kneels in prayer, pendant clasped to her breast.

EXT. REED CABIN - DAY

A layer of frost claims the shade.

Tess, bundled against the cold, stands at the finished picket fence, watching the goats mill about the enclosure.

She notes the hound patrolling the treeline before collecting the shotgun.

EXT. SOUTH PINE RIVER - REED CABIN - DAY

Black clouds wall the horizon.

Joseph and Molly pile stones into an eddy, building a crude fish trap.

Tess crouches, surveying a stick driven into the riverbed, notched to serve as a water gauge. Her eyes shift to the coming storm in concern.

TESS
Where's your sister?

MOLLY
Took Acorn to water.

TESS
She take a blanket?

Molly thinks. Nods.

EXT. REED CABIN - DAY

Joseph steadies a mare (LADY) as Tess, dressed in a riding cape and bonnet, mounts up. Molly watches from the doorway.

TESS

See the animals penned up before
rain. I ain't back by dark, bank the
fire. And stay away from the water.

Tess sets Lady to a trot, the hound in tow. The hungry youngsters stare after her.

EXT. SOUTH PINE RIVER - RAINY LAKE TRAIL - DAY

Tess, on horseback, follows the river. She spots something ahead and draws rein. She looks off, rattled.

EXT. THE BURNED CABIN - DAY

Tess guides Lady past the charred remains of a cabin. She holds her distance, wary.

A short way on, a wooden cross leans from a roughly piled burial cairn.

A deep concern creases her brow. She heels Lady on.

EXT. SOUTH PINE RIVER - CROSSING - DAY

Tess coaxes Lady across a ford. The hound paddles alongside.

EXT. RAINY LAKE/TRADING POST - OUTSKIRTS - DAY

Wheatgrass bows to a growing wind.

OJIBWE ELDER, 60s, hair streaked with grey, sits hunched on a rise, his boney frame pressing a moth-eaten blanket.

He shifts almost imperceptibly as Tess passes. She regards him with a mixture of pity and scorn.

Moments later she tops out to see a handful of hide tents skirting a small stockade on the edge of a vast lake.

Ahead, a rider closes on the outpost.

EXT. OJIBWE ENCAMPMENT - DAY

The hound catches up to Aggie's pony (ACORN), dogging its step in excitement. Tess follows to pull up beside her.

TESS

Aggie Reed, you quit this nonsense
and turn around.

AGGIE

Molly's too scared to sleep. Joseph
taking off all the time, filling her
head with fool-talk. You carry on
like it's nothing.

Tess snatches Acorn's halter, bringing them to a stop at the
edge of the encampment.

TESS

Ain't nothing to let you alone in a
place like this.

AGGIE

The McClusky cabin - you seen it, I
know you did.

Tess looks away, unsettled. She notes the blanketed OJIBWE
watching them in inscrutable silence.

TESS

Stay where I can see you. And keep
close about our business.

To Aggie's surprise, she releases the halter. Aggie looks
from her mother to the outpost and presses Acorn forward.

Tess lingers, already regretting her decision.

EXT. TRADING POST - COURTYARD - DAY

A picket wall surrounds a cluster of log buildings and
corral. Lean-tos and sagging tents crowd muddy avenues. Any
semblance of order lost to rot and apathy.

A handful of TRAPPERS pause working on upturned canoes to
track Tess and Aggie with a dull curiosity.

The hound trots behind, pulled from one scent to another.

Aggie and Tess reach a stable and dismount. A CRYING infant
draws Aggie's attention.

JEB, mid 50s, lean, shoos a young Ojibwe from his fire -

DAANI, late teens, blanketed against the cold, shuffles
away, a bawling INFANT on her hip.

AGGIE

Daani!

Aggie takes off after her.

TESS

Aggie, wait-

INT. TRADING POST - BUNKHOUSE - DAY

Cots and bench tables ranged around a stove.

ROCQUE DESANTS, 19, thin, pale, lies on a cot staring numbly at the rafters.

AGGIE (O.S.)

Daani!

He stirs at the sound of her voice. He draws himself up, movement stiff, laced with the pain of rheumatism.

EXT. TRADING POST - COURTYARD - DAY

Aggie takes Daani by the shoulder -

AGGIE

Daani, it's Aggie. Amos' kin-

Daani turns. Aggie catches at the sight of her sunken, listless eyes.

AGGIE

Where's your man, where's Bill?

FLATWASH

Wasting your breath. There's more wit in a painted rock.

FLATWASH, 50s, fills the doorway of a lean-to. He looks her over, scratching at a crude tattoo on his bare chest.

Daani pulls the squalling infant tighter and hurries to Flatwash who ushers her inside.

AGGIE

You know where he is?

FLATWASH

I ain't minded to talk in no rain.

Tess steps between them, protective. She takes Aggie by the arm, leads her away. Flatwash leers after them.

TESS

Tie-up dog and meet me at the trade house. Don't talk to no-one.

INT. TRADING POST - BUNKHOUSE - DAY

Rocque watches from the window as the hound takes off into the trappers' camp. Aggie follows.

EXT. TRADING POST - COMPANY STORE - STOOP - DAY

Tess climbs the steps onto the stoop.

Chumani huddles with her children. The two women trade a passing look - a moment of motherly understanding bridging the gulf between them.

The door opens, HENRY WOLFERT, late 40s, harried, drawn, steps out, wiping a pair of glasses on his sleeve. He wears a clerk's attire of vest and shirt.

HENRY

Good day to you, Missus Reed. Haven't seen you in these parts for a spell. What brings you out in such weather?

TESS

Amos and Bill went north to trade. They never been gone this long before.

HENRY

Bill McClusky?

TESS

Yes.

Henry meets the news with a grim silence. He steps aside, bidding her to enter.

EXT. TRADING POST - TRAPPERS' CAMP - DAY

The hound noses the base of a tent.

Aggie pulls it away.

AGGIE

Get out of that.

The hound looks past her with a growl.

She spins -

Rocque leans on a canoe. Hat cocked. Thumb hooked in his belt with a casual ease.

He smiles, friendly. Rubs his thumb against his forefinger in a gesture for money.

ROCQUE

La chienne?

(nods to the dog)

The bitch.

AGGIE

We ain't here to trade.

ROCQUE

Then what you here for?

She grabs the dog by the scruff, leads it away.

Rocque puzzles after her before turning back to the tent with a scowl.

INT. COMPANY STORE - DAY

The roof leaks into a collection of pails.

Henry feeds kindling into a potbelly stove. Tess stands at the window watching for Aggie.

HENRY

Captain Wilkes found McClusky. Pulled him from the wash below the Brier.

He catches - unsure whether to continue. Tess gives him a look - whatever it is, she needs to hear it.

HENRY

They'd stripped his bark, cut his ears...

He holds back, not wanting to risk offending her with further detail. Tess looks to the floor. She understands.

HENRY

You're certain they were together? Amos took on a team of mules maybe a month back, came in alone.

TESS

They had an arrangement. Bill's eyes was failing him.

(MORE)

TESS (cont'd)

Amos would handle the string, see they paid him out fair.

HENRY

I didn't know.

TESS

Bill kept close about it.

HENRY

I sent Captain Wilkes with what men we could spare to scout for sign. I don't hold much hope. Likely they're long gone. The sooner we put this place behind us the better.

TESS

What do you mean?

HENRY

Word came from upriver. The Company's pulling out, barely a beaver left in the territory anyway. We all know it was coming.

He stares into the fire, drained of all emotion.

HENRY

Might be you think about joining us?

Tess returns her gaze to the courtyard. She watches Aggie leash the hound to a post.

TESS

He's bringing in our winter store.

Henry glances to the annex room, hesitant. He closes the stove door.

INT. CHAW'S TENT - DAY

A figure lies snoring on a cot. Rocque shakes him awake.

ROCQUE

Feu! Feu!

'CHAW' MORGAN, late 30s, a brawler, impulsive, face marred by rosacea, bolts upright, gut straining his shirt. He searches drunkenly for fire - finds only Rocque.

LAUGHTER from the shadows. Rocque spins -

MAVEEN, Metis Indian, early 30s, all scar tissue and sinew, grins from a pile of blankets, a wine jug rested in his lap.

Chaw snatches the jug and bullies Maveen out the exit. He rips out the stopper and takes a pull, adding a streak of wine to his stained underclothes.

ROCQUE

Where you get wine?

CHAW

Playing the wrong string, boy.

ROCQUE

We had a deal.

CHAW

I ain't say nothing about pulling oar in no squall.

ROCQUE

You scared of a little high water?

CHAW

What you know about high water, Fancy, huh? Go drain that rickety little pizzle in someone else's fire, I'll be gone when I'm good and ready.

The big man sinks onto the cot, cradling the jug as if it were precious cargo.

Rocque glowers and storms out.

INT. COMPANY STORE - DAY

Henry threads his way through the buckets to place a sack of grain on the counter. Tess watches in silence.

At the far end of the room, Aggie switches her bonnet for a battered Derby hat, eyeing her reflection in a small mirror.

She startles as a face looms up behind her -

EVELYN WOLFERT, late 40s, a life of privation straining the kindness from her eyes. She stands in the annex doorway, lips pursed in scrutiny - a rose long wilted, thorns intact.

AGGIE

I was just looking.

EVELYN

Eyes is for looking.

Aggie replaces the hat, chastened.

Henry tallies the supplies in a ledger. He stiffens at the familiar cadence of Evelyn's footsteps on the hard floor.

EVELYN

Afternoon to you, Missus Reed.

TESS

Missus Wolfert.

HENRY

I didn't want to wake you.

Evelyn surveys the supplies on the counter. She holds out a hand for the ledger. Henry slides it over.

HENRY

Missus Reed came looking for word on Amos. Seems him and Bill were headed north together.

EVELYN

That right? How does she intend to cover it?

Evelyn jabs a finger at the ledger -

EVELYN

There's six mules and feed to pay for. Right there for any fool to see.

Henry's eyes dip to the counter.

TESS

Amos only took on half those animals-

EVELYN

It ain't half his name in the account.

TESS

(low)
I got children.

EVELYN

We got a company. You so taken to make your business with Sutter you go plead your case to him.

TESS

I would I could make it that far.

EVELYN

Get used to it. Soon you won't have no say in the matter. Right now you just pray your man's not belly up in Brier Creek like that beggared red whore's out there.

AGGIE

Brier Creek? What's she mean?

They turn to see Aggie - she heard it all.

AGGIE

Where's Pa?

TESS

Wait outside.

AGGIE

Where is he!

Evelyn starts for Aggie. Calm. Deliberate.

TESS

We've goats to trade, good for milk or meat-

Evelyn snatches Aggie by the ear, twists her to submission.

EVELYN

I will paddle your behind to Bend and back ever you raise your voice to me again.

She lets her go. Aggie scoots back, upsetting a bucket. She throws her mother an accusing look and races out.

EVELYN

(goodbye)
Missus Reed.

EXT. TRADING POST - COMPANY STORE - STOOP - DAY

Evelyn, at the window, watching Tess hurry after Aggie.

She notices Rocque on the sidelines. They trade a look - her jaw tightens in disapproval. She steps from view.

INT. COMPANY STORE - DAY

Evelyn marches past Henry into the annex leaving him alone with the steady drip-drip of water.

EXT. TRADING POST - COURTYARD - DAY

Aggie leans her head against Acorn, masking her tears. The animal's mane wound tight in her fist.

Tess kneels to untie the hound.

TESS
Bill's dead.

AGGIE
How?

TESS
Indians.

AGGIE
Pa?

Tess can only shake her head. Doesn't know.

TESS
He's been gone before.

AGGIE
No. Not like this.

Aggie swings into the saddle and heels the pony away.

EXT. SOUTH PINE RIVER - CROSSING - DAY

The river surges past in a rain swollen torrent.

Aggie watches Tess coax Lady to the water's edge, testing the animal's nerve - it balks.

Tess stares downriver, wracked with anxiety.

TESS
Have to wait it out.

She reins the mare around, starts back along the trail.

Aggie shrinks, feeling the anguish in her mother's voice.

TESS
Come on!

INT. TRADING POST - STABLE - NIGHT

An ill-fitting door shudders open. Lamplight casts on a damp room bedded with straw.

Tess and Aggie enter with their saddles. Henry follows holding a lantern. Aggie takes her mother's saddle and sets to hanging them on a wall hook.

HENRY

Hope I didn't speak out of turn before. We're making ready to start upriver before freeze up. We can take you. If that's what you want..?

Aggie watches her mother's reaction.

