

The Burn Line

Screenplay by Adam McKim

Based on the book The Burn Line by Adam McKim

FADE IN:

EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - DAY

A rusted pickup climbs through the twisted gravel roads of the PINE PASS FOOTHILLS, the tires crunching like bone under weight.

Dust coils behind it in the dry air.

Inside -

INT. PICKUP - MOVING - DAY

JESSE BROOKS sits rigid in the passenger seat, backpack wedged between his knees.

He grips the door handle as if it might keep him anchored.

Beside him, HIS MOTHER, (40s) jaw tight, stares dead ahead. Her knuckles blanch around the steering wheel.

MOTHER

You sure about this?

JESSE

Yeah.

MOTHER

You don't have to go through with it.
No one's making you.

JESSE

I want to.

MOTHER

You think this is what he'd want?

JESSE

(sharper)
I'm not doing this for Dad.
Not really.

Silence.

The truck rattles through a pothole, frame groaning.

MOTHER

You remember what he used to say about fire?

JESSE

Yeah. I remember.

The road curves. A sun-bleached sign appears, nailed to a pine.

PINE PASS VOLUNTEER FIRE SERVICE
TRAINING GROUNDS

They roll into a dirt clearing – a ragged camp of canvas tents, two brush trucks, and an old green trailer.

The ENGINE cuts.

Silence, heavy as the heat.

MOTHER

I'll be back Friday.
Unless you call before then.

JESSE

I won't call.

MOTHER

Don't be a hero, Jesse.
You're sixteen.

JESSE

I know how old I am. I'll be okay.

She grips his arm, voice trembling.

MOTHER

You don't have to do this to hold on to him.

JESSE

(quietly)
I'm not trying to hold on.
I'm trying to figure out where I'm going.

A beat. She lets go.

Jesse steps out – blinding sun, heat like a blast furnace.
Boots crunch gravel.

Across the lot – CHIEF MALLORY (40s) waves a clipboard.

MALLORY

You Jesse Brooks?

JESSE

Yeah!

Mallory strides up, helmet under arm.

MALLORY

I'm Chief Mallory. Junior trainee, right?

JESSE

Yes, sir.

MALLORY

Sign here, here, and at the bottom.
Says you won't sue us if you pass out from
heatstroke.

Jesse signs. Tiny, careful letters.

MALLORY

(eyes him)

Ever done wildland work before?

JESSE

No, sir. But I've read a lot – manuals, first-hand
accounts. Watched videos too.

MALLORY

Videos don't carry hose line.
Still – better than nothing.

He gestures toward the tents.

MALLORY (CONT'D)

Pick one empty. Boots off inside.
Dinner's at seventeen hundred. You're on Riley's
crew.

JESSE

Riley?

MALLORY

You'll know him. Looks like someone shaved a grizzly and gave it an attitude.

A laugh from behind the trailer.

VOICE (O.S.)

Kid looks like he'd blow over in a backdraft.

MALLORY

(snapping)

Shut it, Turner.

You weren't born with soot under your nails either.

He claps Jesse on the shoulder.

MALLORY (CONT'D)

You'll be fine. Fire doesn't care how big you are. Just how fast you think.

Jesse nods, heart hammering.

INT. TENT - LATE AFTERNOON

Dim light. Canvas walls ripple in the heat.
The smell - sweat, dust, and old gear.

Four cots. Three occupied. One empty.

Jesse drops his pack, takes a breath.

A shadow fills the doorway.

RILEY (O.S.)

You the junior?

Jesse turns.

RILEY (40s) - scarred forearms, tattooed, soot-streaked shirt, eyes like cold steel.

JESSE

Yes, sir.

RILEY

Don't "sir" me. I work for a living.

JESSE

(fumbling)

Okay — uh — okay.

Riley steps in, drops his helmet.

RILEY

I'm Riley. You're Brooks, right?

Jesse freezes. Nods.

JESSE

Yes. Jesse Brooks.

RILEY

Your dad was Jake Brooks. Volunteer out of Black Ridge. Died in that structure collapse six years back.

Jesse blinks, caught off guard.

JESSE

Yes sir... I mean... that's right.

RILEY

He was solid. Didn't take shortcuts.
Knew when to speak up and when to shut up.

JESSE

Thanks. I'm hoping to do right by him.

RILEY

Do right by the line. Rest'll take care of itself.

Silence. A gruff lesson that lands heavy.

RILEY (CONT'D)

You get gear yet?

JESSE

After dinner.

RILEY

Good. We're cutting line tonight. Brush clearing, widening. You'll get blisters. Sunburn. Good first day.

JESSE

Sounds great.

RILEY

It's not supposed to sound great. It's work.

Jesse nods, flustered.

JESSE

I'm ready.

RILEY

(drinks from canteen)

First fire changes you. Smell it. Hear it. Feel it move. Fire doesn't care what you think.

JESSE

I know it's dangerous.

RILEY

I didn't say dangerous.
I said it changes things.

He tosses the towel over his shoulder.

RILEY (CONT'D)

Fifteen minutes to mess call.
Latrine's down the hill. Forget that and you're digging holes.

JESSE

Got it.

Riley pauses at the flap.

RILEY

Your dad didn't let fear stop him.
But he never pretended it wasn't there.

JESSE

I'm not pretending.

A beat. Riley nods — just once — and exits.

Jesse sits alone. Canvas whispers in the wind.

EXT. CAMP — EVENING

A bell clangs metallic and loud. The mess call.

Jesse joins the flow of firefighters to the trailer canteen.

INT. MESS AREA — CONTINUOUS

ROY (the cook, 50s, built like a boulder) ladles thick orange chili into metal bowls.

ROY

Chili. Or something like it.

JESSE

Yes, sir.

ROY

Eat fast. Riley doesn't believe in digestion.

JESSE

(smiling awkwardly)

Got it.

ROY

I'm Roy. I cook. You don't like it — starve.

JESSE

Understood.

Jesse scans for a seat.

ORTIZ (O.S.)

You lost, Junior?

ORTIZ (30s, broad-shouldered) waves him over.

JESSE
Just looking for a spot.

ORTIZ
Sit. Unless you're afraid of loud eaters.

JESSE
I'll risk it.

ORTIZ
Ortiz. Engine crew. You'll hate us eventually. We
get the job done.

JESSE
Jesse Brooks.

Ortiz grins.

ORTIZ
Mallory called you 'legacy stock.'
Brave or stupid. Either way — welcome.

JESSE
(dry)
Thanks.

Across the table, ASH (17, tough, quiet, braided hair) looks
up.

ASH
Riley doesn't like dead weight.

JESSE
I'm not dead weight.

ASH
We'll see.

ORTIZ
Easy, Ash. He hasn't even held a drip torch yet.

JESSE
I'm not scared.

ASH
Good. Fire doesn't care either way.

Ortiz laughs. Ash does not.

Jesse eats — hot, spicy, real. The camp buzzes around him.
It feels new. Harsh. Alive.

From the shadows — RILEY'S VOICE.

RILEY (O.S.)
Gear up in ten! Helmets on, tools sharp!
We hit the lines at dusk!

Chairs scrape, bowls clatter. No one hesitates.

Ortiz stands, stretching.

ORTIZ
Welcome to the deep end, kid.

Jesse follows him into the fading light, heart thudding like a drum.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. FOREST TRAIL — DUSK

The forest swallows them whole.

DUSK folds through the trees like smoke.

JESSE follows the crew single-file along a narrow path,
the weight of his borrowed gear dragging on his shoulders.

His helmet's too big. His NOMEX shirt clings with sweat.
A PULASKI axe rests across his shoulder — heavier now than
when he picked it up.

RILEY (O.S.)
Eyes up, Brooks.

JESSE
(snapping to)
Yes, sir- uh- yes.

Riley doesn't look back.

RILEY
This ain't a funeral march.
Watch the ground. Watch your crew. Watch the
wind.

JESSE
Got it.

Ortiz, just ahead, glances back.

ORTIZ
Don't sweat it. He barks at everyone.

ASH (O.S.)
Except the fire. He respects that.

RILEY
(calling forward)
Damn right I do. Fire doesn't lie.

They reach a clearing - thick underbrush, twisted brambles,
deadfall tangled in dry grass. Untouched country. Waiting to
burn.

RILEY (CONT'D)
This is perimeter. Line's been walked, not
widened. We fix that. Ten feet deep, full scrape.
No green left standing.

He points the Pulaski toward Jesse.

RILEY (CONT'D)
Brooks - scrape detail.
Ortiz - ignition side.
Ash - spot him.

JESSE
Yes.

Riley steps closer, eyes narrowing.

RILEY

You ever swung one of those more than ten minutes?

JESSE

No, but—

RILEY

You're about to. Keep it low, clean. Too shallow — roots hold. Too deep — you waste time. Find the rhythm.

JESSE

I'll get it.

RILEY

You'll get it or you'll get someone hurt.
Not a lot of second chances out here.

Jesse nods, cheeks hot under the helmet.

JESSE

Understood.

RILEY

Light's fading. Move.

EXT. CLEARING - LATER

The crew fans out. Ortiz swings hard, grunting. Ash drags brush clear, eyes scanning treetops. Jesse raises his Pulaski — swings.

THUNK.

It glances off a root, jolting his arms. He resets, swings again — deeper this time. Crunch. And again. And again.

Sweat pours. Muscles burn.

The scrape widens — pale soil exposed beneath layers of dead fuel.

ORTIZ (O.S.)

Not bad, Junior! Try not to marry the dirt!

JESSE

(breathless)

I'll do my best!

Ash drags a branch past, glancing over.

ASH

Clearing faster than I thought.
Might be half-useful after all.

JESSE

Thanks — I think.

The work continues.

Metal bites earth in rhythm. Sweat, grit, breath.

No one speaks much. The forest hums with insects and fatigue.

DARKNESS deepens.

The air cools. Riley drifts the line, silent, watchful —
correcting, demonstrating.

No praise. No complaint. Just the ghost of approval.

EXT. CLEARING — WATER BREAK — NIGHT

Jesse slumps against a rock, arms trembling.
Riley hands him a canteen.

RILEY

How's the tool?

JESSE

(panting)

Feels like part of my skeleton now.

RILEY

(a hint of a grin)

Good. Means you're learning.

Jesse drinks. Warm water. Heaven.

Riley's gaze shifts skyward.

RILEY (CONT'D)

Feel that?

JESSE

What?

A faint breeze ripples the treetops. Brushes Jesse's neck.

RILEY

The shift.

First lesson of fire — it rides the wind.

Learn to feel it before you hear it.

He turns to the crew.

RILEY (CONT'D)

Ten more minutes, then we hike out!

Jesse watches the breeze move through the trees,
the hairs on his arm lifting.

He doesn't know why — yet.

CUT TO:

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL — LATER THAT NIGHT

The hike out is brutal.

Every step a weight. Boots drag through dust.

No one talks.

Ash leads, headlamp cutting white through dark.
Ortiz hums off-key.

Riley takes the rear, silent, eyes scanning the canopy.

Jesse stumbles, recovers. No one offers a hand.

And it feels right.

EXT. CAMP — CONTINUOUS

The generator's off. Lanterns flicker. Shadows move between tents.

RILEY

Tools to rack. Boots off at tent.
Debrief at oh-six-hundred. Sleep if you can.

ORTIZ

Yes, sir.

Ash peels away toward the gear rack.

Jesse follows, returning his Pulaski, fingers raw and numb.

He unlaces his boots – skin torn, heels red.

Winces. Breathes.

ORTIZ (O.S.)

Didn't pass out. That's a win.

JESSE

I'll take it.

ORTIZ

Don't celebrate yet. Hands'll blister shut by morning.