Tess nods faintly, non-committal.

HENRY

I'll fetch up some blankets.

He hands her the lantern and steps out into the night, closing the door behind him.

Aggie sends her mother a look.

TESS

Get some sleep. We're not staying a moment longer than we have to.

INT. TRADING POST - BUNKHOUSE - NIGHT

Tobacco smoke hangs in the air. Company men play cards and swap tales by candlelight. Daani nestles among them like a prize awaiting claim.

Rocque sits alone at a corner table, poring over a newspaper cutting. Chaw wobbles into a seat opposite. He leans in, conspiratorial, drunk.

CHAW

Hear the talk? We got visitors. Women kind. Henry put 'em up in the stable. That wood of his been damp so long he can't tell quim from a mule.

Rocque folds the clipping away. In no mood for talk.

CHAW

You still full of choler? Remind me what that book of yours got to say on the water south of here?

ROCQUE

It's an article.

Off Chaw's blank look -

ROCQUE

From a newspaper.

CHAW

Words all the same, boy, and they got jack shit to say on running the river south of the Sweet. Lord knows big brother can't count on your oar-bruckled carcass in a fix, so you'd better get your head right, cause I'm your best way outta here. Ain't no-one know what I know.

Rocque pounds his empty cup on the table and stalks away.

CHAW

(to himself)

Sour little sonofabitch...

(to the others)

Somebody play something!

EXT. TRADING POST - GALLERY - DAY

BILLINGS, late 30s, tall, jaded, stands guard. He listens in envy as voices spill from the warmth of the bunkhouse.

Rocque exits. They meet eyes across the distance. Billings tightens his overcoat and turns away. Rocque crosses quickly towards a squat storehouse.

EXT. TRADING POST - STOREHOUSE - NIGHT

Rocque tests the storehouse door - it's unlocked.

INT. STOREHOUSE - NIGHT

Rocque enters. He takes a seat on a stack of furs, letting his eyes adjust to the gloom. He sniffs the air.

ROCQUE

You told us that fat drunk was reliable.

EVELYN (O.S.)

I told you he was broke.

Evelyn steps from the shadows.

ROCQUE

What if Wilkes gets back before it's done?

EVELYN

Then we handle it.

ROCQUE

I don't like it. The Reed woman's here. I caught the daughter poking round camp...

A flicker of jealousy from Evelyn. Rocque knows exactly how to get under her skin.

ROCQUE

What they want with Henry?

EVELYN

What they always want. Weren't for me he'd sop to every sorry wind blew through here.

ROCQUE

Does she know about McClusky?

EVELYN

Knowing don't change a thing.

She steps in close, hips grinding against him.

EVELYN

You leave Morgan to me. Get some rest.

ROCQUE

For all the good it does?

She puts a finger to his lips -

EVELYN

Shhh, them screws got you all riled up again...

He tightens, masking his revulsion as she works her way down his body. He bites his lip, stares at the stacks of fur in wonder, letting her continue.

INT. TRADING POST - STABLE - NIGHT

The hound rests before the door. A fiddle scratches away O.S.

Aggie lies wrapped in a blanket. Her eyes red from crying. A hand snakes around her shoulder to draw the blanket higher.

Tess returns to the entrance. She settles in, listening to the revelry, shotgun rested across her lap.

LATER

Daylight seeps through the cracks.

Tess stirs to find Aggie gone. She snatches up the shotgun.

EXT. TRADING POST - COURTYARD - DAWN

Mist and wood-smoke hangs in the air. Torn canvas flutters. Water patters into muddy pools from buckled roofs.

Acorn and Lady water at a trough. Aggie soothes the mare, struggling to rig the saddle straps. Tess joins her.

TESS

Grandpa's old rig got a way of its own.

Aggie lets her finish. Something on her mind.

AGGIE

What do we tell them?

TESS

(re: the saddle)

Got to set it higher on the withers. She ain't like Acorn.

AGGIE

(annoyed)

I know she ain't.

TESS

Where's dog?

AGGIE

Took off on me.

She nods to the trappers' camp. Tess slides the shotgun into Lady's saddle boot.

TESS

Should of woke me.

AGGIE

I tried.

EXT. TRADING POST - TRAPPERS' CAMP - DAWN

Tess threads her way through a half-abandoned shanty of makeshift tents and leans. Campfires smolder. A hacking cough the only sign of life.

She finds the hound beside Chaw's tent. It noses the canvas walls, locked on a scent.

She frowns, reading the animal's behavior.

Crouching, she tests a corner of the tent wall - it's staked down. She tugs the knot free.

The hound growls a warning -

A paddle SLAMS Tess in the ribs. She doubles over, gasping, clawing the dirt in pain.

Evelyn stands over her, paddle raised.

EVELYN

You was warned.

The hound lunges in a flash of teeth. Maveen steps into view, an old musket set to his shoulder -

TESS

No-

Off Tess' horror as he fires.

EXT. TRADING POST - COURTYARD - DAWN

Aggie, on her feet, distressed. Rocque, half-dressed, holds her at bay as Evelyn marches Tess towards the trading post.

Maveen tags behind, dragging the dead hound by the scruff.

Chaw, still drunk, dressed in shabby underclothes, struggles to free Acorn's saddle.

AGGIE

Ma, make them stop!

EVELYN

No law. No jailhouse. No judge. Just a God given spirit of community.

AGGIE

Ma! Please, we didn't do anything!

EVELYN

Aye, you was caught!

TESS

Don't take our animals-

EVELYN

Can't take what's owed!

Aggie ducks past Rocque to grab at Chaw's arm. They struggle - Aggie gets a hand to the knife on his hip. The big man shucks her into the mud.

CHAW

Hell, no. What is you, stupid?

Tess reacts - Evelyn throws her to the ground, snatches her by the hair, paddle pressed to her throat.

EVELYN

Got her daddy's fire that one.

Tess stares hate at Evelyn.

CHAW

I ain't partial to chawing no brat,
but you got my fur up.

Aggie glowers up at him, defiant.

Rocque pushes Chaw back.

ROCQUE

Just a girl, ami.

The big man erupts, snatching Rocque by the collar, flooring him with a headbutt.

CHAW

What I tell you, Fancy?

EVELYN

(to Chaw)

You leave him be! Get that piece of
shit saddle off and see that animal
corralled!

CHAW

Woman, I ain't a one to be barked at-

HENRY

Stop it! Stop it right now!

Henry dashes into their midst.

HENRY

So much as raise another hand it'll
cost you both a month's pay!

CHAW

All just a misunderstanding, Mister
Wolfert.

EVELYN

There's no misunderstanding. That cur
of theirs attacked my man!

AGGIE

He wouldn't!

EVELYN

I warned you to mind your tongue!

Evelyn turns for Aggie - Tess instinctively clutches at her
dress. Evelyn spins on her heel, about to strike -

The rumble of HOOFBEATS pauses them all. Heads turn to see
three riders enter the courtyard at speed, drawn by the
gunfire. Erastus is among them.

HENRY

Enough! I will not tolerate fighting
on this post.

Rocque, palming his bloodied nose, flashes Evelyn a look
'let it go'.

Evelyn stares poison down on Tess. Tess stares strangely
back. No longer trying to defend herself.

Evelyn flings the paddle to the mud.

EVELYN

Pony's Company property till your
debt's paid. There ain't no
misunderstanding that.

Aggie glowers as Evelyn hefts Acorn's saddle to the ground
and leads the animal away.

The riders draw to a halt. Erastus surveys the aftermath,
brow heavy with questions.

LEMURE DESANTS, mid-20s, a serious man of quiet calculation
and brooding hostility, reaches down, helping his brother to
his feet.

Chaw melts away, anxious to leave.

JOHN 'CUTTER' BORDEAUX, early 30s, kitted head to toe in
animal skins, lines out beside Erastus. He looks from the
dead hound to Maveen in outrage.

ERASTUS

We good here, Mister Wolfert?

HENRY

Yes, we are. The rest of you back at it! I want them boats finished.

(to Maveen)

See that animal buried.

CUTTER JOHN

All of it. You on this side of the wall now.

Maveen flashes Cutter John a dark look. He shoulders the carcass and walks away.

CUTTER JOHN

What kind of fool-wit shoots a perfectly good hound...

HENRY

Where's the others?

Cutter John reins his horse around and heads off. He wants no part in that answer.

As if on cue, two grim-faced riders enter the courtyard leading a pair of pack mules.

The pack animals carry BLANKET WRAPPED BODIES roped to their backs: Three adult. Three smaller - those of children.

A stillness falls over the post.

Erastus follows Cutter John leaving Henry muted in shock.

Aggie stares at the bodies.

Tess drags herself to her feet. Limps to Aggie and helps her up, guided by a newfound urgency.

Daani haunts the sidelines, infant cradled in her arms. She watches, taking it all in.

INT. CHAW'S TENT - DAWN

Lemure searches the tent. He pauses at an oilcloth covered load, feeling out the items beneath.

He raises the cloth to reveal a pair of saddles - one with a handkerchief tied to the pommel. Lacework stained and frayed. He lets it back down again.

He spots the wine jug at the foot of the cot. He lifts the cot to find another saddle alongside a bundle of goods and a worn pair of men's boots.

EXT. TRADING POST - TRAPPERS' CAMP - DAWN

Rocque, nose plugged with cotton, crouches outside the tent.

Lemure exits. He marches past Rocque, collects a pick-axe and takes off into camp. Rocque hurries after him.

EXT. TRADING POST - GALLERY - DAY

Erastus, Henry, and Cutter John stand on the gantry looking out over the wall. A cluster of wooden crosses marks a cemetery between the post and the lake. A burial party hacks away at the ground. The bodies lined in waiting.

ERASTUS

Sioux? I doubt it. Ain't their way,
not this close to winter.

CUTTER JOHN

Ain't no Blackfoot reckon to come
this far into the territory and I
don't see no Ojibwa getting riled up
enough to go counting coup.

HENRY

A small band - hunters perhaps? Saw
themselves an opportunity?

ERASTUS

Once maybe, but twice?

CUTTER JOHN

There's Sioux wintering north of
Bend.

ERASTUS

Under truce.

HENRY

Since when did truce mean a thing?

EXT. TRADING POST OUTSKIRTS - CEMETERY - DAY

SIX MEN scrape out shallow graves in the hard ground.

Billings walks among the dead, pacing out the length of each. He halts at the smallest body, gazes, morose.

One of the stragglers from Wilkes' scouting party, TUCK, late teens, a fuzz of beard on his chin, notices.

TUCK

Poppy... Heard her ma call her that one time.

BILLINGS

Lord, take this sweet flower unto your eternal embrace.

CHAW

(to Billings)

That ain't no bible in your hand, quit preaching and dig.

BILLINGS

God damn, Morgan, you're a particular kind of heathen.

CHAW

I'm about done with this whole outfit is what I am.

BILLINGS

Well, you in luck cause this outfit done with us. We'll all be back in Bend come Christmas. Cold, hungry, and broke as ever.

The other straggler, FORNST, 30s, short, unkempt, drooping mustache, cuts Chaw a look.

NB. Dialogue in italics spoken in French.

FORNST

You work a shovel as fast as your mouth we'd be done already.

CHAW

Asshole. Think I don't know when you cussing me out, huh?

Billings grips the bigger of the corpses -

BILLINGS

Quit jawing an' take a leg.

CHAW

Sooner bury a mule than cut ground for that cheating shitheel.

BILLINGS

The man's dead, Morgan.

CHAW

Then I say we leave him spread
crooked as them cards of his. A
warning to others.

A hush falls over the group. Chaw turns to find Lemure standing graveside, pick in hand. A tense moment between the two. Chaw gives way, slowly backs out of the grave.

Lemure takes his place and starts hacking at the dirt.

Rocque takes the pick from Chaw and joins in. His every swing beset by pain.

Lemure gives his brother a look of concern. Rocque shrugs it off, keeps going, biting back the discomfort.

The others resume digging.

BILLINGS

(to Chaw)

Get on this! I ain't digging no hole
bigger than I have to.

Chaw bends and grabs the corpse by the shoulders, firing an accusing look at Maveen as he does.

EXT. REED CABIN - DAY

Tess and Aggie approach the cabin riding double.

TESS

Molly! Joseph!

No reply.

TESS

Stay up here.

Tess dismounts. Taking the shotgun, she checks the cabin door - it's barred from inside.

TESS

Joe! Molly Girl! It's Ma, open up.

The bar CLUNKS free. The door inches open, Joseph's frightened eyes appear in the gap.

INT. REED CABIN - DAY

Molly sits shaking on the bed, wrapped in a blanket.

Tess kneels beside her, consoling. Joseph looks on.

JOSEPH
I'm sorry, Ma. I couldn't stop them.

EXT. REED CABIN - DAY

The children stand outside the animal run. Molly clings to Aggie, face buried in her side.

A section of the run's brushwood rails have been forced aside. Tess crouches amid the goats' mangled remains. She keeps her back turned, hiding her despair.

TESS
Go back inside.

They don't move.

TESS
I said inside!

Aggie leads the children away.

Tess pulls a hatchet from her belt and sets to work stripping what meat remains.

AGGIE (PRE-LAP)
Gracious God, we've sinned against
Thee, and are unworthy of Thy
mercy...

INT. REED CABIN - DUSK

Aggie, head down, hands clasped on the table before her.

Joseph and Molly huddle beneath a blanket opposite.

AGGIE
...for Christ's sake. Amen.

JOSEPH/MOLLY
Amen.

The children look to Tess for her blessing. She sits apart, staring despondently into the hearth.

TESS
Eat.

They dip spoons into bowls of broth. Tess eats nothing.

A distant HOWL - a coyote.

Molly freezes in fear.

JOSEPH

They's coming back.

Aggie whispers something into Molly's ear. She starts to sing, low at first, coaxing Molly to join in.

AGGIE/MOLLY

*O' CAN'T YOU SEE YOU LITTLE TURTLE
DOVE/SITTING UNDER THE MULBERRY
TREE?/SEE HOW THAT SHE DOTH MOURN FOR
HER TRUE LOVE/AND I SHALL MOURN FOR
THEE, MY DEAR/AND I SHALL MOURN FOR
THEE.*

JOSEPH

Where's dog?

Aggie glances to her mother, continuing to distract Molly with the song.

TESS

Gone.

JOSEPH

Gone where?

Another HOWL answers the first - closer.

Aggie sings louder.

Tess tightens - their every word landing like a fresh blow.

JOSEPH

Ma, where's dog?

Tess snatches up the shotgun -

EXT. REED CABIN - DUSK

Tess marches out to a chorus of YIPS and HOWLS.

She sights the gun on a patch of brush and fires. The recoil jams the stock into her injured ribs. She sinks to her knees, overcome with pain.

The coyotes fall silent. For a moment the children's singing can be heard. The howling resumes - almost mocking.

INT. REED CABIN - DUSK

Tess, alone, stands with her dress slipped over her shoulder. She angles a hand-mirror to see bruising to her ribs. She breathes deep, wincing as her lungs fill.

She drags a battered trunk from beneath the bed. Opens it to an assortment of folded clothing.

She pulls out a dress. Lace trim - Sunday best.

Tess runs a hand along the hem, lost in memory. She stops - feeling something sewn within the fabric.

Feeling the eyes on her, she half turns -

BACKROOM

Aggie quickly closes the door. She looks to the children asleep on the bed. Holds there, deep in thought.

MAIN ROOM

Tess returns the dress to the trunk, closes the lid.

EXT. TRADING POST - GATEHOUSE - DUSK

Billings stands watch on the gantry. He hugs himself for warmth, cold and miserable.

EXT. TRADING POST - TRAPPERS' CAMP - DUSK

Erastus and Cutter John warm themselves beside a fire.

Chumani roasts meat over the coals. She talks in a language (Lakota) neither of them seems to understand. The two children sit shucking corn into a basket.

EXT. TRADING POST - COMPANY STORE - STOOP - DUSK

Henry sits brooding in his chair.

INT. TRADING POST - BUNKHOUSE - DUSK

Rocque keeps tabs on the courtyard from the window. His nose is swollen, eyes ringed with bruises.

At a table, Chaw pleads his case to a stone-faced Lemure.

Evelyn hovers, arms folded in contempt.

CHAW

...Heard he was running west so we followed him out. Only supposed to be Noakes, I didn't know he'd hired on with Beckett-

EVELYN

Supposed to get those furs downriver, not settle some petty score!

CHAW

(to Lemure)

We was careful, I swear.

ROCQUE

Like you were careful to bury the saddles?

CHAW

I guess you ain't wise to the cost of good leather.

ROCQUE

I know the price of a noose.

CHAW

(to Lemure)

Ain't no-one to know. You seen 'em, right? Made it look like them others-

ROCQUE

Them others wasn't children!

CHAW

You think I'm right with that?

(to Evelyn)

I said to scare 'em is all, send 'em on, but that half-breed help of yourn went mad dog on me-

In a flash, she grips his ear and twists, mashing his face against the table. Her voice a warning hiss -

EVELYN

Don't you put that on me!

VOICES from the courtyard.

ROCQUE

Hey-

She lets him go. Chaw clutches a hat to his ear, fuming in silence.

Rocque leaves the window, takes a seat beside Lemure. He stares hard at Chaw, emboldened by his brother's presence.

A gaggle of Company hands enter.

EVELYN

You've a job of work to do.

She snatches up a jug and marches over to tend the newcomers.

LEMURE

I seen them. Oh, I seen them.

Chaw withers under Lemure's burning gaze.

LEMURE

Be ready an hour before dawn.

CHAW

What about Wilkes?

ROCQUE

This dumb son of a bitch.

LEMURE

He'll be tired from the trail and keen for that squaw of his. Guard won't be trouble. Same plan, we lead them to you. Do it right and Henry won't have the numbers nor stomach to follow. Just be ready.

He leans forward, menacing.

LEMURE

You think to cross me again, you will thank the Devil himself for the pleasures of Hell.

Chaw stands and slinks to the exit. They watch him go.

Rocque takes a drink. Lemure notices him struggle to grip the cup. Rocque sees this, looks away, embarrassed.

ROCQUE

I'll pull my weight out there like anyone else.

LEMURE

*Sooner we reach the Confluence,
sooner we leave the territory. Leave
this cold behind. You'll be strong
again, you'll see.*

He grips Rocque's shoulder, consoling. Rocque shrugs him off, thumbs his swollen nose.

LEMURE

Don't worry, you're still fancy.

ROCQUE

Find a wife, brother.

LEMURE

Maybe I find someone else's.

INT. REED CABIN - DAWN

The fire, burned down to embers.

Tess sleeps fitfully on the bed.

Aggie, dressed in coat and hat watches her mother a moment before taking the shotgun from the wall.

She gives Tess a last look and turns for the door.

EXT. NORTH PINE RIVER - DAY

Water trickles from the cuff of a worn leather boot -

Aggie sits binding a rag around her red, swollen foot.

She picks her way upriver, pausing to scan the margins, checking debris caught in snags.

Ahead, crows wheel above the treeline.

She approaches, wary, each step measured with caution. She reaches the water's edge.

Flotsam circles a deep eddy. A fleshy, discoloured shape floats amid the debris.

Gripping tree roots for balance, Aggie leans precariously over the water, probing the shape with a stick, trying to separate it from a tangle of brushwood.

She clears the brush. The shape duly rights itself - a bloated belly twisting to the surface, dragging with it a shriveled canine face.

Aggie quickly pulls away, nauseated.

It starts to rain.

EXT. NORTH PINE RIVER/BRIER CREEK - DAY

Aggie, rain-soaked and miserable, shelters among a patch of willows. Opposite, a creek snakes down from the hills. She watches it empty into the river.

A distant GUNSHOT pulls her attention upstream.

EXT. NORTH PINE RIVER - DAY

Aggie creeps through the brush.

Ahead, the undergrowth gives way to a gravel bar. A 20-foot flatboat rests nose to bank. A tarp covered cargo rises above the gunwales.

She scans the shoreline for activity. Sees nothing. She holds there, thinking.

GRAVEL BAR

Aggie reaches the boat. She looks around, wary.

She steps into the shallows and peers inside the hold: A leather bag, a shovel and a pick rest beside the cargo.

Opening the bag, she finds a bundle of jerky. She eats some, chewing hard. Overcome with hunger.

Something catches her eye. She raises the tarp to reveal a BRASS KETTLE.

Off her reaction - recognising it.

Aggie lifts the lid - a cloth wrap has been stuffed inside.

She opens the wrap, pulls out a clump of blond hair. It takes her a moment to understand.

She gasps, horrified.

Then she hears it - the CRUNCH of footsteps on the gravel.

Aggie wraps the scalps and stuffs them inside her coat. She covers the kettle, snatches up the shotgun and wades around the stern, putting the boat between her and the gravel bar.

She presses to the hull, breath catching with shock as cold water seeps into her clothes.

She listens as the footsteps stop. Something THUDS down onto the wash.

Silence. Now the footsteps backtrack...

She cocks the shotgun's hammers.

Metal SCRAPES wood as something is dragged from the boat.

The FOOTSTEPS resume - moving away.

She breathes again.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)

You gonna be out there all day?

Aggie looks upriver to see Maveen idling along the bar. Musket yoked across his shoulders. A dead muskrat strung from the stock. From his vantage point on the river's curve, she's plainly visible behind the boat.

He looks up - sees her. He freezes.

Aggie blinks. Her eyes find the hunting knife in his belt.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)

What you waiting on?

Maveen's confusion gives way to a cruel smile -

BOOM! She fires a single barrel. Maveen stumbles back, hit in the gut.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)

What the hell?

Aggie swings around the stern and fires the second barrel in the direction of the voice.

A pistol shot THWACKS into the cargo.

She ducks, slips and goes under, grabbing for the boat against the water's pull.

Aggie surfaces, clings to the hull. She grabs the shotgun like a club and wades around the boat, terrified.

She peers out to see a figure running for the treeline.

Maveen stumbles into the river clutching his stomach.

She looks to the boat.

Aggie frees the mooring line and pushes off, clambering aboard as the vessel catches the current.

EXT. FLATBOAT/NORTH PINE RIVER - DAY

Aggie checks the shore - no sign of the second man.

Ahead, Maveen rides the flow, groping his way towards the far bank.

She looks around - a ten-foot setting pole rests against the cargo. She snatches it up and lunges -

Maveen dives just in time, the pole's iron tip chasing him into darkness.

She jabs blindly at the water, over and over until WHAM! The pole strikes solid mass. She doubles down and hammers it home before collapsing in an exhausted heap.

Aggie pulls herself to the gunwale and peers over.

A tense moment passes before Maveen's body corks to the surface, spinning in the boat's wake.

EXT. FLATBOAT/WATERWAY - DAY

Aggie poles the boat along a narrow channel flanked by reeds. Ahead, the channel widens into a lake.

EXT. FLATBOAT/SWEETWATER POINT - DAY

The boat noses into a reed bed, swallowed from view.

Aggie strips back the tarp to stacks of bound furs.

She opens a sack to a collection of silver-wear, boots, and personal affects.

She finds a saddle. She stares at the handkerchief tied to the pommel, lost in the silence.

INT. STOREHOUSE - DAY

Henry gazes at the empty room. Evelyn watches him with brooding contempt - a lit fuse nearing its end.

Erastus enters. Henry doesn't turn.

ERASTUS

Flatboat's gone. Billings said Morgan offered to stand his watch. Him and the Half Breed the only ones unaccounted for.

Henry, barely listening. Lost in a dark place.

Erastus shifts, uncomfortable in the silence.

ERASTUS

Mister Wolfert?

HENRY

I want a written account from every man.

EVELYN

Half them fools can't sign their names.

HENRY

Then they'll dictate to the ones who can.

EVELYN

What for? Them tall hats upriver are done with us.

HENRY

What happens on this post is my responsibility.

EVELYN

You're a damned fool. Captain Wilkes, have the men fetch arms.

Henry stands there, his back to them, spirit broken.

Erastus weighs his decision, caught between duty and force of nature.

EXT. TRADING POST - STOREHOUSE - DAY

The Company men loiter about the yard; Lemure, Rocque, and Billings among them.

Erastus emerges from the storehouse -

ERASTUS

I need six men and arms. Rest of you
get working on the boats.

Lemure and Rocque step forward - eager volunteers.

EXT. REED CABIN - DAY

Molly wraps her arms around Aggie's waist, helping her the last few steps to the cabin. Aggie, soaked through and exhausted from the long walk.

MOLLY

Ma!

Tess hurriedly exits, catching Aggie as her tired legs give way.

TESS

Help get her inside.

INT. REED CABIN - DUSK

Aggie sits shivering beneath a blanket by the fire. Her boots set out to dry.

At the table, Tess sits with the pouch of scalps and the handkerchief before her. The air weighs heavy between them.

TESS

What in the name of God were you
thinking?