JESSE

(smiles weakly)
Looking forward to it.

Ortiz grins, claps his shoulder.

ORTIZ

You'll be fine, Junior. Just keep showing up.

Ortiz disappears into the dark, whistling.

EXT. CAMP – CONTINUOUS

Jesse stands alone.

Crickets. The rustle of trees. Low voices from the mess tent.

He turns toward his own tent.

INT. TENT - NIGHT

Moonlight filters through canvas.

Jesse collapses onto his cot, arms buzzing from the day.

He stares up at the canvas roof - the silence loud, endless.

He pulls the blanket to his chest.

Outside, the wind stirs again - gentle, familiar.

A reminder that it hasn't gone far.

Jesse closes his eyes.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. FIRE CAMP - JESSE AND RILEY'S TENT - PRE-DAWN

The faint GLOW of morning filters through canvas.

JESSE wakes to the smell of smoke - though nothing burns yet.

He sits up, stiff and aching. Shoulders locked. Calves tight.
The air hums with silence - pine, dust, and old fire.

Across the tent, RILEY stands near the flap, half-dressed,
jaw rough with stubble, eyes fixed on the pale slit of dawn.

RILEY

You're up.

JESSE

Yeah.

RILEY

Good. Briefing in ten. Boots on.

Jesse groans softly, pulls on socks, grimacing through the pain.

JESSE

Did it rain last night?

RILEY

Nope. Why?

JESSE

Smells like steam.

Riley looks back, expression unreadable.

RILEY

That's the land holding its breath.

JESSE

What does that mean?

RILEY

You'll understand when it exhales.

He pulls on his shirt, grabs his helmet, and steps out.

Jesse dresses quickly – splashes water on his face, runs a hand through his hair, shoves on his boots – then follows into the brightening dawn.

EXT. FIRE CAMP – MORNING

Camp is alive with motion. Helmets clack. Radios squawk. The easy chatter of yesterday is gone. Now it's all clipped orders and bootfalls.

ORTIZ sips from a dented thermos by the gear shed. He spots Jesse.

ORTIZ

Welcome back from the dead.

JESSE

Not sure I ever left.

ORTIZ

You'll find out once the line starts glowing.

JESSE

Can't wait.

RILEY
(passing by)
Briefing. Now.

EXT. BRIEFING AREA - CONTINUOUS

A semicircle of firefighters forms around CHIEF MALLORY (50s), red bandana at his neck, coffee mug in hand. Behind him, a map on an easel - sections marked in red grease pencil.

MALLORY
All right, listen up.

Silence settles.

MALLORY (CONT'D)
Today's ignition zone is Section D. East slope, low elevation. Controlled perimeter burn. Double containment lines are cut. Goal's to chew through surface fuel, push fire uphill, stop it cold.

He gestures to the map.

MALLORY (CONT'D)
We start ignition at zero-nine-hundred.
Winds light out of the west. Humidity's low.
Two brush rigs and water support standing by.

He pauses - glancing toward the sky.

MALLORY (CONT'D)
But I don't like this air.
It's dry and still. If you smell pine pitch or feel wind change-you say something. I don't care who you are. Fire moves faster than ego.

Jesse listens, pulse steady but tight.

MALLORY (CONT'D)
Riley's crew - southern perimeter.
Reinforce the old line. Watch for heat breaks.

RILEY
Understood.

MALLORY

Keep an eye on your junior.
Don't turn him into a cautionary tale.

RILEY

I'll keep him close.

Jesse straightens slightly, determined.

MALLORY

Move out. Radio checks in ten. Gear staged in
fifteen.

The circle breaks. Boots scatter.

JESSE

It's always this quiet before a burn?

ORTIZ

No. Quiet means something's off.

JESSE

Off how?

ORTIZ

You'll know if the wind tells you.
You'll really know if it doesn't.

RILEY

(calling)

Let's go, Brooks. You're on radio today.

Jesse blinks. Riley tosses him a handheld.

RILEY (CONT'D)

You said you read the manuals. You're qualified.

JESSE

(fumbling)

I did.

RILEY

Then don't screw it up.

Ash passes, helmet tucked under her arm.

ASH

Last guy who crossed frequencies lost his eyebrows
– and his lunch.

JESSE

Noted.

They head toward the brush trucks as sunlight spills over the ridge.

CUT TO:

EXT. MOUNTAIN FIRE ROAD - DAY

The engine ROARS uphill, bouncing over rocks.
Jesse grips the steel frame in back, wedged between ORTIZ and stacked gear.

The forest tightens on both sides – tall, blackened trunks, scars from old burns. Cicadas scream somewhere unseen.

ORTIZ

See that ridge? That's us. Section D.

Jesse squints – steep slope, dry brush, dead pine.

JESSE

What are we doing?

ORTIZ

Widening containment. Cutting, clearing, sweating. Try not to fall on your face.

JESSE

Got it.

ORTIZ

Watch for ticks.

JESSE

Ticks?

ORTIZ

Real killers out here. Fire's flashy, ticks are sneaky.

Jesse groans.

The truck slows, pulls to the shoulder.

RILEY jumps out before it stops, drops the tailgate.

RILEY

Gear out! Move!

Jesse grabs his Pulaski and tool pack, heart hammering.

RILEY (CONT'D)

Section D west edge. Two feet in, two feet down. Brooks — you're with Ortiz. Stay in his shadow. Do what he says.

JESSE

Yes.

RILEY

Save your breath for work. When ignition call hits, stop everything and listen. Fire doesn't wait for stragglers.

JESSE

Understood.

Riley moves off.

Ash shoulders a chainsaw and vanishes into brush.

Ortiz elbows Jesse.

ORTIZ

Let's make a line ugly enough to impress the boss.

EXT. RIDGE EDGE - DAY

They work in tandem. Ortiz clears with fast, expert swings.

Jesse drops to one knee, yanking up dry grass and dead roots.

ORTIZ

You ever wonder why rookies get grunt work?

JESSE

(grunting)

Because they'd screw it up?

ORTIZ

Bingo. But also – grunt work teaches you what fire loves to eat. Learn that, and you start thinking like it.

JESSE

Thinking like fire?

ORTIZ

Fire's lazy. Takes easy meals – dry grass, pine needles, wind. Clearing this stuff? Buys you time.

They fall into rhythm – pull, toss, scrape.
The fire line stretches – a raw scar of pale soil.

JESSE

How long you been doing this?

ORTIZ

Six years. Valley first, now here.

JESSE

Why?

ORTIZ

Watched a friend lose his house. Didn't want to watch another. Also, I hate offices.

Jesse smiles faintly.

They keep working. The sun burns white.

Sweat drips. Dust clings. But Jesse's moving with the crew now — muscles steady, strikes clean. For once, he feels part of it.

ORTIZ

Not bad, Junior. Could've fooled me.

JESSE

Thanks.

A faint wind flickers through the brush. Jesse pauses, looking up.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Feel that?

ORTIZ

Yeah.

JESSE

What is it?

Ortiz sniffs the air, squints.

ORTIZ

Not sure yet. Might be heat pulling air off the ridge.

JESSE

Should we tell Riley?

ORTIZ

If it's something, we'll know.
If it's not, he'll chew you out anyway.

The RADIO on Jesse's vest crackles — a short static burst.

Jesse flinches. Ortiz taps it.

ORTIZ (CONT'D)

Test key. Someone leaned on the mic.

JESSE

Right.

Ortiz gestures toward the half-finished line.

ORTIZ

Let's finish up. Maybe we stand still before the show starts.

Jesse digs his Pulaski back into the dirt. The BLADE bites deep. Sweat slides down his spine.

Above, the forest waits — silent and watching.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. RIDGE LINE - MID-MORNING

Heat owns the world now.

It hangs heavy, alive, breathing down Jesse's neck.

JESSE leans on his PULASKI, sweat dripping from his chin.

The scrape line behind him shimmers in the sun.

ORTIZ pounds at a stubborn root nearby.

Beyond them—the slope—brush and low grass. The ignition zone. Too close.

A sharp CRACK echoes up from below. Followed by a long HISS.

ORTIZ

That's drip-torch fire. They've started the line.

Jesse stiffens.

ORTIZ (CONT'D)

You okay, Junior?

JESSE

Yeah. Just didn't think it would sound like that.

ORTIZ

It never does. Sometimes you don't hear it at all — till it's too late.

A thin column of SMOKE snakes upward through the trees.
No roar. No glow. Just motion—fast, hungry.

JESSE
Riley said stay till second call.

ORTIZ
He'll let us know if it gets too hungry.

Riley's voice bursts from the RADIO—dry, clipped.

RILEY (V.O.)
Team Bravo, hold southern line. Eyes up. Radios
open. Fire's moving clean but quick.

ORTIZ
(grim)
That was fast.

JESSE
Should we move back?

ORTIZ
Not yet. That tone means it's not a threat—yet.

The air tightens.

Jesse swallows, uneasy.

JESSE
Does it always feel like this before a fire jumps?

ORTIZ
Sometimes. Sometimes you feel nothing at all.
That's worse.

A faint crackle rises—the sound of pine needles catching
flame.

Soft. Patient. Deadly.

Then—Riley's voice again, sharper now.

RILEY (V.O.)
Spot fire reported at grid Echo-Five!
Tighten flanks—scan high ground!
Bravo Team, check your downwind!

Ortiz spins toward the ridge. Jesse follows.
Off to the right—a new curl of smoke.

JESSE
That wasn't there two minutes ago.

ORTIZ
No. It wasn't.

A GUST OF WIND slams across Jesse's face—dry, bitter,
chemical.

The taste of pine pitch.

JESSE
(into radio)
Bravo to Base, spot confirmed downwind,
southeast of position. Smoke column active.

RILEY (V.O.)
Copy that. You've got fire on the crawl.
Get your asses back to staging.

ORTIZ
You heard him! Move!

EXT. RIDGE TRAIL - CONTINUOUS

They move fast downhill—half-run, half-slide.

Behind them, the fire CRACKLES louder.

Another gust. Pine needles rain down.

JESSE
Something's changed!

ORTIZ
Yeah. The fire just stood up.

EXT. TRAILHEAD - MOMENTS LATER

ASH hauls gear into the brush truck. Face stone-set.
Smoke thickens above the slope.

ORTIZ
Where's Riley?

ASH
Calling suppression. He's up-ridge.

ORTIZ
We need eyes on the slope-if it curls this way-

ASH
Then we're boxed in.

(to Jesse)
Get that radio up. Now!

Jesse fumbles for the mic.

JESSE
(into radio)
Bravo to Riley. Fire behavior increasing.
Wind shift confirmed. Awaiting orders.

Static. Nothing.

JESSE (CONT'D)
Bravo to Riley-do you copy?

A POP. Then Riley's voice-fragmented, fading.

RILEY (V.O.)
Hold line-backtrack-no-flank-

Silence.

ORTIZ
(quiet curse)
We just lost him.

Jesse stares at the smoke thickening overhead.

JESSE

What do we do?

ORTIZ

Fall back to the trucks. Pray he's ahead of us.

EXT. STAGING AREA - MINUTES LATER

The smoke sheet rises like a wall.

Wind pulses from the south—twenty-plus mph gusts.

Heat stings.

Ash is at the tailgate, radio pressed to her ear.

ASH

No word from Riley.

Signal's breaking. Spot's growing.

ORTIZ

How far?

ASH

Too far to ignore. Not far enough to run.

Jesse's vest radio bursts with fragments—Mallory's voice, static, shouts.

Ortiz grips Jesse's shoulder.

ORTIZ

Get to the cab. Radio Base. Request wind telemetry now. Tell 'em spot fire running southeast toward Ridge Line Delta. Say "running."

JESSE

Got it.

He sprints to the truck, jumps in, keys the mic.