AGGIE

I had to know he ain't out there.

TESS

You could've been killed!

AGGIE

I only meant to take a little food, I
swear. He saw me - the one who shot
Dog.

She stares at the pouch, lost in the horror.

AGGIE

He's dead. I killed him. Oh, God...

She breaks, tears stream her cheeks. Tess goes to her, comforting, not knowing what to say.

AGGIE

They killed them. They killed the Becketts. ...We have to tell Mister Wolfert. He'll help us, won't he? He'll take us upriver - to Aunt Rosa's.

TESS

Hush now.

AGGIE

They had his saddle!

TESS

Aggie, that's enough!

AGGIE

We can't stay here, we won't make the winter.

Tess snatches up the handkerchief and tosses it into the fireplace.

TESS

We are one before God.

The words cut through Aggie like a knife.

Tess marches to the trunk, throws it open, angrily sifting through the clothing.

TESS

We'll dry the powder. Trap coyote if we have to. We'll make do.

AGGIE

Ma-

TESS

Rest. I'll see to it.

Aggie sucks it down. Knows it's useless.

Tess catches, staring into the trunk at the pretty dress.

LATER

A thin layer of gunpowder rests on a linen sheet set safely back from the hearth to dry.

Tess sits close by, watching for errant sparks. She's sleepy, eyelids heavy.

All at once she tenses, listening intently.

BACKROOM

Aggie lies sleeping beside the younger children. A faint sound from outside the cabin. She opens her eyes, sleepy - a hand covers her mouth. She looks up to see Tess.

O.S. a WHINNY.

TESS

The other one, did he see your face?

Aggie shakes her head - she doesn't know.

TESS

Lock the door. Don't make a sound.

Tess removes her hand and quietly exits. Aggie slips from the bed and bars the door.

MAIN ROOM

Tess collects the shotgun. She hesitates, looks to the powder laid out.

Working quickly, she wraps the powder in the linen and tidies it away.

She stuffs the pouch of scalps beneath the mattress.

She takes the hatchet from beside the hearth, conceals it about her person.

EXT. REED CABIN - NIGHT

Tess edges around the cabin, shotgun to her shoulder.

Lady capers about the corral, spooked.

TESS

Step forward. Hands raised.

A figure steps from the shadows. One hand aloft, the other clutches a bloody sash to his neck. His face is hidden beneath the hood of a slicker.

Tess stares at the figure in cold fear.

INT. REED CABIN - NIGHT

Chaw sits shivering at the table in his undershirt, sash held to his neck. The look of a hunted man.

CHAW

...I tried to hold them off, but them savages was on us like a swarm. Thought I was set to die out there - if I hadn't smelt your fire.

He gulps down a cup of water.

TESS

Go easy.

CHAW

You got something with bite? Can't barely feel my toes.

TESS

We ain't.

CHAW

Tobacco then?

TESS

No.

Tess places a dish of steaming water and a sewing kit on the table. She takes a breath, composing herself.

TESS

Show me -

He removes the sash to reveal a spread of pellets embedded in his neck and upper shoulder.

Tess inspects the wound, trying to hold her composure. She opens the sewing kit.

CHAW

You know what you're doing?

TESS

Grandpa spelled some in the hog-yards. Ma taught us to patch a man long before his shirt.

CHAW

Ever see her pull lead?

TESS

Not on nothing she weren't fixing to eat. You'll want to take hold of something.

BACK ROOM

Aggie carefully feels her way along the wall to a small gap in the wood. She peers through:

AGGIE'S POV: Tess settles beside Chaw. She dampens a rag in the dish and gently tilts his head to clean the wound.

MAIN ROOM

Chaw's gaze skims the cabin to rest on the shotgun - returned to the wall. He flinches -

CHAW

Jesus-

Tess pauses, nervous.

He nods for her to continue. No sooner does she touch him than he pulls away. She reaches to brace his chin - he catches her hand.

CHAW

Sure you ain't got nothing stronger?

TESS

I'm sure.

CHAW

Just cut to the pulling.

She sets the rag aside. Her hand trembles as she takes out an awl - a steel point housed in a bone handle.

He grips the table, wincing as she probes the torn flesh.

Aggie watches them through the narrow gap.

PLIP. A pellet drops into the dish.

Tess looks back at him. He studies her a beat, thawing ever so slightly to her touch.

CHAW

I got a taste for the liquor. I know the Lord don't look kindly on it.

It's an apology, of sorts. He tilts his head for her to continue. She works another pellet free and deposits it in the dish.

CHAW

I'm a god-fearing man, I appreciate you might see it different, but right now I'm fearing what's out there a whole sight more.

TESS

Helps if you don't talk.

CHAW

Then I'll say it plain. I need your horse.

TESS

We can't.

CHAW

We don't got no choice.

TESS

She don't take to strangers-

CHAW

Woman, I bled a trail from here to the river.

TESS

I can't let you take her.

CHAW

I'll send back for you - fetch a bible I'll swear on it!

TESS

That horse is all we got.

CHAW

You know what happens they find us. How they take their time. You want they be burying your kin same as Beckett's?

Tess looks to the bed, conscious of the scalps - ever more conscious of his lies.

TESS

We go together. All of us. First light.

CHAW

You got plenty powder for that
scattergun?

TESS

There's powder.

CHAW

Good. We'll set a watch. Lord help us
they find us.

He tilts his head, bidding her to continue.

His gaze strays to the shotgun. A glint of light catches his
eye: a droplet beads on the muzzle.

He frowns, putting it together. His knuckles whiten.
Fighting the urge to pull away.

His eyes scan the room with a newfound purpose. He fixes on
Aggie's boots set to dry before the fire.

The droplet patters to a small patch of damp earth below.

BACK ROOM

AGGIE'S POV: Tess drops the last pellet into the dish. She
places the awl alongside and hands him the rag.

TESS

Hold it tight while I fetch a
dressing.

She moves out of view behind him.

CHAW

There's this territory down south,
heard about it from one of them
newspapers...

As he talks, he palms the awl with his free hand. His gaze
shifts to the back room with suspicion.

MAIN ROOM

Through the crack, Aggie looks on in horror.

CHAW

...An article's how they call it.
Open land, good soil and best of all
there ain't no winter, least not like
here. You know how that sounds after
all these years?

BACK ROOM

AGGIE'S POV: She shifts, trying to find a line of sight to her mother. Chaw continues to talk while subtly positioning himself to strike.

CHAW

...Preachers like to talk about
finding truth in the word of God. I
say a man find truth in that article-

Tess appears behind him - THWACK! She buries the hatchet in his skull.

END POV

Aggie recoils, dumbstruck.

MAIN ROOM

Tess backs away, finding the wall for support. She looks to the shotgun - to the damp earth below.

Chaw raises a trembling hand to the blade, staring at her in shocked disbelief. Blood snakes from his hairline to his chin, pattering to the table.

The awl slips from his grasp, rattling across the floor.

She startles as his chair clatters to the floor. He stands, a far-gone look in his eyes. He steps towards the door.

She edges around him and lifts the bar...

EXT. REED CABIN - NIGHT

Tess watches Chaw stagger into the gloom. A dead man walking, guided by some fading impulse.

His steps falter, he pitches headlong into the brush, boot heels poking from the foliage.

INT. REED CABIN - NIGHT

Tess sits at the table staring blankly across the room.

Aggie emerges from the back. She takes it all in. Her mother's silence. The fallen chair. The blood.

Aggie rights the chair. Collects the awl.

A look passes between them. An understanding.

Aggie gathers the rag and wordlessly begins to clean the bloody mess.

EXT. NORTH PINE RIVER - TRAIL - DAY

Seven horsemen ride through a dawn mist.

Fornst and Cutter John lead. Erastus follows with Lemure and Rocque side-by-side. Billings and Tuck in rear.

Rocque darts his brother a nervous look.

Lemure stares calmly ahead.

The foliage thins and they emerge onto the grass flat between the gravel bar and willow grove.

The brothers slow, casting around in anticipation.

They trade a look, confused. Rocque sets a thumb to the hammer of his rifle. Lemure shakes his head 'no'.

CUTTER JOHN

Over here!

EXT. REED CABIN - OUTSKIRTS - DAY

A pair of boot heels furrow the dirt. Tess leads Lady towards the escarpment, Chaw's body dragging behind. Hatchet still lodged in his skull.

EXT. LOOKOUT POINT - DAY

Tess peers over the edge, gauging the drop to the river.

Chaw's body lies bound and weighted with rocks. She takes hold of the hatchet and wrenches it free. It releases with a crack of bone, sending her slipping onto her backside.

The weight shifts, pulling Chaw's stiffened corpse on its side. His dead eyes stare through her.

Tess lashes out in a fit of rage, kicking at the body, inching it back until it flops over the ledge.

She slumps. Sobbing. Drained.

EXT. NORTH PINE RIVER - GRAVEL BAR - DAY

Cutter John probes the dead muskrat with his knife. He notes the twine binding its legs; the birdshot raking its hide.

CUTTER JOHN

Looks like they planned on setting
down awhile.

Erastus heels a bundle of beaver pelts onto its side.

ERASTUS

Something changed their minds...

He crouches to inspect the twine securing the bundle. Tests the knot, the wheels turning.

ERASTUS

This ain't one of ours.

Billings paces, agitated.

BILLINGS

Crossed each other. That's the nature
of mutts, nothing but a corruption.

CUTTER JOHN

Helluva weight for one man to pull
oar on.

BILLINGS

Ain't sense enough between their ears
to reckon with that.

Rocque sits in silence at the water's edge. Maveen's rusted musket cradled in his lap.

Tuck and Fornst emerge onto the wash upstream.

TUCK

Nothing this a'way.

Billings scatters gravel with an angry kick.

BILLINGS

They gone. Hacked up, run off or
drowned, don't make no difference.
They gone.

Lemure stalks the grass flat. He finds a pick-axe. A shovel nearby. Chaw's pistol a few paces away.

He traces the line of possessions to the forest beyond. He makes sure no-one else is looking and slips Chaw's pistol beneath his coat.

LEMURE

There's a trail here.

BILLINGS

Ain't you hear what I said?

LEMURE

I'll lead a group onto the high
ground and around the spit. What you
say, Captain?

ROCQUE

I'll go.

ERASTUS

Take Cutter. Rest of us'll track the
river far as the Sweet and circle
around. Rendezvous on the South Fork.
Find anything, let it be till we
together. Tuck, take care these
pelts.

Lemure stands and heads for the horses.

Rocque heaves the old musket into the river and follows.

Billings spits and glowers after them.

EXT. REED CABIN - DAY

Lady nibbles at the grass, reins dragging in the dirt.

Molly gathers the reins. She looks around, searching for her mother. She frowns and moves towards the river.

Ahead, a figure lies across the trail: Tess.

Molly stops cold -

MOLLY

Mama..?

INT. REED CABIN - DAY

Tess lies on her bed in a cold sweat. Joseph and Molly sit beside her with a pitcher and ladle.

At the table, Aggie dries a measure of gunpowder, sifting it from a piece of cloth into a powder-gourd.

MOLLY

Will she die?

AGGIE

She needs food and rest.

Aggie crouches at her mother's bedside. She dips a rag into the pitcher and pushes it into Molly's hand. She guides the child in moistening her mother's lips.

AGGIE

Just like this. Not too much now.
Joseph, you don't let that fire out.
I ain't back by first light tomorrow
you take Lady and ride to the trade
post for help.

Aggie pulls on a battered hat. She takes the shotgun from the wall. Gives them a last look and exits.

EXT. FOREST TRAIL - DAY

Cutter John walks ahead. Rocque and Lemure follow on foot, leading all three horses up an incline.

ROCQUE

You think they crossed us?

Nothing from Lemure.

ROCQUE

*It's a sign, telling us to head back
north. We could raise sheep.*

LEMURE

*Why set down if they meant to cross
us? Why not keep going?*

ROCQUE

Indians?

LEMURE

Indian would have taken the guns.

ROCQUE

They took the boat...

They continue in silence for a few paces.

ROCQUE

*Old Brouchard had so many sheep he
kept a man on just to count them.*

LEMURE

Hey-

They join Cutter John at a band of rock. Cutter runs his finger against a smear of blood on a narrow lip. Drawing a knife, he traces the outline of a partial boot-print.

CUTTER JOHN

That's a boot cap. Used a hand to steady. Footed the same spot.

Lemure's eyes flick ahead, searching...

EXT. SOUTH PINE RIVER - REED CABIN - DAY

A cricket kicks against a watery death.