JESSE (into radio)
Base, this is Bravo Crew. Requesting wind
telemetry. Active spot southeast Ridge Line Delta.
Fire is running. Repeat—fire is running!

Static—then MALLORY (V.O.), tight and urgent.

MALLORY (V.O.)
Copy, Bravo. Wind shifted ten degrees south.
Gusts twenty plus. Spot expanding.
All crews withdraw to fallback positions.

JESSE
(soft)
Fallback...

EXT. STAGING AREA - CONTINUOUS

ASH
(shouting)
Gear in! We're pulling back!

ORTIZ
Where's ignition crew?!

ASH
Still downhill! Five minutes before it cooks!

Jesse races back.

JESSE
Mallory confirmed shift—gusts twenty.
Ordered full fallback!

ORTIZ
Then we don't wait! Help her load!

They throw gear into the bed — tools, helmets, saws.

The air sharpens—smoke and chemicals—forest turning angry.

Jesse glances toward the slope.

FIRE MOVES.

Low, fast. A wall of orange ripping through brush,
snapping at pine boughs, rolling smoke like a wave.

JESSE (whispers)
This isn't controlled anymore...

ASH
(yelling)
We're loaded!

ORTIZ
Where the hell's Riley?!

No answer. Only smoke.

Ash keys her radio again.

ASH
Riley, this is Bravo! Fallback in progress!
Trucks loaded! Fire moving fast! Do you copy?!

Static. Then silence.

ASH (CONT'D)
(low)
Thirty seconds. If he's not here—we go.

ORTIZ
Can't just leave him.

ASH
We're not leaving him. We're not dying either.

Jesse backs away, taking in the chaos.

Smoke, heat, voices—all pounding together.

The radio CRACKLES suddenly.

RILEY (V.O.)
Bravo—Riley—coming in—north side—hold—

JESSE
(into mic)
Riley, this is Jesse. We hear you.
Confirm location.

Static. Then:

RILEY (V.O.)

North slope. Cutting through old trench.
Two minutes out. Hold fire rig.

ORTIZ

He's behind us. Two minutes—then we roll and meet him.

ASH

Everyone strap in! Jesse, passenger seat—keep radio live!

Jesse jumps in, hands shaking.

Ash fires the engine. Smoke boils in the mirror.

ASH (CONT'D)

Come on, Riley... come on.

A SHADOW moves through trees—then RILEY BURSTS INTO VIEW, helmet on, pack slung, tool dragging from his hand. He doesn't slow.

ASH

Move!

Riley climbs into the bed, slams the tailgate.

RILEY

Drive!

Ash guns it. The truck ROARS up the trail, wheels hammering ruts. Smoke chases them.

Inside, no one speaks.

As they clear into a wide gap, Jesse finally finds his voice.

JESSE

The fire... it jumped.

Riley leans forward, eyes on the rearview, voice low.

RILEY

No... it ran.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. FIRE ROAD - DAY

The brush truck JOLTS and bucks over rock.

JESSE grips the dash, white-knuckled.

ASH drives hard, jaw locked. Smoke rolls behind them like a storm.

ASH

What'd he say?

JESSE

Cut left at the split - north fire road!

Ash yanks the wheel. Gravel sprays.

The truck tears onto a narrow path, branches slapping the sides.

The cab fills with the sting of resin and smoke.

JESSE

I thought this was a burn window!

ASH

It was a burn window.

JESSE

And now—?

ASH

Now it's a runaway.

They burst into a clearing - the second brush truck already there.

RAMIREZ and DANA stand outside, gear in hand.

RILEY jumps down from the bed before the truck stops.

RILEY

Report!

DANA

Spot fires up the slope. Three flare-ups.
One's crowning the east side.

RAMIREZ

Wind's not just shifting - it's feeding.

RILEY

Then we're out of time.

He points rapid-fire.

RILEY (CONT'D)

Ash - water on the lower edge. Dana, Ramirez -
trench behind the rigs. Ortiz - find any ignition
crew still upslope.

JESSE

What about me?

Riley's eyes lock on him.

RILEY

You've got a radio and legs. Run point to Camp
Charlie. Tell them we're pulling from Section D -
slope's gone hostile.

JESSE

Alone?

RILEY

You wanted to be useful. Left fork at the washout.
Keep running till you hit the marker tower.

JESSE

But the smoke-

RILEY

You'll get through. Go now.

Riley grips his shoulder — firm, grounding.

RILEY (CONT'D)

Keep the radio live. Call out if you hit trouble.
Don't be a hero. Just get there.

Jesse nods, turns, and runs down the trail.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL — CONTINUOUS

The forest moans around him. Wind rises, hot and hollow.
Smoke crawls low across the path — silver-grey and stinging.

JESSE (into radio)

This is Jesse Brooks, Bravo Crew. En route to Camp
Charlie. Wind shift confirmed. Spot fire
compromised Section D. Riley says slope is
hostile. Over.

Static.

He tries again.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Camp Charlie, do you copy? Over.

Nothing.

He slows, listening — only wind through dead branches.

Ahead, the trail forks.

LEFT — downhill into thick smoke.

RIGHT — uphill, clearer.

JESSE (muttering)

Left fork. Riley said left.

He stares between them. The left glows faintly orange deep in
the haze. He hesitates.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Maybe that's the one... I'm taking the high road.

He veers right, jogging uphill. Smoke returns – thicker, sharper. He coughs, shirt pulled over his nose.

JESSE (into radio)
Bravo to base, confirm path to Camp Charlie.
Visibility falling. Do you copy?

Only static.

Then – faint, ghostlike – a voice calling his name.

JESSE (CONT'D)
Riley? Ortiz?

Nothing. Just trees and wind.

He pulls out his compass.

The needle dances... then settles northeast.

JESSE (CONT'D)
Northeast? That's wrong.

He spins. The trail behind him is gone – swallowed by smoke.

JESSE (CONT'D)
Okay... fine. Retrace. Just retrace–

A violent GUST blasts through, throwing ash everywhere.
He drops, shielding his face.

The radio bursts to life – fragmented transmission.

RADIO (V.O.)
–Charlie post-unknown location–fire behavior–

JESSE
Say again! Say again!

Silence.

He stands, chest pounding.

The smoke thickens. No trail. No markers.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Okay... I went northeast. Just go back... just—

He moves fast, ducking low branches, stumbling over rock.
The smoke closes in.

Then — a flicker of ORANGE between trees, forty yards
downslope.

JESSE (CONT'D)

That's not good.

He keys the mic.

JESSE (into radio)

Bravo to base. Visual on active flame, southeast
slope. I'm off grid—reversing course—

The radio SCREAMS static — then dies.

A loud CRACK behind him — a branch splitting in heat.

He runs.

EXT. SLOPE - CONTINUOUS

Through brush and rock, blinded by smoke.

Branches whip his arms.

The heat builds — pulsing, breathing, alive.

His helmet slips. His pack bounces.

The fire ROARS behind him now — a deep, rhythmic thunder.

He bursts through a thicket and slides down loose gravel.
The world tilts sideways — no direction safe.

He drops beside a BOULDER, gasping.

JESSE (into mic)

This is Jesse Brooks, Bravo Crew. I am lost.
Repeat — lost. Fire active in all directions.
Requesting coordinates. I need—

Static. The radio dies.

He lowers it, shaking.

Only his breathing and the whisper of burning trees.

Then — a distant, eerie CRY. Animal. Maybe not.

He exhales, trembling.

Pulls an emergency FOIL BLANKET from his pack — unfolds it.
The CRINKLE echoes too loud in the silence.

He drapes it over himself and leans back against the stone.

Through a break in the trees, the sky glows violet and rust.
Ash drifts like snow, golden in the last light.

JESSE (soft)

I'm not dead.

Silence answers.

He reaches beneath his shirt, fingers closing around his
father's DOG TAG.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Guess this is the part where I start talking to
myself... Or to you.

A thin, tired smile.

JESSE (CONT'D)

I tried to do what you did. Followed orders.
Worked hard. Didn't freeze when it got bad. Still
screwed it up. Lost the trail. Lost the crew.

His voice catches.

JESSE (CONT'D)

I don't know if I'll make it through the night.
But I'll try. I just... wish I knew what you'd do
right now.

He leans his head back, eyes closing.

Above him, the first STARS shimmer through smoke.

The forest crackles somewhere unseen.

The fire keeps moving — relentless, unstoppable.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - DAWN

SILENCE.

Not the peaceful kind—an absence so complete it hums.

JESSE stirs beneath a rock ledge.

Morning light slices through ash-hung air like stage lights.
He sits up slowly, foil blanket CRACKLING off his shoulders.
Cold. Stiff. Alive.

The fire's gone. Only haze remains—thin, ghostly, drifting.

He checks his RADIO. Dead.

Unfolds a sweat-creased MAP across the dirt.

JESSE

Okay... you came up the northeast road. Took the
high fork. Supposed to hit Camp Charlie...

He frowns, tracing lines.

JESSE (CONT'D)

But you didn't.

Pulls his COMPASS. Needle spins, settles north.

JESSE (CONT'D)

So you're... here? Section E? No, that's too far...

He exhales. Nothing but trees.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Maybe west. High point. Spot the ridge—

A memory—RILEY'S VOICE in his head:

RILEY (V.O.)

Fire doesn't play fair. It doubles back.

Jesse's hand tightens on the map.

JESSE

Or maybe... the creek. Follow the water. Water goes where people go.

He folds the map, slings his pack, looks to the blue-glass sky.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Let's find the creek.

He steps from the ledge—his own voice too loud in the still. Boots sink into soft ash as he moves downhill.

EXT. DRY CREEKBED - LATER MORNING

A shallow, twisting scar through the forest floor. Jesse crouches, brushes gritty soil between his fingers.

JESSE

You'll lead somewhere.

He follows it.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

The sun climbs. Jesse's boots CRUNCH over pebbles. The creek snakes south—maybe. Maybe not.

No markers. No tape. No tracks.

JESSE

Should've hit something by now...

He unfolds the map on his knee. Terrain doesn't match. Compass needle wobbles then settles southeast.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Still the right way...

A flicker in the trees. He freezes.

JESSE (calling)

Hello?

No answer. Only ash drifting from branches.

He exhales, keeps moving.

The creekbed narrows, dropping into shadow.
Light dims. The ground turns soft, sucking at his boots.

A bird cries once—then silence.

JESSE

Ortiz would've called this stupid.

He hears ORTIZ in memory:

ORTIZ (V.O.)

Creekbeds are good for water, not for hiking.

JESSE

Flat and predictable doesn't lead anywhere when
you're lost.

He stumbles on a slick log—catches himself, panting.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Okay... fine. It's fine.

He drinks from his canteen—warm metallic mouthful—then caps
it.

Up ahead, a slope. He climbs on hands and knees.

EXT. ASH CLEARING - CONTINUOUS

At the top—a small clearing.

The ground BLACK, coated in powdered ash.

Too even. Too still.

He kneels, touches it. Not char. Not fresh.

JESSE

Anyone?

Nothing.

He sits on a stone, staring at the ground.

JESSE (CONT'D)

I don't know where I am. How far I've gone.
If I'm going the right way.

He keys the radio again—voice thin.

JESSE (into radio)

Jesse Brooks. Following dry creekbed southeast.
If anyone can hear me... please respond.

Static. Nothing.

A drip echoes from somewhere ahead—like water finding stone.

EXT. LOWER GULLY - AFTERNOON

The forest changes.

Trees thin. Air grows heavy.

The creek cuts deeper, the ground sharper.

Jesse moves like a machine—dehydrated, hollow.
Every step a choice to keep going.

JESSE

Half mile more... then rest.

The light turns amber.