Joseph stands over the fish trap, a stick poised above the struggling insect, ready to strike.

O.S. a horse NICKERS. He squints downriver, frowns.

INT. REED CABIN - DAY

Joseph shakes his mother awake.

JOSEPH

Ma, ma, wake up.

Tess rouses. She looks around in sleepy confusion, trying to make sense of what she sees:

Lemure stands beside the empty wall pegs. Rocque warms himself by the fire. Molly sits at the table, feet kicking nervously against the leg - TAP-TAP-TAP...

LEMURE

Are you sick?

Off Tess' blank look -

ROCQUE

He asks if you are sick?

Tess tries to rise, desperately trying to remain calm.

ROCQUE

No no, please. We stopped to water our horses. The boy said you were... in difficulty.

TESS

Ain't no trouble. Molly-

Molly slips from the chair - Rocque sweeps her up, sits, balancing her on his knee. He smiles, reassuring.

ROCQUE

Such a sweet child. A shy one.

(to Molly)

I have a bird, here in my pocket. You want to see? He is shy too.

He rests his hat on the table and takes out a kerchief, directing his words to Tess as he spreads it out.

ROCQUE

The Wolfert woman, she's some push on her, eh? A tongue that could turn a river back on itself.

Lemure stalks the room, peering into the backroom as he passes. He stops at the hearth, lifts the lid on a kettle suspended from a tripod by a chain.

Tess watches nervously as he takes out a canteen, pours water into the kettle then lowers the chain bringing it closer to the fire.

The children look on as Rocque waves a hand over the kerchief - like a magician.

ROCQUE

There's talk of a raiding party. Sioux. You have heard this..?

TESS

Joseph, take your sister and fetch up firewood.

LEMURE

They stay.

TESS

Begging your pardon-

Lemure cuts her off with a hostile look. He uses a stick to stir up the embers. His eyes narrow.

Rocque pinches the corners of the kerchief, tilts his hands - a lump rises in the centre. It's as if a 'bird' were trapped beneath the fabric. Molly smiles.

ROCQUE

Our companions were to meet us above the Brier.

TESS

This here's the South Fork.

ROCQUE

Of course. They were not there, so...

Molly reaches out to touch the 'bird' - Rocque lets the kerchief fall flat.

ROCQUE

He's gone, into the ether. Like our friends. Maybe you have seen them?

Molly shakes her head.

ROCQUE

You have a sister, no?

TESS

We don't get folk out this way all that often. You're the first people we've seen in a long time.

LEMURE

Is a terrible thing that happened to the old man.

Tess steals a glance at the hatchet beside the hearth.

LEMURE

I was there when Captain Wilkes brought in that squaw of his. Said she fired the cabin. Had to haul her away for her own good. Not the first time I heard of such a thing.

He places a half-burnt scrap of cloth on the table.

A flicker of unease as Tess recognises the lacework edging the handkerchief's remains.

LEMURE

Some burn what they want to forget. Others, what they want to hide.

The kettle's lid rattles with the escaping heat.

LEMURE

Two men - one a half-breed, have you seen them?

TESS

I told you, we've seen no-one.

LEMURE

Trail led us here.

TESS

There's trails all over these hills.

LEMURE

This one's the blood kind.

TESS

Coyotes killed our animals, dragged them off every-which-way. I'll show you-

She stands - Lemure blocks her way.

LEMURE

The older one, where is she?

TESS

My family's my concern. I see your companions, I'll be sure to pass on yours.

LEMURE

You sent her away? The trading post perhaps? Why?

A faint WHISTLE - like a bird call - pulls Rocque's attention to the window.

Lemure hears it too.

LEMURE

Pick one.

TESS

You need to go.

LEMURE

Pick.

JOSEPH

You need to go!

TESS

Please, leave us be.

He runs his gaze between the children, gauging her reaction to each. Finally, he settles on Molly.

It's too much for Tess to bear, she looks away.

Lemure leads Molly to the hearth and crouches beside her. Steam seeps from beneath the kettle's lid.

LEMURE

Show me your hand.

Molly looks to her mother, not understanding.

TESS

Please...

Molly stretches out her good arm.

Lemure sets the lid aside.

EXT. SOUTH PINE RIVER - REED CABIN - DAY

The horses water in the shallows. Cutter John sits on a rock, soaking his bare feet. He lets out a whistle, listens for a reply. Nothing. He looks back at the cabin.

INT. REED CABIN - DAY

At the window, Rocque keeps tabs on Cutter John, wary.

TESS

(whispered)

I'm begging you.

Lemure stares Tess down, willing her to concede as he guides Molly's hand towards the kettle's mouth.

EXT. SOUTH PINE RIVER - REED CABIN - DAY

Cutter John finishes pulling on his boots. He collects his rifle and starts up the bank.

INT. REED CABIN - DAY

Rocque drops a hand to his pistol.

ROCQUE

Brother.

Lemure clamps a hand over Molly's mouth.

Tess looks to the hatchet -

Joseph springs from his chair, snatches up the hatchet and rounds on Lemure with a clumsy swing -

Lemure catches his wrist, halting the blade a hair from his scalp. He twists it from the boy's grasp and swats him away.

TESS

Molly!

Molly hares into the back room. Tess pulls Joseph to his feet and bundles him after her.

She pulls the door closed, blocking it with her body, eyes darting frantically between them.

Rocque, unsure, looks to his brother - it's his play.

Lemure rests the hatchet on the table. Smooths his hair over. Rattled by the close call.

EXT. REED CABIN - DAY

Cutter John closes on the cabin. The door swings open, Lemure and Rocque exit, squinting into daylight.

LEMURE

Boy says he seen smoke upstream.
Could be a camp.

CUTTER JOHN

He drawing you a map?

They continue past. Rocque darts his brother a look, uneasy.

Tess steps into the doorway. Cutter John touches his hat in greeting. She stares, not knowing whom to trust. She closes the door. He frowns, troubled by her reaction.

Rocque sees Erastus approaching with the others in the distance. Lemure has seen them too. He holds out a canteen -

LEMURE

Drink.

ROCQUE

I'm not thirsty.

LEMURE

*You'd rather spend your days a
cripple counting sheep?*

Rocque reluctantly takes it.

LEMURE

She'll keep. We go for a ride. Give her some time to think it over.

INT. REED CABIN - DAY

Tess watches them from the window in dread.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - DAY

A GUNSHOT breaks the silence.

Aggie trudges into view...gathers up a dead jackrabbit. She glances around, cautious.

EXT. RIVER TRAIL - KILLING GROUND - DAY

The men ride a rough path through the trees. Guns readied. Heads on a swivel. Fornst leads, Erastus behind him. Cutter John ahead of Lemure and Rocque. Tuck and Billings in rear.

TUCK

...We get paid out, right?

BILLINGS

Like shit we do.

TUCK

Ain't us took them pelts.

BILLINGS

Can't sell what you ain't got, boy.

ERASTUS

(sotto)

Quiet.

BILLINGS

(lower, to Lemure)

All been for squat.

Lemure bristles. He bends his eyes towards Rocque, calling his attention. Rocque shifts, uneasy.

LEMURE

Water.

Rocque hesitates.

Lemure, insistent.

Rocque passes the canteen. Lemure takes a mouthful. He drops back, holding it out to Tuck.

As Tuck reaches out, Lemure drops the canteen and grabs him by the wrist. He sinks a knife into his ribs three times in rapid succession before pulling him from his horse.

Rocque draws a pistol and shoots Cutter John square in the back. He flops from the saddle.

At the sound of the shot, Erastus heels his mount forward -

Fornst turns in the saddle, rifle raised, and blasts him in the gut.

Erastus falls, his arm hooking the rein, pulling the mare down with him.

The men cling to their mounts as they wheel in fright.

Erastus draws a double-barreled pistol and fires: First shot grazes Fornst knocking him from his horse. Second nails Rocque in the hip, unseating him.

Lemure leaps from his mount, pistol drawn. He fires, hitting the downed mare. He grabs Rocque and drags him to cover.

Billings takes aim at Erastus but the wounded mare lurches to its feet blocking the shot. It steps clear to reveal Erastus - second pistol in hand -

BLAM! Billings drops - his horse shot out from under him. He grabs his shotgun and fires, raking Erastus in the legs.

Erastus snaps off a final shot, clipping Billing's ankle as he ducks behind a tree.

It's over in seconds.

Cutter John lies dead.

Erastus crawls to Tuck who lies gasping for air - his lungs collapsing. He sees it's useless and keeps going.

Lemure and Rocque lie behind a berm. Rocque squirms, blood oozing through his fingers as he tries to staunch the wound.

ROCQUE

He shot me - I'm shot.

LEMURE

Stay still.

BILLINGS (O.S.)
 (furious)
 You wanna warn me 'fore you start a
 goddamn shooting match!

Lemure peers out: No sign of Erastus.

LEMURE
 I can't see him.

Billings tears off a neckerchief and stuffs it into the cuff
 of his shredded boot.

BILLINGS
 What the hell happened to Morgan?

ROCQUE
It won't stop!

Rocque hyperventilates, panic setting in.

ROCQUE
Help me, it won't stop-

LEMURE
 Get the horses!

BILLINGS
 You get 'em!

LEMURE
 My brother's hit.

BILLINGS
 (re: his ankle)
 This ain't no bee sting!

LEMURE
 Get the damned horses, we need to
 move!

BILLINGS
 The old bastard's still out there.

Lemure restrains his brother, keeping him from twisting to
 see the extent of the wound.

BILLINGS (O.S.)
 Fifty!

LEMURE
 (to Rocque)
Stop it-

ROCQUE
 (pleading)
Ami-?

LEMURE
Be still.

BILLINGS
 Fifty dollars gets the horses. On top
 of what you owe!

LEMURE
 Get the horses, or no-one gets paid!

Lemure removes his coat, wraps it around his brother.

LEMURE
*Look at me. Look at me! We're not
 going back. Never. We're getting
 clear of here. All the land, all the
 wine and the prettiest women you ever
 seen.*

They share a strained smile.

ROCQUE
Texas.

Billings limps onto the trail, knife drawn. He looks around,
 wincing at the sight of his wounded horse. He spots the
 bloody drag marks in the dirt leading into the trees.

Fornst stumbles from hiding. His face a mask of blood where
 the ball creased his scalp. He sinks to his knees, dazed.

BILLINGS
 (to himself)
 Jesus...

Tuck wheezes.

BILLINGS
 Shit. Gimme that-

He pulls a pistol from Fornst's belt.

Tuck stares up at Billings, eyes filled with fear, breath a
 pinched rasp. Billings cocks the pistol, unsettled by the
 grisly task.

BILLINGS
 Shut your eyes, boy. Ain't nothing
 more worth seeing.

EXT. SOUTH PINE RIVER - HUNTING GROUND - DAY

A pair of shotgun barrels peek through a tuft of grass -

Aggie lies the other side, gun angled on a spot above the river. Her gaze drifts to the prairie.

Wind rolls shadows across an ocean of grass.

Movement draws her back. A shape flashes across the brow of a distant rise. Seconds later it reappears, revealing itself as a fleeing jackrabbit.

She considers the shot. Too far. She scans the peripheries for a threat. Nothing.

Behind her, FOUR RIDERS file down from the forest. Bundled against the cold, faces lost to the shadow of blankets cowed about their heads.

A cold fear overcomes her. She spins. All she can do is watch in dread as the riders close in.

EXT. STREAMBED - DAY

Erastus lies on his back, one arm clutched across his blood-soaked torso, the other useless at his side.

He digs a heel into the gravel and pushes, inching his way to the stream to lap at the water like a dog.

BILLINGS (O.S.)

Over here!

Presently, Lemure squats beside him. He reaches for his canteen - realises it's not there.

LEMURE

Another time, we could have lived well in this place.

He takes Erastus by the collar and drags him kicking and cursing into the water.

At the treeline, Billings looks away, unable to watch as the violence reaches a bloody climax.

INT. REED CABIN - DAY

Timbers creak as a bitter wind buffets the cabin.

Tess sleeps, her weight rested against the door. The hatchet clutched to her chest.

She rouses to the sound of hooves. She looks to the children asleep on the bed. The sound grows closer.

The door rattles against the bar.

AGGIE (O.S.)
Molly... Joseph?

Tess rises, pulls back the bar and opens the door.

Aggie stands there, ashen.

Tess looks past her to see FOUR INDIANS watering their ponies on the riverbank.

Before Aggie can react, Tess pulls the shotgun from her grasp and pushes her aside.

TESS
Inside. Awas! Awas!