Shadows reach long fingers across the gully.

He leans against a boulder, breathing hard.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Where the hell am I?

Unfolds the map – dirt-streaked, creased to ruin.
Tries to match terrain. Fails.

JESSE (CONT'D)

I'm not on the map anymore.

He shoves it away, anger fading into fatigue.

The trees here are wrong—branches twisted, ash layered thick.
Wind dead. Time stalled.

He drops to a flat rock, removes his helmet.
Takes a tiny sip of water.

JESSE (CONT'D)

You did this. Picked the wrong fork.
Followed a dead creek into a dead zone.
You got lost.

Silence presses close.

He keys the radio one last time.

JESSE (into radio)

Jesse Brooks, Bravo Crew. Still alone. Still lost.
Followed a dry creek for miles. Sun's going down.
Looking for a place to bed down. If anyone hears
this...I'm still trying.

He lets go. Nothing.

EXT. ROCK HOLLOW – SUNSET

A small dip between two boulders—just enough shelter.
He drops his pack, groans, spreads the foil blanket, wraps
himself.

Eats the last protein bar. Two sips of water.
Caps the canteen tight.

The light dies fast. The forest becomes edges and then none.

Night sounds rise—distant CRACK, rustle, bird cry.
He tells himself it's nothing.

Fingers find the dog tag beneath his shirt.

JESSE

I'm not done.

Barely a whisper.

He lies down, curling beneath the foil, eyes open to a thin moon.

The forest waits. The fire, somewhere beyond, still moves.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. RIDGE BASE - MORNING

The ridge rises like the spine of a sleeping animal - jagged, steep, uncaring.

JESSE studies it, knees aching just looking.
His breath puffs white in the cool air.

JESSE

One step at a time.

His own voice sounds alien - hoarse, smoke-scarred.

He adjusts his pack straps and starts up.

Boots SLIP on pine needles. Legs burn.

He hasn't eaten since yesterday. A few sips of water left.

A CRACK behind him. Sharp. Deliberate.
He whirls - hand over the Pulaski on his pack.

JESSE (calling)

Hello?

Brush rustles. Movement.

Thirty feet downslope - a shape emerges.

A COYOTE. Gray-brown. Still. Watching.

JESSE (soft)

Easy...

The animal steps closer, head low, curious.

Then tilts its head, slips back into shadow — gone.

Jesse waits. Ten seconds. Twenty.

Then exhales, shaky.

JESSE (muttering)

Great. Now I'm lunch scouting.

He unstraps the Pulaski, grips it tight, scanning the trees. Everything feels closer now. He skirts the ridge, staying high, eyes wide.

JESSE (CONT'D)

I'm not gonna panic. I'm not gonna lose it.

He doesn't believe it.

A voice in memory — RILEY's, calm and certain:

RILEY (V.O.)

Follow orders. Stay visible.
Don't leave the line.

He keeps walking until his legs give.
Drops beside a boulder, sets the pack down, breath ragged.

JESSE

Just... need a second.

He crouches, face in hands, Pulaski across his knees.
The silence presses in.

JESSE

They don't even know where you are. They might've
stopped looking.

He lifts his head — eyes rimmed red.

JESSE (CONT'D)

This is what it must've felt like for Dad.

He removes his helmet. Exhausted. Drained.

He lifts the radio.

JESSE (into mic)

Jesse Brooks. Elevation increase... no signal.
Still off-route. Still alone.

Nothing. Dead air.

He closes his eyes—

FLASHBACK:

INT. PICKUP TRUCK — DAY (YEARS AGO)

Eight-year-old JESSE in the front seat. The truck smells of oil and smoke. HIS FATHER sits behind the wheel, hands trembling slightly. Radio chatter — distant fire call.

FATHER

If anything ever happens...
You stay calm. You get out. You breathe first.
Then you think.

Young Jesse nods.

BACK TO PRESENT:

EXT. RIDGE BASE — DAY

Jesse's eyes snap open. Hands trembling.

JESSE

I'm not him.

He forces breath in, then out — steady.

JESSE (CONT'D)

I get out. I breathe. I think.

He closes his eyes again. Just for a moment.

EXT. RIDGE SUMMIT - LATE AFTERNOON

Jesse scrambles the last few yards, drops to his knees at the top.

He scans the horizon - valleys, ridges, endless forest.

No roads. No towers. No crew. Just silence.

Wind sweeps from the north, carrying a faint scent of burnt plastic.

He sits, Pulaski beside him. Shoulders sag.

JESSE

I'm losing daylight.

He pictures the crew - Ortiz with seeds, Ash sharpening steel, Riley bent over the mapboard.

No one calling his name.

JESSE (CONT'D)

(a whisper)

I'm still here. I'm still trying.

It sounds small. Worn out.

He staggers along the ridge to a shelf of stone under leaning pines.

Drops his gear. Unrolls the foil blanket.

Sits. No fire. No shelter. Just stillness.

Night deepens. The forest becomes motion and noise - wind, brush crack, distant rustle. None of it friendly.

He clutches the chain under his shirt - his father's tag.

Hours pass. Then - a faint change in the air.

His breath plumes white. The wind swings west.

The SCENT hits – smoke.

Jesse stands fast, scanning the dark.

JESSE (CONT'D)

I'm not gonna sit here. I'm not letting it find me
asleep.

He grabs the Pulaski, descends twenty yards down-slope.
Brush. Grass. Dry debris.

He kneels. Feels the ground. Then starts to CLEAR it.
Swing. Scrape. Cut.

(montage)

- Pulaski bites earth.
- Dirt flies.
- His breath turns to steam.
- The trench widens, six feet across. Two feet wide.

END MONTAGE.

He slumps beside it, gasping.

Palms torn. Eyes fixed on the treeline.

JESSE

If you come... I'll be ready.

The forest holds its breath.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. RIDGE FIREBREAK – DAWN

Ash-gray light.

JESSE sits hunched beside the rough trench he scraped
overnight.

The PULASKI rests across his knees – a badge he no longer
wants.

He never slept.

The line before him is crooked, shallow – a beginner's scar in the dirt.

Wind's gone. Only stillness remains.

JESSE

What now?

His voice cracks. He glances at his canteen – three sips left.

Hands raw through the gloves. Knees stiff. Doubt louder than pain.

He paces the line, studying it through imagined eyes.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Too shallow. Not enough width. No anchor.
Riley would tear it apart. Ortiz would call it a
tired squirrel hole.

Almost smiles. Doesn't.

JESSE (CONT'D)

You knew this was coming. Lost the trail, screwed
it up... too proud to admit it. Just like he was.

He drops beside his pack. Silence presses close.

No radio. No crew. Only creaking trees.

Memories flicker.

– Riley's hand on his shoulder: *Then you're qualified.*

– Ortiz laughing: *Just keep showing up.*

– His mother's voice: *You don't have to do this to hold onto
him.*

JESSE (CONT'D)

I wanted to prove something... I just don't remember
what.

He pushes to his feet, staggering off toward shade.

EXT. FOREST RIDGE - LATER

His body moves on autopilot - stumbling through roots and ash. He finds an OVERHANG carved into the hillside - a stone shelf barely deep enough to crawl beneath.

He drops his gear, slides inside. Dry. Cool. Safe enough. Foil blanket around his shoulders. Eyes heavy.

He rests his head against the stone -

DREAM SEQUENCE:

INT. TRUCK - NIGHT (DREAM)

Jesse sits in the back seat of his dad's old blue FORD.

Dashboard cracked. Air smells like pine and smoke.

Road rolls by in gray streaks outside the window.

JESSE (8)

Dad?

The MAN at the wheel doesn't answer. His face is half in shadow - looks like his father, but isn't. Eyes hollow. Haunted.

JESSE (8)

I'm scared.

MAN

Then you're paying attention.

JESSE (8)

What do I do?

MAN

You breathe. You listen. Stay where the wind can find you. Wind tells you where the fire is coming from.

The man reaches for a MAP on the dash — blank.

White paper. No roads.

MAN (CONT'D)

You followed me. But I was lost, too.

The truck disappears into light —

BACK TO SCENE:

INT./EXT. OVERHANG — DAY

Jesse JERKS awake — gasping. Sweat and ashes on his skin. He sits up slowly, the dream still clinging. Sunlight leaks across the entrance.

He stares at his hands, shaking faintly.

JESSE

I'm still here.

He picks up the Pulaski, lays it across his lap.

Looks out into the trees — fear tempered by resolve.

Eyes close again, finally surrendering to sleep.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. RIDGE OVERHANG — DAWN

JESSE blinks into half-dark.

The sky beyond the trees is pale — morning.

He bolts upright, panic sharpening through fatigue.

JESSE

You're gonna die if you keep doing this.

He groans as joints pop.

Muscles stiff and salt-stained beneath the foil blanket.

At the mouth of the overhang – ash falls.

Not flakes. Dust. Fine. Endless.

The air stands still, heavy and wrong.

He steps into the open, brushes gray from his arms.

JESSE (into radio)
Jesse Brooks, Bravo Crew. Still alive. Still
alone. Smoke cover heavy. Ashfall overnight.
No movement in sight. Please say someone's still
out there.

Only static.

He lowers the radio. Watches the trees.

JESSE (CONT'D)
I need to move. Can't stay here.

He slings his pack, Pulaski in hand, turns full circle – lost.
Then sets his jaw.

JESSE (CONT'D)
West. Ridge line. Find a clearing.

He starts walking.

EXT. FOREST RIDGE – DAY

The world's gone gray. Trees and rocks blend to one tone.
Ash drifts like dust shaken loose from the sky.

He walks. Mouth dry. Head pounding. Steps uncertain.

The forest suddenly explodes – A STAMPEDE bursts through the
brush.

DEER. Dozens. Charging downhill. Behind them – COYOTES, low
and fast, not chasing, *fleeing.*

The ground TREMBLES.

Jesse dives aside as the herd splits around him — a wall of fur and noise.

Branches SNAP. Ash erupts.

Then — stillness.

He tastes the air. Smoke. Fresh.

The low, pulsing pressure builds — that invisible push that comes before a flame front.

JESSE

Fire.

He turns — no glow yet. But it's close.

He looks where the animals fled, then back.

JESSE (CONT'D)

No choice.

He grips the Pulaski — and runs **with** them.

EXT. BURN SCAR — LATER

The ground steams. Charred trunks rise like skeletons.

Every step kicks gray into the air.

The smell — sweet rot and scorched pine. A thousand Christmas trees gone to smoke.

He crouches beside a fallen log. Its hollow still glows faint red.

JESSE

Too close.

The fire's maybe a mile behind, still moving. But here — blackened earth. Silence. Safety, for now.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Good. This buys time.

He walks again.

The forest here isn't alive — it's aftermath.

Wood creaks. Ash hisses as hidden sap vaporizes below.

A burned-out stump, edges melted smooth. Soil still hot beneath his boots.

He stops at a clear line — black turns back to brown. Fire's edge.

JESSE (quietly)

I don't even know which is worse anymore.

He steps over it.

EXT. FOREST - LATE AFTERNOON

Jesse moves through the untouched side. Feet numb. Body gone hollow.

His gait staggers. Every step mechanical. One foot. Then the other.

He trips over a root — crashes to one knee. The Pulaski clatters beside him.

JESSE

No water. No food. No sign. No... anything.

He slumps against a tree, head back. Lips cracked. Skin pale. Breathing shallow.

JESSE (CONT'D)

I should stop. Sit. Wait.

Silence.

JESSE (CONT'D)

...Not yet.

He looks up – the sky a ceiling of gray, no sun left. No hope, either. Just persistence.

JESSE (CONT'D)

One more day.

He closes his eyes. That's the deal.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. BURNT RIDGE – DAY

A faint, sour stench cuts through the smoke. JESSE slows, sniffing – puzzled.

He drops to one knee behind a deadfall, parts the branches – A POOL glistens below, wide and green-brown. Stagnant. Sulfurous. Insects skate the surface.

JESSE

It's disgusting... But it's water.

He creeps closer. The mud sucks at his boots.

Pulls a compact SURVIVAL FILTER from his pack – the one RILEY gave him before deployment.

JESSE (CONT'D)

You said read the manual. I did.

He skims algae with a stick, dips the filter, drinks. The water is warm. Foul. But it holds. He gulps until his stomach aches.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Okay... that'll hold me. That gets me one more day.

He fills his canteen, seals the rest. Wipes his mouth. Looks around the hollow.

Twisted trees. Half-burned birch bark curls like paper. Life trying to recover – and failing.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Back uphill. Ridge. Clearer path.

He starts to climb.

EXT. FOREST RIDGE - LATER

Jesse moves uphill through denser green. Ferns curl, moss clings to roots - unburned ground.

But the forest feels *off*.

He slows. Ahead - a shape by a rock outcrop. Small. Slumped. He approaches carefully.

Bones. Ribs charred and half-buried. A fox, mid-run, mid-fall - frozen in time.

Jesse stares, breath shallow.

JESSE (quietly)

This is what it's doing.

He circles wide, keeps walking.

Another hundred yards - another body. A raccoon. Burned to its joints, claws still curled. Farther - melted feathers, fused nests.

JESSE (whisper)

What didn't run fast enough?

Ash drifts like snowfall. The forest exhales, empty.

He climbs to the ridge top - a wide CLEARING. The valley beyond lies blanketed in gray, smoke stretched like a veil across the world.

He drops his pack beside a massive pine. Knees crack as he sinks down.

JESSE

I'm still moving.

He leans back. Breathing steady.

Hydrated. Barely human. Still alive.

JESSE (CONT'D)

I might actually make it.

Not hope — just math. He closes his eyes. Listens to the wind in the pines. Cool. Clean.

Then — a FOOTSTEP.

His eyes snap open. Stillness.

Another step. Measured. Careful. Thirty feet off.

He grips the Pulaski, rises to a crouch.

JESSE (calling)

Hello?

Silence.

JESSE (CONT'D)

If you can hear me... I'm not armed.

I mean— I've got a tool, but I'm not looking for a fight.

No reply. He scans the treeline. The forest seems to hold its breath.

JESSE (whisper)

Just wind. Just wind and nerves.

But the wind shifts — circling, pausing — like something unseen is listening back.

He stays still, Pulaski low, eyes locked on the trees.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. RIDGE FOREST — DAY

A glint. Faint, unnatural — a flash of *glass* between trees.

JESSE stops mid-step, squints downslope.

Two hundred yards through haze – straight lines, roof angles.
A *structure.*

JESSE

No way...

He bolts downhill – sliding, stumbling, branches clawing his sleeves. Heart hammering. Adrenaline smothering exhaustion.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Come on... please.

He bursts through brush – and stops dead.

An OLD HUNTING BLIND rises on rusted poles, half-collapsed. Leaning. Rotten. A tin panel flaps weakly in the wind.

Hope dies on his face.

JESSE (quietly)

No... no, no no...

He drops to his knees beside a support post. Metal flakes under his hand – cold, lifeless.

JESSE (CONT'D)

This isn't help.

Still, his hands reach for the ladder – instinct, desperation. Half the rungs are gone. He climbs anyway.

The blind groans. Each step shrieks. He hauls himself through the hatch–

INT. HUNTING BLIND – CONTINUOUS

Dim light cuts through warped boards. The floor sags. Corners rot. A stool, a chewed plastic bin, a rusted thermos – relics of someone long gone.

No radio. No gear. No hope.

JESSE

That's it?

His voice echoes small in the stale air. He kicks the plastic container — it spins, cracks, stills. Silence swallows it whole.

He sinks onto the wobbling stool. It holds — barely.

JESSE (CONT'D)

You couldn't just leave a note? A map? A name?

He stares at nothing — imagining the hunter who built this, the patience, the waiting, the silence that followed.

JESSE (CONT'D)

I ran for this.

He exhales hard, shoulders slumping. The fight drains out of him. No tears yet — just stillness. Hands open in his lap, palms raw.

Finally, he stands. Descends rung by rung. Drops the last few feet with a dull THUD.

EXT. CLEARING BY THE BLIND — MOMENTS LATER

The air has changed. Pressure building. Leaves whisper warnings. A low THUNDER rolls across the ridge — distant but heavy.

Jesse looks up. A dark cloud wall spreads across the horizon — thicker than smoke, promising rain.

He steps into the open clearing, shoulders bowed.

JESSE

This was supposed to mean something.
Getting here. Finding this place.

Thunder again, closer. He swallows, voice cracking.

JESSE (CONT'D)

I thought I could keep going... If I just kept walking—

His knees buckle. He sinks to the ground, fists clenching then loosening.

Breath shatters. He folds forward, face to dirt, shoulders shaking. Tears fall silent beneath the rising wind.

Thunder rumbles one last time. The forest watches – and says nothing.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. MOUNTAIN SLOPE - DAY

A FLASH-white, soundless-bleaches the forest.

JESSE flinches mid-step, boot skidding on rock. The light vanishes. Ten seconds later-THUNDER, deep and slow.

He looks up. The sky boils bronze-gray. Air thick with static, the weight of wet earth.

JESSE

Keep moving. Lower ground.

He jogs downhill-boots sliding, Pulaski bouncing. Lightning flashes again-closer. Thunder CRACKS like a fault line. He ducks behind a mossy log, scanning treetops.

Another flash. Another hit of ozone. Then-smoke. Thin. Rising lazy between trunks.

JESSE (whisper)

Damn it.

He turns-smoke behind him too. One fire ahead, one behind. He's caught between.

He runs.

EXT. LOW DRAW - MINUTES LATER

The valley narrows into a dark corridor.

Cooler air, but no safety. The wind spirals—erratic, charged.
The scent sharpens—metallic, coppery.

Lightning detonates ahead. Thunder lands instantly. Branches
rain needles. Birds explode from cover.

JESSE (to himself)
Two fires. I'm in the middle.

He scrambles up a short ridge, drops to a small bench of earth
— bare dirt, rock, scattered fern. No scars yet. Not safe
long.

JESSE (CONT'D)
Gotta get low. Gotta get under.

He rips a TARP from his pack—frayed, sun-stiff. Swings the
Pulaski, carving trenches on both sides of a shallow dip.

Pins one end under a log, weighs the other with rocks.

JESSE (muttering)
Not stopping the fire... just buying seconds.

Wind kicks—sideways now, from both directions. Smoke creeps
like fingers around the trees.

He drops to his knees, throws dirt along the tarp's edge,
fists pounding, sealing it down.

JESSE (CONT'D)
Not much of a line.

He crawls under the tarp, lies flat—face inches from soil.
Breath ragged, chest heaving. The heat already unbearable.

Lightning ignites the world white. Thunder detonates on top of
it. He curls tighter, arms over head.

JESSE (whisper)
Don't panic. Don't you dare panic.

Outside—the WIND SCREAMS. Trees thrash.

Then comes the new sound: a low, steady ROAR.

Fire's voice.

It builds—deep, relentless, closing from two sides. Trunks POP. Sap hisses. The air vibrates.

The tarp glows orange. Smoke presses underneath in waves, searching, breathing.

Jesse shoves his face into the dirt, coughing through grit. Sweat pours from his scalp, eyes burning.

The ground beneath him grows hot enough to sting. Sparks pepper the tarp's edge—glowing, dying.

Time dissolves. One minute. Five. Forever.

The ROAR crests—then slowly fades. Heat falls by degrees. The earth stops trembling.

Stillness.

Jesse doesn't move. Breath shallow. Ears ringing. The tarp sags heavy with ash.

A faint breeze slips through. Cool. Real.

He opens his eyes. The world under the tarp is black and quiet, smoke drifting like fog on a dying river.

JESSE (hoarse)

Still here.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. DRY CREEK BED - DAY

The creek is dust and memory.

JESSE kneels, scraping earth with his boot heel.

Baked layers crumble — pale, cracked, lifeless.

He scans for water. Nothing.

Then — a hollow in the rock, no deeper than a bowl.
Inside, a few spoonfuls of murky green.

JESSE

Holy hell...

He unscrews his canteen, dumps the last stale drops.

Pulls a CHARCOAL FRAGMENT from his pack — wrapped in foil like treasure.

Crushes it between stones, sprinkles dust into the pool.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Black teeth... right? Fire teeth?

He stirs with a stick, filters through his survival straw.
Drinks. Grimaces. Swallows again.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Okay... fluids. That's one thing.

He pockets a small shard of charcoal.

JESSE (CONT'D)

For signal. Arrows. Marks. You're not dying today.

He caps the canteen and moves on.

EXT. BURNT FOREST — LATER

The world is sepia — trees thin, ferns curled, silence absolute.

A crow calls once. Then nothing.

Jesse walks, slower now, Pulaski on his shoulder. His voice drifts out in fragments — half-mutter, half-company.

JESSE

You'd hate this. You'd call it a character builder.

A tired chuckle. He's talking to RILEY... or his DAD.
Maybe both.

JESSE (CONT'D)
Should've eaten more. Slept more. Shut up and
listened.

He steps on soft moss. Keeps going.

JESSE (CONT'D)
Did you see that squirrel? No? Me neither.
Still here. Still walking. Still me.

He stops beneath a split tree.

JESSE (CONT'D)
That one looks like it's screaming.

He laughs quietly – not mad, just spent. Sits under a leaning
birch, Pulaski across his boots.

JESSE (CONT'D)
Maybe I'll just... close my eyes.
(calling to the woods)
You're not allowed to eat me until I'm all the way
dead. That's the rule.

Silence.

Then – a SOUND. Low. Distant. Guttural.

Jesse freezes. Listens. Heart thuds once.

JESSE (whisper)
That wasn't thunder.

Nothing moves. The forest holds its breath.

A second growl – closer. Almost human.

He stands slowly, Pulaski gripped tight. Turns in a slow
circle.

JESSE (quiet)
Okay... we're not waiting to find out.

He starts downhill through ferns and deadfall. Every pause heavier, every silence thicker.

The air turns damp — smells of caves and rot. He crouches behind a hollow stump, watching shadows.

No movement. No wind. Just the sense of eyes in the dark.

JESSE (barely audible)

I heard you.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. BURNT FOREST HOLLOW — NIGHT

The air is still. Too still.

Smoke hangs high in the canopy, refusing to leave. JESSE crouches beneath an up-torn root wall, a half-fallen tree offering one shielded side.

JESSE

I'm not food.

He drops his pack, spreads a TARP low against the roots. Three directions to watch. Better odds than four.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Move again tomorrow. Let the smoke clear.

He ties a PARACORD line between two saplings, hangs an aluminum CAN from his water filter—two pebbles inside. A makeshift alarm.

He tugs the cord. CLINK. Satisfied.

JESSE (muttering)

If this turns out to be a raccoon with a limp..

He settles back, Pulaski within reach, ash brushed across the tarp front for camouflage. Eyes heavy. The forest creaks once, then silence.

DISSOLVE TO:

DREAM - FOREST CORRIDOR

Jesse runs barefoot through living trees. Branches claw his shoulders, bark hot as skin. Smoke writhes at his ankles.

Behind him—a GROWL. Low. Primal. Endless.

The forest narrows. The ground cracks. He falls—lands on burning soil.

Eyes in the dark open. Flames leap like breath.

FATHER (VOICE)

You waited too long.

A SNAP—real, not dream.