FALLING BIRD, early 60s, Ojibwe, says something to his companions: OJIBWE BOY, 11, and OJIBWE WOMAN, mid 30s. They confer among themselves, suppressing smiles.

TESS
No food. No trade. Go!

She motions with the shotgun 'go'.

AGGIE
Ma, don't-

TESS
Get inside! Awas. Go. Awas!

The fourth figure stands apart from his companions. Now he turns from the river and approaches the cabin carrying a bedroll. Unlike them, he is Anglo. He wears a blanket over a worn overcoat. A greying beard sweeps his chest.

Tess' breath catches, struggling to process.

AMOS REED, mid 50s, a dour frontiersman, his brow worn into a scowl as if forever in search of some unsettled grievance.

And for a moment, it's unclear if Tess intends to fire.

Amos registers this. He slows.

JOSEPH (O.S.)

Pa!

Joseph tears between them. Amos drops the bedroll and scoops him up - an unwitting human shield.

Aggie hangs there, staring into nowhere.

Tess slowly lowers the shotgun.

INT. TRADING POST - BUNKHOUSE - DAY

Surgical tools line a table. A misshapen lead ball rests beside a pair of bloodied forceps. GRUNTS of pain O.S.

Lemure and Evelyn pin Rocque to a table as Henry sutures the wound. Rocque bites down on a belt, sweating hard, semi-delirious with pain and blood-loss.

Evelyn and Lemure trade a look. Friction between them.

Rocque spits the belt free, craning to see the damage.

HENRY

Hold him!

ROCQUE

Don't leave me.

HENRY

I said hold him!

ROCQUE

Don't leave me!

They push him back down. Evelyn mops his brow. She sends Lemure a warning look. Lemure puts a finger to his brother's lips, quieting him.

LATER

Henry sags in a chair, drained.

Evelyn and Lemure sit in silence. Rocque sleeps.

EVELYN

Need to put an end to this.

HENRY

No one leaves sight of the wall.

EVELYN

Don't fret, Henry, I weren't asking on you.

HENRY

What would you have me do? You heard them, there could more than a dozen warriors. I won't risk more lives. We make ready to leave, take our chances on the river.

LEMURE

And the Reed woman? I told her we'd come back.

Evelyn turns her gaze on Henry, demanding an answer.

Henry draws a troubled breath.

INT. COMPANY STORE - DAY

Billings white-knuckles a chair, grunting in pain as Jeb eases off his shredded boot. Fornst hunches beside the hearth. His head swathed in a bloody bandage.

BILLINGS

Quit twisting!

JEB

You left it on too long, it's all swolled up.

Lemure enters. He holds out the bottle of rum. Billings snatches it up.

BILLINGS

About time.

JEB

How's the lad?

LEMURE

Lucky. His belt slowed the ball.

Jeb inspects Billing's injured foot.

JEB

Must be luck season. Torn up some but it don't look so deep. Gonna hurt like a mother to clean.

BILLINGS

An angel at my side, Jeb.

LEMURE

Wolfert wants three men to bring in
the Reed woman and her kin.

BILLINGS

Wolfert can kiss my pecker.

Lemure runs his gaze between Billings and Fornst - it's not
a choice.

LEMURE

We leave first light.

JEB

These boys got some healing to do.

But Lemure is already heading for the door.

Billings stares bitterly after him. Fornst takes the bottle
and raises a mock toast.

FORNST

*May the Lord watch over idiots,
drunks, and children.*

INT. REED CABIN - NIGHT

Amos sits in a chair between the table and the hearth.

AMOS

...Woke up on the riverbank. Felt
sure I was set to freeze. Fairly
begged the Lord to deliver me.
Weren't for the coyotes tussling over
my boots, Old Bird out there might
have passed me by.

Tess sits with Molly at the table. The child hungrily works
her way through a plate of freshly cooked rabbit.

AMOS

They hauled me back to camp and
dressed my wounds. For a good spell
there I don't recall...

He leans over and peels a strip of meat from the bone. He
settles back, sucks it down, surveying the room as if seeing
it for the first time.

Tess tightens, nervous.

AMOS

Food's wasting, Boy.

Joseph gawks from the door gap at the Ojibwe encamped around a fire. Aggie closes the door, stewards him to a seat.

AGGIE

It's impolite to stare.

AMOS

(to Joseph)

Look at you, more meat on this jackrabbit. Have to fatten you up 'fore snow sets in.

JOSEPH

We gonna hunt?

AMOS

Them bucks ain't gonna come to us.

JOSEPH

How many Indians did you kill, Pa?

Amos ignores the question. He runs a hand through his matted beard. Stares into the flames, his mood darkening.

AMOS

The furs are gone.

Tess gives a faint nod of acknowledgement. He side-eyes her, trying to fathom what she knows.

TESS

They found Bill. The Becketts too - out on the Bluffs. Sioux they said.

AMOS

They?

TESS

Company men.

AMOS

Here?

Tess nods.

Aggie ladles stew into a bowl. She looks over - this is news to her.

AMOS

Tell me who?

TESS

I didn't recognise them.

AMOS
What they look like?

TESS
Two of them, maybe more I didn't see - I don't know they was just passing. They was young.

JOSEPH
They spoke funny.

Amos shifts - this means something to him. Aggie sets a bowl of watery stew before him. He studies Tess, the gears turning, making no move to eat.

AMOS
Kind of them to be looking in like that.

Tess flicks a look to Joseph, willing him to stay quiet.

AMOS
What happened to the animals?

TESS
Coyotes got into the run.

AMOS
Where was dog?

Tess takes a deep breath, shakes her head, words failing.

AGGIE
He was with me. I went looking for you, Pa. I went to the trade post - Mister McClusky's place was all burned out. I didn't know what else to do.

AMOS
(to Tess)
Where was you?

AGGIE
The men there killed dog and took Acorn-

JOSEPH
But you said he run away?

TESS
Aggie that's enough.

Amos sets down the bowl. He pulls Joseph onto his lap.

AMOS

(to Joseph)

Was a boy in camp, a little older than you. This old she-wolf came for his pony. So he killed it - with his bare hands no less. Or so Old Bird out there told it...

He raises a hand, bidding Joseph to do the same. They meet palm to palm. The boy's hand tiny and vulnerable against his father's weathered slab.

AMOS

Know what they called him?

Joseph shakes his head.

AMOS

Me-taw-gaw-nek. Means Little Clam.

Molly stretches out her good arm, hungry for her father's attention.

MOLLY

What about mine, Papa?

AMOS

Could've turned tail, let that old wolf to its nature. But he stood to. Took up for what was his.

AGGIE

It was my fault, Pa. It was me, I was the one went to the post.

Amos no longer listens. His gaze lingers coldly on Tess. She takes her cue and gathers Aggie and her siblings and ushers them into the back room.

BACK ROOM

Tess smiles reassurance as she tucks Molly in. Joseph giggles as she tickles him under the chin.

Aggie sits balled in the corner, a blanket hugging her thin shoulders. She watches her mother in concern.

MOLLY

Is Papa angry with us?

TESS

Shh. Remember our song? I wanna hear
you sing it loud. So Pa's friends can
hear.

Tess sets to humming a tune - the same one Aggie sang to Molly. Joseph and Molly pick up the lyrics, unsure at first, voices gathering in confidence. Tess guides them through the first verse, words threatening to catch in her throat.

TESS/MOLLY/JOSEPH

*OH FARE THEE WELL, MY LITTLE TURTLE
DOVE/AND FARE THEE WELL FOR A-WHILE/
BUT THOUGH I GO I'LL SURELY COME
AGAIN/IF I GO TEN THOUSAND MILE, MY
DEAR/IF I GO TEN THOUSAND MILE.*

Tess stands, letting the children continue.

TESS

I wanna hear all them verses.
(to Aggie)
Stay with them.

AGGIE

Don't go.

Tess takes a last look at them all, hiding her sadness behind a thin smile. She exits.

MAIN ROOM

Tess closes the door on the singing children. Slowly, she crosses to Amos and kneels before him, head low - penitent.

He lays a hand on her head, gentle, caressing. He leans his head against hers, almost tender were it not for the fear in her eyes as his hand slides to her throat.

AMOS

What kinda name is that for a boy
kills a wolf?

EXT. REED CABIN - NIGHT

Falling Bird and family listen as the children's VOICES drift from the cabin. Ojibwe Woman draws her blanket. The old man puffs his pipe.

INT. REED CABIN - BACK ROOM - NIGHT

Aggie stares bitterly at the closed door, hiding her tears from the younger children.

MOLLY/JOSEPH (O.S.)
*...AND THE RAGING BILLOWS BURN/BEFORE
 MY HEART SHALL SUFFER ME TO FAIL/OR I
 A TRAITOR TURN, MY LOVE/OR I A
 TRAITOR TURN...*

INT. TRADING POST - BUNKHOUSE - DAWN

Rocque perches on the edge of a cot. Lemure helps him into his coat, pushes a makeshift crutch into his hand. He moves to help him up - Rocque bats him away.

ROCQUE
Go. I'm good.

Lemure, not done, he palms his brother's head, pulls him close. Rocque struggles but slowly accepts the embrace.

LEMURE
I'd never leave you.

INT. COMPANY STORE - LIVING QUARTERS - DAWN

Evelyn rinses her hands in a basin. She catches Henry's reflection in a shaving mirror. He sits at a table, hunched over a bowl of stew.

He looks up as she gathers foodstuffs and exits into the store. He stares into the bowl, deflated.

EXT. TRADING POST - COMPANY STORE - STOOP - DAWN

Rocque sits in a chair, medicating from a bottle of rum. The crutch across his lap. Evelyn exits.

They watch Lemure swing into the saddle and rein his mount to join Billings and Fornst at the open gate.

A METIS TRADER, 30s, fresh from the trail, approaches the stoop carrying a small bundle of pelts.

EVELYN
 Store's closed.

METIS TRADER
 Where the old man at?

EVELYN

That's his business. I'll tell him
you're passing.

He glowers at them, spits and grumbles on his way.

Lemure sends them a last look and leads the others away.

INT. REED CABIN - DAWN

Last night's stew remains on the table, untouched.

Aggie emerges from the back room, looks around. Molly hovers behind her, apprehensive.

She peers out the window to see the vacated campfire -
Falling Bird and family gone. Below that, Tess stands in the
river, her figure silhouetted against a dawn mist.

EXT. SOUTH PINE RIVER - REED CABIN - DAWN

Tess stands thigh-deep in the water. Her eyes closed. Neck
bruised. Resolve hanging by a thread.

AGGIE (O.S.)

Ma?

Tess' breath returns in a gasp. She turns. Aggie reaches out
to her from the bank. Her mother stares numbly back.

TESS

I prayed he was dead.

INT. REED CABIN - DAY

Tess lies in bed, wracked with fever, no longer able to hide
the pain in her chest. Aggie mops her brow.

Molly watches shyly from across the room.

MOLLY

I wanna see Mama.

AGGIE

Take your sister and fetch water.

Joseph scowls back at her from the table.

AGGIE

Joseph Reed-

JOSEPH

No.

AGGIE

I need your help.

JOSEPH

Dog's dead cause of you.

He hops from the chair and races out the door.

AGGIE

Joseph!

A rasped breath from Tess commands Aggie's attention. She raises a ladle of water to her mother's mouth. Tess rises to meet it but the pain is too great.

AGGIE

We'll fetch a doctor.

TESS

There's none to fetch.

Tess pulls back the blanket and gently tugs down the neckline of her nightdress to reveal a dark purple bruise blossoming from her ribs.

TESS

Not for this. Go, get them away from here.

Aggie shakes her head -

TESS

You have to. Before he comes back.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - DAY

Amos, forearms stained red with blood, crouches over a fresh deer carcass. He dresses the kill with a hunting knife. Steady. Methodical.

EXT. SOUTH PINE RIVER - REED CABIN - DAY

Aggie hunkers on the bank. She shivers against the cold. Her troubled gaze lost to the prairie.

Molly wobbles past her carrying the pail. Aggie watches her fill it, hampered by her palsied arm.

Molly totters back up the incline, water sloshing from the pail. She reaches Aggie and takes a seat beside her, taking solace in her sister's company. Molly gazes off -

MOLLY
He's coming back.

Aggie follows her line of sight to see a rider - Amos - approaching in the distance. A deer carcass slung over the pony's back.

AGGIE
Go find your brother.

MOLLY
Do we have to stay now?

AGGIE
Go on. I'll come get you.

EXT. REED CABIN - DAY

The gutted deer flops to the dirt.

Amos stands over it, greasy and bloodied from the kill.

INT. REED CABIN - DAY

Amos enters.

Aggie crouches at her mother's bedside. Tess opens her eyes, regards him weakly as he prowls past them to the hearth.

AMOS
Where's the Boy?

AGGIE
I sent them for wood.

AMOS
Be quicker with three. A wonder I
didn't ride up on a pile of bones.

Aggie doesn't move. Amos fixes her a cold look - not about to ask twice.

AGGIE
She's sick.

TESS
(low)
Go.

Aggie mops her mother's brow. She's going nowhere.

Amos, anger bubbling beneath the surface. He touches his stomach - flinches. The flesh still tender from the wound.

AMOS

How many days I been gone?

The question hangs between them without answer. He nods, accepting the truth in their silence.

Amos rests a hand on Aggie's head, tousles her hair. A cold vacancy in his eyes.

AMOS

We can't of been more than a day out of Rainy when they hit us. I heard Bill cry out. Seen him run. I just about made it to the water - I didn't even hear the shot, barely felt it. Just the fever that came after - burned in me like a hellfire. Like the Devil put steel to my throat and set the blackest of all creation before my eyes.

His hand travels down her cheek leaving a smear of deer blood. He cups her chin before coming to rest on her throat.

TESS

Amos, please, she weren't to know.

His fingers slowly tighten...

AMOS

And I would not beg his mercy for there is cause in me greater than any suffering he wills in my name.

TESS

I thought you dead-

AMOS

We are one before God!

He jerks Aggie's chin upwards, forcing her gaze to his. She stares back, afraid yet defiant.

TESS

I know what they did! The Company men - I know they cut up Bill and left you to die.

Amos lets Aggie go. He turns his glare on Tess.

TESS

And I know where they're at.

EXT. REED CABIN - DAY

Amos, armed to the teeth, reins the pony around. He pauses, looking on the cabin with a pang of hesitation.

He presses his heels to the animal's flanks and takes off towards the river abandoning the deer carcass to the flies.

INT. REED CABIN - DAY

Tess heaves opens the trunk and drags out the pretty dress. She finds a point in the hem and rips open a seam. From it she pulls a yellowed envelope. She holds it, lost.

Aggie sits against the bed, curled in shock. Tess touches her cheek, drawing her out.

Aggie meets her mother's eyes. Tess stares back, the years of suffering laid bare.

TESS

Sometimes, the Lord gathers up all
the hurt, all the anger, he breathes
it into a person - like a poison.

She presses the envelope into Aggie's hand. A single word on the envelope reads: ROSA

TESS

I can't protect you from it no more.

Aggie looks away, struggling to process.

JOSEPH (O.S.)

(panicked)

Ma!

EXT. REED CABIN - DAY

Aggie and Tess step from the cabin to see Joseph and Molly haring towards them in a state of excitement. Joseph points wildly towards the river. Tess pales.

JOSEPH

Riders on the trail! They're coming
back!

TESS
You've to go, now.

AGGIE
What is it?

TESS
The one's tried to kill Pa. Fetch the saddle.

Tess pushes Aggie towards the cabin.

TESS
Go!

MOMENTS LATER

Molly and Joseph sit tucked on Lady's saddle before Aggie.

Tess bites back the pain as she urges the animal forward, pushing the pouch of scalps into Aggie's hand as she goes - no time to waste.

TESS
Give these to Mister Wolfert, no-one else. You tell him what I told you.

AGGIE
You're coming with us?

TESS
Take the ridge trail, stay close to the trees, don't stop till you reach Rainy.

Tess struggles to keep up as Lady's pace quickens. Aggie reaches for her mother's hand.

AGGIE
I ain't leaving you!

TESS
She can't take us all.

JOSEPH
What about Pa?

TESS
I'll wait on him.

JOSEPH
Then I'm staying too!

He tries to dismount - Aggie pulls him back.

TESS

Go with your sisters. Do what Aggie says. And look after Molly. She ain't as sure as you.

She grabs Molly's hand and manages a last kiss.

TESS

Mama loves you, Molly-Girl.
 (to Aggie)
 Find your Aunt Rosa in Saint Clair.
 Give her the letter, she'll know what it means. Go!

With that she gives the animal a slap on the flank.

Lady canters away, Aggie holding her siblings in place. Tess watches, her heart breaking. Aggie turns - a last look between them.

INT. REED CABIN - BACK ROOM - DAY

A flaming torch ignites the bedding.

MAIN ROOM

Tess tosses a second torch at the foot of the bed. The flame quickly takes hold.

She heaves the table over, feeding the flames.

EXT. REED CABIN - DAY

Lemure, Billings, and Fornst halt their mounts. They watch, dumbstruck, as the fire takes hold of the cabin.

Lemure spots Tess stumbling along the bank, away from them.

LEMURE

(re: the cabin)

Go see.

EXT. SOUTH PINE RIVER - REED CABIN - DAY

Tess pushes on, leading them away - buying time.

Lemure steadily closes the gap. He looks around, nervous, trying to connect events.

LEMURE

Who set the fire?

She alters course, wading into the river.

LEMURE

Water's cold. Give me your hand.

She edges back, the current threatening to unbalance her.

He takes the hint. Dismounts, palms raised.

LEMURE

I know you lie to me. Tell me where
the boat is, you do that, then we
help you. Let us help you, no?

She stares at her burning home, transfixed.

AT THE CABIN

Billings is beaten back by a wall of flame. He and Fornst watch the rising inferno - nothing could survive that.

AT THE RIVER

Lemure squats, at a loss for how to deal with her. The others drift down beside him.

LEMURE

Let us make a deal. Tell me where it
is and we take you back - the fort,
upriver. Wherever you want to go.

BILLINGS

I ain't sign up to ferry no cuckoo.

Lemure stands, cautions him with a look.

LEMURE

Where you want to go?

BILLINGS

She done lost her wits. Lit her whole
damn family up.

Lemure's hand hovers over his pistol.

Billings reaches for his own gun, unsure as to Lemure's intent. But Lemure remains fixed on Tess as she inches further from the bank.

LEMURE

Come. Take my hand. Not like this.
Not like this...

TESS

Your friends are dead - the Wolfert's
man and the fat one. I killed them.
Seen it in their eyes, damned for
what they done and they knew it. Not
like you. You got hope. That ain't
mine to take.

Tess closes her eyes. A look of peace washes over her as she
lets go.

TESS

Sweetwater Point...

EXT. LOOKOUT POINT - DAY

Aggie pauses Lady on the escarpment. She looks back at the
cabin. Molly and Joseph don't see what she does. Off her
reaction. Her eyes a dam threatening to fail.

EXT. SOUTH PINE RIVER - REED CABIN - DAY

Lemure wades out after her in panic. Fornst and Billings try
to pull him back but he bats them away.

But it's too late. She's gone. The cabin burns. The wind
fanning the flames ever higher.

EXT. THE BURNED CABIN - DAY

Aggie guides Lady past the cabin's charred remains. The
children look on, apprehensive.

The wooden cross threatens to topple from the burial cairn.

Aggie takes in the sight, stung.

EXT. SOUTH PINE RIVER - CROSSING - DAY

Joseph and Molly cling to one another as Aggie urges Lady
across the ford.

EXT. SWEETWATER POINT - THE APPROACH - DAY

Hooves sink into waterlogged ground -

Lemure, Fornst, and Billings halt their mounts before a swathe of cattails buffering the lake.

Lemure dismounts, slips his rifle from its boot.

EXT. SWEETWATER POINT - DAY

Wildfowl call to one another.

The three fan out on foot, wading blindly through a screen of reeds.

Fornst chews tobacco. Wafts a bug from his face.

Billings mutters to himself. Impatient. Incautious. He curses loudly as he stumbles on his injured leg.

He holds there, regaining his composure. He notices a slight ripple of water around his legs.

Lemure presses through the last stand of rushes to find himself at the edge of a vast, shimmering lake.

A duck breaks cover...

...Lemure stalks towards the disturbance - a hunter, reading the signs.

Ahead, the shape of a boat emerges through the reeds.

He closes on the vessel. It rests in a narrow channel - cargo intact.

He hears a faint SAWING sound. Reaching the boat, he looks over the gunwale. Recoils in horror.

Billings lies in a pool of bloody bilgewater, slit throat to navel, breath sawing through a rag wadded in his mouth.

Lemure wheels, rifle searching for a target.

A VOICE, words indistinct - a tone that pleads mercy. A wet THWACK. A CRY of pain sends wildfowl to flight.

Lemure barrels through the reeds.

Fornst splashes into his path clutching his shoulder, blood spilling through his fingers.

Lemure grabs him, leads him on.

CRACK! Fornst flops to the water. Shot in the back.

Lemure spins, fires blind.

He finds Fornst's hand, drags him a few faltering steps before a second shot shatters the Frenchman's knee. He roars in fury as Lemure abandons him.

Lemure charges on...collapses onto surer ground.

A shot rings out.

He levels a pistol on a spot behind him - the hammer snaps to a damp fizzle. He picks himself up and runs.

Lemure hoists himself into the saddle, saws the animal around, heeling it into a gallop without looking back.

EXT. OJIBWE ENCAMPMENT - DAY

Aggie leads Lady towards the trading post.

Molly and Joseph stare wide-eyed at a trailing knot of OJIBWE CHILDREN. The bolder dart from the throng to tug playfully at their clothing.

Aggie's hand falls to the hatchet on her belt. They back off, scowling after them. Joseph glances back, nervous.

EXT. TRADING POST - COMPANY STORE - STOOP - DAY

Rocque sits up in his chair, watching with suspicion as Aggie heads Lady across the courtyard.

EXT. TRADING POST - COURTYARD - DAY

Joseph and Molly take in the unfamiliar surroundings.

Aggie unfastens Lady's saddle. She looks to the porch where Rocque appears to be dozing.

AGGIE

Wait here.

EXT. TRADING POST - COMPANY STORE - STOOP - DAY

Aggie hefts the saddle up the steps. At the last moment, Rocque shifts his crutch to block her way.

ROCQUE

Looks heavy.

AGGIE

Being in my way don't help.

He grins, bemused. Lowers the crutch. She starts forward only to find Evelyn now fills the frame.

Aggie bristles with fear and resentment.

AGGIE

I'm to see Mister Wolfert.

EVELYN

Your Ma send you?

AGGIE

Yes, Ma'am. I'm to settle our debt.

EVELYN

Mister Wolfert is occupied.

AGGIE

Please. I have to see him.

EVELYN

You can settle with me. Else you can come back tomorrow.

She makes to close the door -

AGGIE

Ma'am-

Evelyn sees Aggie's desperation. She nods her inside, closing the door behind them.

Rocque fidgets, uneasy.

INT. COMPANY STORE - DAY

The saddle rests on the counter. Evelyn gives it a cursory inspection, unimpressed.

Aggie glances to the door, tired, nervous.

AGGIE

She's a good horse. Ain't skitty like some. And Acorn, he's from good stock.

EVELYN

A pair of warm-bloods I got no use for.

AGGIE

Ma'am?

EVELYN

Your Ma send you out here to give up your only horse and saddle? Suppose you gonna carry them younguns' home?

AGGIE

Mister Wolfert promised to take us upriver. I have to see him-

EVELYN

Lord be.

AGGIE

Please-

EVELYN

How many ways I have to say it?

AGGIE

We can't go back.

Desperate, Aggie checks the door. She slips a cloth bundle from beneath her coat and holds it out.

Evelyn sits the bundle on the counter and unwraps it, feigning shock at the knotted scalps within.

AGGIE

It wasn't Indians killed Mister McClusky...

Evelyn looks her square in the eye 'who then?'

EXT. RAINY LAKE/TRADING POST - OUTSKIRTS - DAY

Lemure digs his heels into his mount's bloodied flank, urging the exhausted animal on.

EXT. TRADING POST - COMPANY STORE - STOOP - DAY

Rocque counts the seconds. Foot tapping in agitation. Not liking this one bit.

INT. COMPANY STORE - DAY

Evelyn stands at the window, her back to Aggie.

EVELYN

Do you know what you're saying? It's enough to fetch those men a noose.

AGGIE

It's the truth.

Evelyn turns and crosses to Aggie. She lifts the girl's chin to meet her eye. Aggie squirms, afraid.

EVELYN

It's unwise to play me for a fool.

AGGIE

Sweetwater. There's a boat, that's where the pelts are. They killed Mister McClusky and all them others - just like they tried to kill my Pa.