CUT TO:

EXT. HOLLOW - NIGHT (REALITY)

Jesse's eyes shoot open. Breath caught mid-inhalation. Another CRUNCH of ash. Close.

He doesn't move. Listens. The can alarm is silent.

He slides a hand toward the Pulaski. Grips. Waits.

A heavy step. A huffing exhale. Claws rasp bark.

JESSE (under breath)

Bear.

He eases upright, crouched beneath the tarp. Fingers find his LIGHTER. Fuel's low.

Another breath—wet and close. A shape moves between trees. Massive. Breathing.

Ten feet away—EYES catch moonlight. The creature snorts, steps forward.

JESSE (yelling)

Hey!

He strikes the lighter—click-click—FLAME. Grabs a clump of dry moss, lights it—THROW.

The moss lands short, flaring orange. Smoke curls up, bright and sudden.

The BEAR rears, snorts, pivots—thunders back into darkness.

Silence.

Jesse stands trembling, flame guttering out in his hand.

JESSE (whisper)

Holy hell...

He lowers the Pulaski. Stares at the smoking patch where the fire died.

JESSE (quiet)

I should be shaking.

But he isn't. Every muscle locked, humming with clarity.

He kneels, smears soot across his fingers. The forest smells of sweat, ozone, and animal musk.

JESSE (low)

I could've died. That was real.

He looks at the lighter — still warm metal in his palm.

JESSE (softly)

Fire still matters.

He sits beneath the roots, Pulaski balanced across his knees like a blade. Eyes fixed on the treeline — awake.

TIME LAPSE:

DAWN bleeds across the horizon. Jesse's face gray with fatigue but clear-eyed. He folds the tarp, slings the pack.

CANTEEN - light.
Pulaski - ready.

He glances once toward the bear's trail. Nothing moves.

JESSE (soft)
Thanks for the lesson.

He turns east. No trail. Just his own.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. BURNT RIDGE - DAY

Everything glows the color of old ash.

JESSE moves through it slowly, each step cautious.

The air feels different - tired, not angry.

A flicker of ORANGE catches his eye. A shred of FLAGGING TAPE dangles from a branch, brittle and heat-curled.

He pulls it free. Black letters fade across the plastic:

"DOZER LINE START →"

JESSE
...No way.

He looks ahead - another flag. Then another. A trail. Human hands had been here.

He follows the markers through gray brush. Each step reveals more - old PINK and RED ribbons, spray-painted arrows, rusted nails.

A cracked LAMINATED TAG flaps on a tree:
"Weather Log - B Shift - Day 3."

He exhales hard, voice low.

JESSE
Someone worked this line.

EXT. SLOPE CLEARING - LATER

Artifacts emerge like fossils - two BROKEN SHOVELS half-buried, a coil of collapsed HOSE, blades flaking with rust.

JESSE
How long ago? How long before the forest took you back?

He moves carefully, reverent.
A long scar in the dirt - a FIREBREAK - cuts across the slope. Beside it, a blackened tree still stands.

At eye level, carved letters:
"TB + JB / Crew 6"

Jesse freezes. Fingers hover near the bark.

JESSE (soft)
JB...

His own initials. His father's.

The forest breathes once. Ash swirls. A single ribbon flutters and dies still.

He doesn't speak again. Just listens to silence.
It's enough.

Slowly, his face changes - not joy, not grief.
Recognition. Purpose.

He kneels, brushes dirt from the tree's base. Begins stacking stones - deliberate, slow.

A small CAIRN rises, no higher than his knee.

He pulls a stub of CHARCOAL from his pack, writes "JB" on the flat top stone.

JESSE

Thanks... for being here first.

He stands, adjusts his pack straps. Something in his stance has changed – a line pulled straight again inside him.

He looks east. Smoke still coils between trees, but it no longer feels unbeatable.

He steps over the old fireline and walks on, leaving the initials and cairn standing silent behind him.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. RIDGELINE - DAY

The world hums – a faint, buried THRUM beneath the wind.

JESSE climbs a jagged slope, hand braced on stone, breath shallow in the thin, metallic air.

The SOUND fades, then returns – rhythmic, mechanical, distant.

He keeps climbing. Rock slides under his boots. The Pulaski knocks his spine with every step. Each motion says the same thing: You chose this.

The trees thin to bone. The world narrows to stone and sky.

The noise strengthens – a low CHOP-CHOP-CHOP behind the haze.

Jesse drags himself the last few feet – and crests the ridge.

WIDE SHOT: a valley drowned in smoke.

Across the distance – movement. A HELICOPTER skims the horizon, tiny, fast, impossibly real.

Jesse freezes. Then—life.

JESSE

Hey! HEY! Over here!

He waves both arms, jumps, voice cracking in the thin air.
No response. The chopper banks west, still climbing.

He rips his pack open, yanks out the SILVER EMERGENCY BLANKET,
flashes sunlight into the air — a desperate beacon.

The helicopter slides behind a ridge... and vanishes.

JESSE (shouting)

Damn it!

The blanket drops over his boots. Motionless.

For a moment he just stands there, breath raw, watching the
sky pretend it didn't see him.

Then he looks downslope — smoke thickening. Fire crawling
under the canopy like a secret.

JESSE (muttered)

I need cover.

EXT. RIDGE BENCH - LATER

Jesse works the Pulaski into the dirt — relentless,
mechanical. Sweat streaks through ash. He digs like muscle
memory.

JESSE

Just like last time.

The trench takes shape — six feet long, two feet wide, a foot
and a half deep. Crude but real.

He lines the bottom with pine boughs, lays his emergency
blanket, rigs a tarp above — jacket, dead ferns, debris.

Finally he drops to his knees, panting, ash-covered.

The Pulaski rests across his leg like a sword.

JESSE (under breath)

Not pretty... but it'll hold.

He drinks from his canteen – last few mouthfuls. Checks the horizon. Smoke drifts, wind fickle.

Somewhere below, the fire moves unseen. He can feel its pulse under the breeze.

He slides into the trench. Shoulders touch both sides. Knees bent. Dirt presses against his ribs like armor.

He stares up – the sky fading from orange to slate.

He breathes slow. Listens to the invisible fire exhale below the ridge.

JESSE (radio, quiet)
Jesse Brooks, Bravo Crew. High ridge, east Sector Nine. Saw a helicopter – no response. Fire's behind me. Still moving. Still alive.

Static.

No reply.

He clips the radio back to his vest.

Silence. Total. Honest.

He closes his eyes, chest rising slow. Not sleep – reminder. The lungs still work. The fire hasn't taken them yet.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. MOUNTAIN RIDGE – NIGHT

The horizon burns.

A distant amber glow pulses between black trees – not sunrise, but something hungrier. A wall of light breathing low and wide.

JESSE sits up inside his dirt trench, wind shifting behind him – blowing down-slope, straight toward the fire.

He listens. Calm. Alert.

He rolls over, unzips his pack. Pulls out the EMERGENCY SHELTER – silver, folded, edges heat-crinkled from too many days in smoke.

He checks every seam with shaking hands. Foot anchors. Breathing flap. Still intact.

He stares at it – the last resort.

JESSE (soft)

You wait too long... and you die inside it.

Wind lifts the ash.

The air grows sweet, then bitter. The scent of pine turns to tar.

He drinks the last of his water. Wipes his mouth. Slides into the trench and pulls the silver cocoon over himself.

The world narrows to foil and heartbeat.

JESSE (whisper)

Stay down.

He cinches the edges with loose rock, pressing himself flat against the earth. Air tightens. Heat builds.

The first smoke seeps through the seams. It doesn't roll – it crawls, whispering through dirt and cloth.

JESSE (weak laugh)

Why do I keep going back to green fuel?

He coughs – voice rasped dry.

JESSE (CONT'D)

Burned ground's safe. But green means water. Shade. The black doesn't care if I make it. The green might.

The sound changes – air splitting. A dull, ripping ROAR growing from the slope below.

Heat radiates through the shelter. The seams POP. The foil quivers. Ash peppers the top like rain on tin.

JESSE (hoarse)

Stay down...

His breath quickens. The air thickens. Each inhale tastes of metal and resin. Sweat pools beneath his collar. The shelter glows faint orange from outside flame.

Time fractures. The world flashes white.

CUT TO:

EXT. BACKYARD - NIGHT (MEMORY)

A MATCH flares.

TEN-YEAR-OLD JESSE kneels beside a fire pit. His FATHER crouches opposite, sleeves rolled, hands blackened with soot. Newspaper twists ignite, flames licking up through the sticks.

FATHER

You know why it works?

Jesse shakes his head.

His father smiles faintly - warm, sure.

FATHER (CONT'D)

Because it wants to. Fire wants to burn.
That's all it knows.

The firelight paints his face in orange and shadow.

FATHER (CONT'D)

Our job is to remind it who's in charge.

He taps Jesse's chest twice with two fingers.

FATHER (CONT'D)

And that starts here.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. FIRE SHELTER / TRENCH - NIGHT

Jesse lies pressed against dirt. The shelter hisses around him — edges glowing faint red. The air flap flutters weakly. He gasps once, coughing smoke.

Jesse's hand claws at the dirt, anchoring himself. His lips move, barely audible.

JESSE
I just have to survive it.

The roar peaks — deafening. Then dulls.

Silence seeps in behind the heat. A heartbeat. Then darkness.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. RIDGE TRENCH - DAWN (AFTERMATH)

Silence.

JESSE lies motionless inside a half-collapsed trench. The silver SHELTER lies crumpled over his legs, edges blackened, curled like burned foil.

He stirs. Breath ragged. Eyes raw and red. Each inhale drags ash across his throat.

He peels the shelter away — the sound brittle, the fabric sticking to blistered skin.

Jesse pushes up on one trembling elbow. His ribs protest. His hands shake. He stands slowly, unsteady.

Around him — devastation. Trees stripped bare, bark gone, the ground a crust of gray glass.

The trench sits like a scar in the earth, edges singed, the soil fused where flame kissed it and moved on.

He takes a step – winces – another.

A faint shift in the smoke. He turns. A FIGURE stands beyond the haze – human-shaped. Still. Watching.

JESSE (hoarse)

...Riley?

The shape blurs – vanishes. Only smoke remains.

He wipes his eyes, coughs hard, then freezes. Another silhouette farther off – hunched, holding something. Familiar posture. Gone again.

Jesse grips the PULASKI until his knuckles gray.

JESSE (to himself)

Low oxygen. Stress. You're seeing things.

But the forest doesn't argue.

A CHILD appears next – barefoot, still. Raises one arm. Points down-slope. Toward the VALLEY.

Then fades like dust on heat.

Jesse swallows, steadies. Adjusts his pack. Moves the way the boy pointed.

EXT. BURNED SLOPE – LATER

He descends through ruin. Ash flakes lift with each step. The forest whispers in phantom motion – shadows pacing him just outside sight.

The pain in his body keeps rhythm with his boots. Every breath scrapes.

He passes a VISION of ORTIZ on a log, carving wood, silent. Jesse doesn't stop.

Sunlight cracks through once – a single BEAM catching the ash like gold dust. He stands in it a moment. Lets it touch his face. Then moves on.

Up ahead – another apparition: his FATHER, as at the funeral, arms crossed. Watching.

JESSE (quiet)

I know.

He walks past.

EXT. RUINED CAMPSITE - DAY

The trees open into a CLEARING – circular, blasted out.
A camp. Or what's left of one.

Collapsed frames. Melted tarps fused to rock.
Gear reduced to outlines in ash.

Jesse steps closer, scanning. His eyes find a HAND –
blackened, curled, half-buried.

He stops. Breath catches.

He kneels – not touching, just near. The air hums with quiet
apology.