Evelyn catches, frowns -

The door opens, Rocque hobbles inside. He locks the door behind him before sweeping off his hat in apology.

ROCQUE

Please, I must apologise...

Aggie reaches to recover the scalps. Evelyn snatches her wrist and holds her in place.

Aggie stares, confused. The shuffle and thump of Rocque's gait closes behind her. She cringes as he slips a hand around her waist, easing the hatchet from her belt.

ROCQUE

My behaviors have been poor. I hope you can forgive me?

He leans against the counter, thumbing the hatchet's blade.

ROCQUE

A dull blade makes double the work. Why you want to work so hard?

Evelyn stares at Aggie, still trying to process.

EVELYN

What about Amos?

AGGIE

What?

EVELYN

Tried...you said tried to kill?

EXT. TRADING POST - COURTYARD - DAY

Molly and Joseph hunker by the water trough. A shadow falls over them. Joseph looks up, blinks.

INT. COMPANY STORE - DAY

Rocque paces before Evelyn, agitated.

ROCQUE

No, no, no, my brother wouldn't lie.

EVELYN

Did you see it?

ROCQUE

I heard the shots.

EVELYN

Did you see him die?

ROCQUE

I went after McClusky!

EVELYN

I ain't asking on Mclusky!

ROCQUE

Get a rope and tie her, wait for my brother. Then we hear the truth.

EVELYN

I'm through waiting.

ROCQUE

Amos is dead!

He rounds on Evelyn. With them distracted, Aggie sees her chance. She snatches his crutch and shoves him off balance, sending him crashing into a shelf.

Evelyn descends on her in a fury. Aggie slugs her with the crutch and ducks into the annex.

AGGIE

Mister Wolfert!

LIVING QUARTERS

She races in, frantic.

Henry stares blankly from a chair.

AGGIE
Mister Wolfert?

Dried blood trails from his mouth and nose. His skin pale and waxen. An upturned bowl rests at his feet, the contents congealed over his bare feet.

Aggie covers her mouth in shock. FOOTSTEPS - she looks around for a way out. She's trapped. She readies the crutch to defend herself.

Evelyn enters. She takes a leather shaving strop from above the basin and presses in on Aggie.

EVELYN
You gone and done it now, Girl.

Rocque limps in. He spots Henry.

ROCQUE
What did you do?

EVELYN
What I oughta have done twenty years ago.

ROCQUE
This was not the plan!

EVELYN
I won't spend another moment in this godforsaken hell. We are leaving, pelts or no.

ROCQUE
No, you don't listen. This was not the plan...

He cracks Evelyn in the skull with the butt of his pistol. She slumps to the floor.

Aggie runs - Rocque grabs her, rips the crutch from her grasp. She falls against the table. They struggle.

ROCQUE
Stop, I'm trying to help you!

Rocque throws her to the floor. He winces, grabs the table for support, riding the pain from his hip.

ROCQUE
She was going to kill you.

AGGIE

And you ain't?

ROCQUE

Come with me.

Aggie stares in disbelief. He stares back - means it.

ROCQUE

You think me a thief and murderer,
but I'm no worse than any man here. I
do it cause I want something better.
Is it wrong - to want something
better? Come with me. I keep you
safe. Give you everything you ever
wanted, away from here.

A GUNSHOT sounds O.S. A commotion from the courtyard.

Rocque looks to the window - another shot follows.

Aggie leaps to her feet and rushes for the door.

COMPANY STORE

Rocque catches her dress, pulled off-balance by her momentum. He falls, dragging them both to the floor.

She SLAMS hard, fingers raking the boards as he grips her ankle, dragging her back.

She hooks her foot around the open door and swings it closed on his injured hip. He cries out. The door bounces back. She repeats, forcing him to let go.

She makes it to the exit, fumbles with the key.

He levels the pistol -

The lock gives. She looks back, afraid.

He wavers. Can't do it.

She yanks the door open -

EXT. TRADING POST - COMPANY STORE - STOOP - DAY

Aggie halts in her tracks.

Lemure heaves himself up the steps, pistol in one hand, the other clamping a bloody wound to his thigh.

A second of eye contact between them. Aggie looks past him to see Amos framed beyond the gate, rifle in hand.

COURTYARD/GATE

Amos glowers back, betrayed.

Jeb races towards the gate carrying a rifle.

JEB

Jesus. That you, Reed?

AMOS

I'm here for them Desants boys. They killed Bill. Throw in or stay out.

STOOP

Aggie stands frozen with shock.

MOLLY (O.S.)

Aggie!

The children peer through the rails at the far end of the stoop - Daani at their side.

Aggie regains her senses, makes a run for it.

With a wild cry, Rocque hobbles out onto the stoop, pistol in each hand. He fires, once, twice, sending Amos and Jeb diving for cover.

LEMURE

Get me inside!

COURTYARD/GATE

Amos looks out to see Rocque hauling his brother up the steps. He unslings the shotgun and steps out.

INT. COMPANY STORE - DAY

The brothers spill through the doorway, taking cover as chunks of frame splinter in a hail of buckshot.

Rocque tears a sash from his waist and tosses it to his brother. He guards the door while Lemure tourniquets his wounded leg.

ROCQUE

You told me he was dead.

Lemure shakes his head - a broken man.

LEMURE

Go. I'll hold them.

Rocque pushes his pistols into Lemure's grasp. He snatches up his brother's rifle.

ROCQUE

Load up.

LEMURE

I can't ride.

Rocque hobbles to the counter and pulls a double-barrel shotgun from under it.

ROCQUE

Then we paddle.

EXT. TRADING POST - TRAPPERS' CAMP - DAY

Daani leads the others through the camp; the Infant clutched tight. Aggie follows, pulling Molly along with Joseph at their heels.

EXT. TRADING POST - COURTYARD/STOOP - DAY

Amos steps from cover, shotgun in hand, rifle slung. The dead men's pistols lined in his belt alongside his own.

Rocque and Lemure spill onto the stoop, taking cover behind the uprights.

A hurried exchange of fire erupts as the brother's fight their way towards the trappers' camp.

Buckshot from Jeb's shotgun rips into an upright, showering Rocque with splinters.

Lemure fires on Amos - the shot goes wide.

The first barrel of Rocque's shotgun tags Jeb in the arm. The second peppers his leg, taking him out of the fight.

A lead ball from Amos tears into Lemure's shoulder.

Rocque draws a pistol and returns fire - Amos ducks behind a tangle of fishing nets.

Rocque pulls Lemure to his feet. They limp away - a shot from Amos punches into Rocque's side. He keeps going.

TRAPPERS' CAMP

The brothers stumble along in the direction of the gate, using the sprawl of shelters for cover.

Flatwash, half-dressed, rifle in hand, turns a corner into their path -

Lemure raises a pistol and shoots him in the chest. Flatwash wobbles back, lining to fire. Lemure pushes his brother aside and tackles Flatwash.

LEMURE

Go!

Rocque pushes on, shutting out the brutal struggle taking place behind him.

Flatwash pins Lemure, rifle stock jammed against his throat.

Lemure, choking, gets a hand to his knife, skewers it into Flatwash's midriff, again and again.

EXT. OJIBWE ENCAMPMENT - DAY

Aggie and the others race toward the shore. They reach a canoe pulled onto the bank.

AGGIE

(to Daani)

Help me!

EXT. TRADING POST - TRAPPERS' CAMP - DAY

Lemure drags himself behind a stack of firewood. He pulls Flatwash's rifle into his lap, struggling to set the hammer as the strength drains from his hands.

He looks up to see Amos bearing down, hunting knife drawn.

The rifle slips from Lemure's grasp. He leans back, accepting his fate.

EXT. RAINY LAKE/CANOE - DAY

An onshore wind whips up the water. The children brace themselves in the canoe as Aggie and Daani guide the boat through the chop.

Without warning, a pair of hands haul Aggie away, forcing her underwater.

She rises, gasping. Eye to eye with the Metis Trader.

METIS TRADER

Thieving bitch!

He pushes her under. She struggles, a flurry of bubbles breaching the surface. He lifts her - she SMASHES a rock into his head. He snarls, rage doubled.

ROCQUE (O.S.)

Sioux, prendre les bateaux!

Metis Trader half turns as Rocque slams into him, taking them both down. Rocque pins the man underwater, raining blows with the hatchet.

Aggie surfaces with a gasp. She wades after the canoe.

No sooner has Aggie pulled herself into the boat than Rocque catches hold. He drags himself into the bow.

ROCQUE

(to Daani)

Paddle!

He grabs Aggie, face in close.

ROCQUE

Sit your back to me - close. Move and I send us all to the water.

EXT. TRADING POST - TRAPPERS' CAMP - DAY

Evelyn wanders in a daze. Blood flows from a cut to her brow.

She reaches the woodpile. Lemure sprawls in a growing pool of blood. Dead.

Flatwash lies nearby. Barely alive.

EVELYN

Where is he?

Flatwash bends his eyes towards the gate, fingers ticking as the life drains out of him.

She pulls the knife from his side.

EXT. RAINY LAKE/CANOE - DAY

Daani in stern, struggling to keep the bow straight. The children hunker between her and Aggie who presses her back to Rocque as he paddles for open water.

Aggie sees something on the shore -

SHORELINE

Amos charges from the camp, Flatwash's rifle in hand. He wades into the margin -

AMOS

Boy!

RAINY LAKE/CANOE

Aggie watches her father in growing fear.

AMOS

Joseph!

Joseph makes to look back -

AGGIE

No, look at me.

JOSEPH

I hear Pa!

AGGIE

Look at me!

SHORELINE

Amos utters a prayer beneath his breath and sets the rifle to his shoulder.

RAINY LAKE/CANOE

Aggie pulls Joseph close. Eyes locked on the shore - but looking past her father now -

AGGIE
 (to herself)
 Lord, forgive me.

She watches Evelyn follow Amos into the shallows. Hearing her, he turns - she plunges the knife into his neck. Amos staggers back, groping at the handle as his legs buckle.

Aggie blinks.

Evelyn wades out, staring after them in a trance.

The children gaze up at Aggie, not understanding.

Rocque paddles grimly on.

EXT. TRADING POST - COMPANY STORE - STOOP - DAY

Evelyn sits in Henry's chair. A thousand yard stare - lost to all reason.

ROCQUE (PRE-LAP)
 (mumbled singing)
 IT'S THE OAR THAT LEADS US/THAT LEADS
 US/IT'S THE OAR THAT LEADS US TO THE
 UPPER COUNTRY...

EXT. RAINY LAKE/CANOE - DAY

The lake narrows, banking to the mouth of a wide river.

Rocque sings to himself, fighting the urge to close his eyes. He's exhausted. Weak from blood loss.

ROCQUE
 (mumbled singing)
 ...WHEN SHE GOT THERE/SHE DRANK MANY
 GLASSFULS/WHEN SHE GOT THERE/ SHE
 DRANK MANY GLASSFULS/TO HER FATHER
 AND MOTHER'S HEALTH...

Molly and Joseph lie sleeping, Infant nestled between them.

Aggie stares into the boat, her back to Rocque, rigid with fear. She slips the letter from her coat - damp but intact.

Rocque's voice wavers, words fading.

Aggie slowly realises. She looks up - Daani no longer paddles. They confer with a glance, uncertain.

AGGIE

...Is it far?

No answer. She turns to see Rocque slumped forward. His coat slick with blood from the gunshot wound. He whimpers, crying softly to himself.

Daani takes a small knife from her robe. She holds it out. A long moment passes as Aggie considers.

AGGIE

ON MY WAY FROM PRETTY LA ROCHELLE
CITY/ON MY WAY BACK FROM PRETTY LA
ROCHELLE CITY/I MET THREE PRETTY
LADIES...

She rests a hand on his shoulder, comforting. Urging him to take up the song.

AGGIE

ON MY WAY FROM PRETTY LA ROCHELLE
CITY...

Rocque picks up the verse, stumbling over the words, his voice barely a whisper as she guides him through.

AGGIE/ROCQUE

ON MY WAY FROM PRETTY LA ROCHELLE
CITY/ON MY WAY BACK FROM PRETTY LA
ROCHELLE CITY/I MET THREE PRETTY
LADIES...

Daani resumes paddling.

Aggie eases the paddle from Rocque's grasp and joins her, letting him continue the song alone.

Rocque stares into nowhere. The light in his eyes growing fainter with every word.

Daani and Aggie paddle on, their weary strokes carrying them upriver. The singing fades until just the steady dip and pull of paddles remains. Aggie, her gaze fixed on the grey water stretched before them.

FADE OUT