JESSE (barely)

I should've found them. I should've–

The words die in his throat.

He stands still for a long beat. Then bows his head – a
gesture, not a prayer.

He spots something near the old fire ring – a KNIFE handle
jutting from the ash.

He crouches, brushes debris aside. Draws it free. The blade
gleams – unburned.

He weighs it in his hand. Fits perfectly.

He slides the sheath onto his belt.

He circles the perimeter, eyes tracing melted outlines,
reading the story in silence.

Finally, he turns toward the far slope. Smoke lifts in ribbons. Light cools. The fire's worst behind him – but not its consequence.

He looks once more at the camp – the scorched gear, the still hand.

Then he nods – to the dead, to himself – and walks on.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. BURNED FOREST – DAY

JESSE moves through a wasteland of ash. Each step CRUNCHES dully, distant, like hearing himself underwater. The KNIFE at his belt taps against his leg – a heartbeat he can still count on.

The slope has flattened now – open ground, dotted with stumps and black skeletons of young trees. He kneels, scoops water from a shallow puddle. It tastes like char. He drinks anyway.

Ash begins to fall again – soft, steady. It coats his boots, his skin, his mouth. He stops wiping his face. Keeps walking.

Through the haze – a SHAPE. Rectangular. Upright. Structure.

He slows, eyes narrowing. Hope doesn't flare – it settles, low and cold.

EXT. RUINED CABIN – DAY

The building emerges – small, single-room, half-collapsed. Two walls still stand; the rest burned inward. He approaches carefully, boots sinking into soot.

He pushes the warped door with his boot. It CREAKS.

INT. RUINED CABIN – CONTINUOUS

Smoke-stained air. The stench of burned metal and something older. The floorboards crunch underfoot.

A twisted cot. A half-melted backpack fused to the ground.

Jesse crouches, brushes ash away. Inside — a FOIL-WRAPPED BAR. He sniffs it, shrugs, eats. Peanut butter and smoke. Fuel.

He drinks the last of his water.

Then sees it — a BLANKET in the corner, collapsed under a beam, shape beneath it unmistakable. A body.

He doesn't touch it. Just stands there.

Beside the remains — a DENTED CAN. He takes it. Another glint — a KNIFE handle, melted into the beam. He pries it loose.

JESSE (hoarse)
You lasted longer than most.

He slides the smaller blade onto his belt beside the first. Two knives now. Two ghosts.

He glances once more around the cabin — no maps, no notes, nothing left to say.

EXT. RUINED CABIN — DAY

He steps outside, pulling the door shut behind him. The ash falls thicker again, whispering down like gray rain.

He stands still a long moment. Then walks away.

EXT. RIDGE ABOVE THE CABIN — DAY

Jesse climbs the slope beside the ruin — slow, deliberate. Boots slip. Thighs burn. The sky above is colorless, flat.

He reaches the crest, plants his feet, breath heaving. The valley stretches below — vast and gray, the fire's shadow still curling low in the hollows.

He turns, scanning the horizon — and freezes.

A thin LINE cuts across a distant ridge — straight, clean.

JESSE (whisper)

Is that a road?

Below it, faint through haze — a TOWER. He stares hard, afraid to blink. It holds.

He crouches, pulls out the DENTED CAN, stabs it open with the smaller knife, eats in silence. Cold beans. Metallic aftertaste. Doesn't matter.

He wipes his mouth, stands again. The wind shifts — no smoke now, just stillness.

JESSE (quietly)

I'm going to make it.

He turns toward the valley — and walks.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. MOUNTAIN SLOPE — DAY

Loose shale slides under JESSE's boots as he descends. The ground glints like broken glass — fire-fused rock cracking under each step.

Up ahead, faint through haze — the TOWER. A beacon. A promise.

He steps down — the rock shifts — his foot drops. A jagged REBAR SPIKE juts from a burned stump.

SNAP.

He goes down hard — rolls — SLAMS into a split log. The world tilts. Silence.

JESSE (gasping)

God... you idiot.

He pulls his boot off — grimaces. A deep tear splits the bottom of his foot, bleeding fast. The boot's sole is warped, melted, crumbling.

He drags himself to the log. Unrolls filthy gauze. Presses it to the wound. Hisses. The blood keeps coming.

He exhales once – calm. Certain.

JESSE (to himself)

You're gonna sew it.

He grabs his lighter, a bent safety pin, and a bootlace. Sterilizes the pin in flame until it glows red.

Ties the lace into a single frayed thread. Wraps cloth above his ankle – makeshift tourniquet.

Braces his foot. Breathes. Then drives the pin through.

A muffled SCREAM. Eyes wide. He forces the stitch. Pulls the thread. Again. And again.

He ties the last knot. Leans back, drenched in sweat. The bleeding has stopped. He tears a strip from his shirt, wraps it tight.

For a moment, he just breathes. Then looks skyward – gray smoke thinning, the faint shape of clouds behind it.

He grips his walking stick – tests weight on the foot. It holds. Barely.

JESSE (gravel whisper)

Back on it.

He takes one slow step downhill. Then another. Pain with each one.

JESSE (quiet)

One more day.
Just get to that tower.

The wind shifts, carrying his words away.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. BURNT RIDGE – DAY

A gray sky. Still. Heavy. Then – a DROP. It lands on JESSE's neck, slides down his collar. Another hits his cheek. Then his brow. Rain. Actual rain.

He lies in the draw as it finds him, one drop at a time. Ash runs off his skin in thin black rivers.

Tears mix with rain. He doesn't notice at first. Then he sits up, lets the water hit his face, his eyes, his mouth.

The forest whispers again as rain taps burned branches.

He opens his pack – sets it wide to collect water. Holds a can beneath the drip line, lets it fill drop by drop. Rinses his hands, his canteen, his face.

He drinks slowly. Pain still in his stitched foot, but duller now. He smiles – barely.

JESSE (soft)
Keep moving while it's raining.

He stands, braces on his stick, turns toward the slope.

EXT. SLOPE - DAY

Rain drizzles steady. Jesse walks carefully, boots sinking in mud. The terrain levels – something subtle shifts.

He notices it in the pattern of the ground. A row of rocks – evenly spaced. Too even to be chance.

He stops. Blinks rain from his lashes. One rock bears a smear of ORANGE PAINT.

JESSE (whisper)
Trail.

He crouches, touches the color. It smears onto his finger. His throat tightens. He looks up – and now he sees it: A faint corridor through the trees, curving between ridges. A line. Cut. Man-made.

He limps forward, following the bend. More signs emerge – charred nails in a stump, a plastic tag, melted but marked with a single letter: "S"

A sector mark.

He presses his palm to it, the rain running between his fingers.

He moves with purpose now – no longer wandering. A tin square on a tree: "4."

A ribbon of red, tattered but still fluttering.

He rounds a bend and stops.

A wooden SIGNPOST stands half collapsed, letters carved by hand, blackened by flame but still legible:

"Camp Raven – 1.3 mi →"

JESSE (quiet awe)

Camp Raven.

He touches the scorched wood.

He tightens the pack straps, adjusts the stick, and starts forward. Rain still falling, ash still bleeding into mud.

He walks on – limping, soaked, unbent – following the trail into the mist.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. RIDGE – DAWN

Rain softens the world. Ash turns to mud beneath JESSE's boots. The haze hangs low, but above it – a hint of morning.

He climbs the last rise. Through the mist, the shape resolves – angles, lines, ruin with order.

A RANGER STATION. Blackened timbers, roof half-gone, porch collapsed. Beyond it, through mist and rain – a TOWER, steel-legged, rusted, still standing.

He steadies himself on a trunk, breathing hard, then limps toward the station.

EXT. RANGER STATION – CONTINUOUS

Steps burned away. He circles to the side, hauls himself onto the landing. Wood CREAKS but holds.

INT. RANGER STATION – CONTINUOUS

Dark. Wet. The smell of smoke, melted plastic, and rain. Walls lean inward. A desk, half-charred. A bunk, skeletal. And behind the desk – A RADIO. Bolted to the wall. Blackened, but whole.

Jesse stares. Then moves.

He crouches beside it, lifts the mic from the debris, wipes soot from the button with his thumb.

JESSE

This is Jesse Brooks... volunteer fire crew,
Bravo. If anyone can hear this – I'm alive.

He releases the button. Only static.

He adjusts the dial, tries again.

JESSE

Fire line volunteer. Off-grid since the jump.
If this station's still routing signals – please
respond.

A HISS. Then – CLICK.

A voice, faint through the static:

RADIO VOICE

...copy that. Say again, Jesse? Repeat. Did you
say "alive"?

Jesse freezes. Then exhales a shaky laugh – half disbelief, half relief.

JESSE

Yes. I'm alive.

RADIO VOICE

Repeat your position. Are you mobile?

JESSE

Camp Raven. Ranger station. What's left of it.
Found the line. Radio still works.

A pause – faint typing in the background.

RADIO VOICE

You're outside the containment arc. We lost signal there four days ago. Everyone assumed Raven burned.

JESSE

It almost did. But I'm still here.

He leans against the wall. Rain drips through a hole above, running cold down his face. He closes his eyes.

RADIO VOICE

We've got your transmission. Locking coordinates now. See any smoke? Chopper activity?

JESSE

No choppers. No active fire. It's quiet.

Another pause.

RADIO VOICE

Copy. We're bouncing through East Ridge repeater. Weak but stable. Stay on channel. Recovery's en route.

Jesse listens – lets it sink in. Someone knows. Someone's coming.

JESSE

Thank you.

RADIO VOICE

You'd be surprised. Chopper dispatching to your sector — thirty to forty minutes. Any flares?

JESSE

Negative. No mirror. Nothing.

RADIO VOICE

Then get above the tree line. Make yourself visible.

JESSE

I'll be ready.

He sets the mic down gently. Slides down the wall, sits on the floor, head on his knees.

Silence. Rain. The hum of the radio.

He forces himself up again, limps to a drawer, finds cloth, ties a white strip to the rusted antenna mount — a flag.

Checks his bandage. Rewraps it with cleaner cloth.

In a half-buried tin box — matches, a compass, a folded photograph.

He opens it: three people, smiling, arms around each other. A burn line glowing behind them.

He studies it — then slips it into his jacket.

He returns to the desk. Sits. Hand resting on the mic, not pressing it.

Outside — the rain eases. The forest exhales.

For the first time in days, Jesse waits for something he truly believes will come.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. CAMP RAVEN - DAWN

Mist drifts across the burned clearing. JESSE stands in the doorway of the ruined ranger station, still, listening.

A low THRUM trembles through the air - distant, rhythmic. Mechanical. Real.

He steps outside, eyes searching the gray sky. The sound grows - a heartbeat of machinery echoing through the valley.

He looks up - and there it is.

A HELICOPTER crests the ridge, blades slicing mist. It banks low over the treetops, sweeping through the haze.

Jesse moves - limping, dragging himself across the clearing. Stitches pull. His ankle screams. He raises the antenna flag and waves it wide overhead.

No voice left - only motion.

Rotor wash tears through the clearing, flattening blackened brush, spiraling ash into the air. Jesse braces against it, eyes shut tight.

The chopper hovers. A CREW MEMBER descends, shouting over the roar.

CREW MEMBER

Jesse Brooks?

Jesse nods - exhausted, trembling. The rescuer grabs him, hauls him up toward the cabin.

Hands reach down from above, pulling him inside.

The crutch falls into the ash below.

INT. HELICOPTER - CONTINUOUS

Noise. Wind. Metal. Jesse is strapped into a seat, movements sluggish. A WATER BOTTLE pressed into his hand.

He drinks. Each swallow mechanical. Each breath a relearning.

Through the window — the valley drops away. Scorched ridges, pale smoke, black rivers of fire line. The ruined ranger station shrinks to a smear in the mud.

Beside him, a man in his fifties — rugged, calm, headset on.

PILOT

You're the one they thought was dead.

Jesse turns, voice thin but certain.

JESSE

I was.

A nod. Nothing more. They ride in silence, the helicopter steadying through crosswind.

Sunlight pierces the haze — bright columns cutting through gray. The world below glows silver where black once burned.

PILOT

Basecamp in under an hour.
Medics are ready.

Jesse doesn't respond. His eyes stay on the horizon — the endless rise of land and light.

The pilot studies him once, then leans toward the comm.

PILOT

You survived something most wouldn't.

Jesse exhales — no words left. Just silence. Peaceful.
Final.

He rests his head back against the seat, the hum of the rotors fading into rhythm.

Through the window — the mountains fall behind, and the open sky stretches ahead.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

White light. Too white.

It hums overhead, flickering faintly. JESSE lies still on the narrow bed. Pulse monitor chirping. IV line gleaming under his arm.

Footsteps echo past the open door. Murmurs drift in from somewhere down the hall - nurses, visitors. The sounds feel distant. Unreal.

His foot - properly bandaged now. Ribs taped. Shoulder numbed. Eyes open but unfocused on the ceiling light that refuses to hold still.

A SOFT KNOCK.

He turns his head.

His MOTHER steps in - pale, tired, eyes raw but dry. Behind her, his SISTER and STEPFATHER linger in the doorway.

Nobody speaks.

JESSE

Hey.

It's barely sound, but it's enough. His mother crosses the room, kneels beside him, wraps her arms around him.

MOTHER

You're home.

Her voice trembles - a whisper, a prayer. He doesn't answer. The word "home" feels too far away.

She brushes his cheek, the gesture fragile.

MOTHER

Do you know how long it was?
Eleven days, Jesse... we didn't know if-

She stops herself. Breathes. Shakes her head.

JESSE

I wasn't far.

A small lie. She nods anyway. His sister steps closer, takes his hand. Hesitates.

SISTER

You look...

JESSE

Like hell?

SISTER

Yeah. Like hell.

A faint smile. A tear she doesn't wipe away.

His stepfather gives a simple nod across the bed.

STEPFATHER

The station's been checking in.
Chief Mallory wants to come by.

Jesse stares at his cleaned hands – the gray still in the creases.

JESSE

Not sure I want them to.

STEPFATHER

They want to thank you.

JESSE

I didn't save anybody.

MOTHER

You saved yourself.
That's not small.

He nods. Eyes close. The monitor keeps its rhythm.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM – LATER

Dim lights. Broth half-finished. Rain whispering against the window.

Jesse watches the town through glass — A water tower. Rooftops. A blinking neon sign.

A KNOCK.

CHIEF MALLORY steps in — uniform dusty, helmet tucked under his arm. He nods once, quietly.

MALLORY

They said I could have five minutes.

JESSE

It's fine.

Mallory sets his helmet on the windowsill but doesn't sit.

MALLORY

You gave us a scare. We had crews all over the county. Air teams. Volunteers. Every time the wind shifted, we thought... We were looking for you.

JESSE

I didn't know anyone was.

MALLORY

Well... we were.

Silence. Rain taps the window. Jesse watches the IV line pulse.

MALLORY

You did everything we train for. More than that. You adapted. You kept moving. You didn't give up.

JESSE

I made mistakes. Lost the line. Broke protocol—

MALLORY

You survived.

He says it plain, no softness, but no judgment either.

MALLORY (continuing)
You're sitting here because you didn't panic.
That counts.

Jesse looks down. Absorbs it.

Mallory lifts the helmet again, pausing at the door.

MALLORY
Doesn't matter how far you got from the crew.
You found your way back.

A quiet beat.

JESSE
Thank you, Chief.

Mallory nods once, then exits. The door closes softly behind him.

Jesse sits alone, the hum of the fluorescent light returning. He exhales — long, slow — and lets the silence stay.

Through the window, dawn glows faintly over the town.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. HOSPITAL LOBBY — MORNING

JESSE signs a form, foot bandaged, one boot laced.
A nurse wheels him forward — clipboard in hand.

The elevator doors open.

Beyond the glass entrance — a CROWD. Family. Firefighters. A woman in a blazer with a notepad. A banner stretched between two signs: WELCOME BACK JESSE. Two kids hold drawings — flames and all.

NURSE
Looks like you've got a welcome party.

Sunlight spills across him as he steps out. His mother waves. Cameras hover. The woman in the blazer moves in.

PR WOMAN

Mr. Brooks? County communications.
The media's interested – maybe a quick thank-you
video?

JESSE

A video?

PR WOMAN

Just something hopeful. People are calling you the
Lucky Line Walker.

He stares at her.

JESSE

I didn't walk a line.

Awkward silence. She forces a smile. He turns away, limping
toward the van.

INT. COUNTY VAN - DAY

The van rolls through town. Jesse sits by the window, arms
folded, head against glass.

Outside, people wave. Applaud. He closes his eyes.

Faces blur past the glass. Signs. Smiles. Applause.

EXT. BROOKS HOME - LATER

Neighbors crowd the driveway. Brownies on paper plates.
Cameras. Hugs.

WOMAN

Welcome home, Jesse!

He raises a hand in thanks – a gesture that feels borrowed.

Inside, the house is the same. Crooked couch. Missing remote.
A framed photo: Jesse in cadet uniform, grinning in sunlight.

He stares at it a long time.

EXT. BACK STEPS - NIGHT

Jesse sits alone. Barbecue smoke in the distance. A sprinkler hissing across the street.

His hands rest on his knees - scarred, stiff. He looks up at the quiet sky.

MOTHER (O.S.)

Hungry?

JESSE

Maybe later.

She nods. The door closes softly. He sits in silence. Alive. Uneasy. Unchanged.

EXT. FIREHOUSE - DAY

The next morning. The same red trucks. Same white hose rack. Same echoing emptiness. Jesse hesitates at the threshold, shadow falling long inside.

CAPTAIN SHAW looks up from a clipboard, mug in hand. Her face softens.

SHAW

Brooks.

JESSE

Ma'am.

She crosses to him, places a steady hand on his shoulder.

SHAW

Glad to have you back.

JESSE

Thanks.

The crew gathers - quiet smiles, pats on the arm. One firefighter offers a clean patch.

CREWMAN

Replacement. We figured yours got crispy.

A small smile.

JESSE

Yeah. Something like that.

INT. FIREHOUSE - BREAK ROOM - MINUTES LATER

Jesse sits among them. Laughter. Inside jokes. Soda bottles clinking. He listens, distant.

SHAW

You don't have to stay long. We just wanted you to know - the door's open.

JESSE

Feels weird. Being back.

SHAW

I'd be more concerned if it didn't.

He studies the patch in his hands.

JESSE

I wasn't strong. I was lucky.

SHAW

Every survivor says that. But they came back. That's the difference.

He looks down. No answer. Just quiet acceptance.

EXT. FIREHOUSE - AFTERNOON

A group photo - smiles for the camera. Flash. Done.

Jesse steps outside into sharper light. The bay doors stand open behind him. He looks up. The sky is bluer than he remembered.

He walks off into sunlight - slower, steadier - the patch still folded in his hand.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. CEMETERY - LATE AFTERNOON

Wind whispers through dry field grass. A line of POPLARS rattles against a pale sky.

JESSE limps through the creaking gate - no flowers, just a palm-sized piece of pine bark tucked in his jacket pocket.

He moves slow, deliberate. Gravel grinds beneath his boot like memory - persistent, unwelcome, real.

He stops at a simple gray HEADSTONE, firehouse emblem etched near the top. Scorch marks stain the base.

He kneels - one leg folded, the other stretched.

From his pocket, he draws the carved bark: " JB " - two letters, shallow-cut and clean. His. And his father's.

He sets it against the stone, brushing gravel aside.

Silence. Just wind and the faint bark of a dog somewhere beyond the ridge.

JESSE

You didn't tell me it'd be like that.

His voice is calm. Not angry. Just worn.

JESSE (continuing)

You told me about fear. About heat, smoke... hands that shake after. But you never talked about being alone.

He looks at his hands - clean now, scars faintly pink.

JESSE (continuing)

I didn't know it could get that quiet. Like the world shut off and forgot to take me with it.

He leans back, eyes on the wide, empty sky.

JESSE (continuing)
You said fire doesn't play favorites. You were
right. I just didn't think I'd come back from it.

No reply. Only wind moving through brittle grass.

He studies the initials again. Runs a thumb over the letters.

JESSE (continuing)
I don't know if I'm going back. That used to be
the goal – get home, get back on the truck, prove
it didn't break me.

He exhales, quiet.

JESSE (continuing)
But maybe it did. Maybe something out there took
what I didn't know I had.

A branch creaks above him. He straightens the bark where it's
shifted.

JESSE (continuing)
If you were here, you'd tell me that's okay. That
not everything has to go back. That sometimes the
only way forward... is through.

He stays a long moment. The wind tugs at his jacket. Clouds
drift in – soft, silver, gathering dusk.

Finally, he stands. One hand on the stone for balance.

No ceremony. No last words. Just breath in cold air.

He turns toward the gate. Walks down the hill, steady,
unhurried.

At the post, he pauses – a hand resting there, brief, certain.

Then he steps through.

He disappears down the path, the poplars swaying behind him.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. PINE PASS TRAINING CAMP - MORNING

ONE YEAR LATER

Diesel coughs from idling trucks. Ravens cackle beyond the treeline. The gear shed still leans to one side. Same dirt. Same heat. Same hum of work.

JESSE stands at the edge of camp - boots planted where he stood twelve months ago. But this time, it isn't nerves. It's something steadier. Weight. Perspective.

He adjusts his radio strap, flexing his healed foot. A faint limp remains - not weakness, just memory.

ORTIZ leans against the engine, sipping lukewarm coffee.

ORTIZ

You look taller. That happen, or am I shrinking?

JESSE

Could be both.

Behind them, RILEY approaches - the same scowl, softened by time.

RILEY

You back to stay this time?

JESSE

I'm not going anywhere.

RILEY

Try not to get lost again.

JESSE

No promises. But I brought a better map.

Ortiz snorts, tossing his cup aside.

ORTIZ

Good. 'Cause if you vanish again, I'm not hiking ridges with smoke in my shorts. I'm old. My knees make sounds now.

ASH (O.S.)

You're thirty-two.

Ash joins them, gear slung over one shoulder.

ORTIZ

Exactly. Ancient in fire years.

Jesse grins. Ash studies him.

ASH

No one thought you'd come back.

JESSE

I didn't know I would, either.

CHIEF MALLORY steps from the ops tent, clipboard under his arm, radio squawking. His face creased, calm — the same as before. His eyes brighten when he spots Jesse.

MALLORY

You remember the way to Section D?

JESSE

Yeah. I remember everything.

Mallory hands over the clipboard. Not symbolic — procedural — but it feels like more. A quiet passing of trust.

Jesse turns toward a line of ROOKIES — six of them, stiff, nervous, trying not to look new. Hard hats still clean. Boots too shiny.

JESSE

You three — Pulaskis with Ash on the ridge.
She'll show you how to thin the brush.

He points to another recruit fidgeting near the bins.

JESSE (continuing)

You're with me on drip torch. Ever used one?

ROOKIE

No, sir.

JESSE

You will today. Watch your spacing. If I say stop
— stop.

Mallory meets his eyes. A short nod. Quiet approval. Then he walks off.

A light wind stirs through the clearing. Smoke from a prep burn curls skyward — soft, steady, harmless.

Ortiz claps Jesse on the shoulder.

ORTIZ

Feels good, doesn't it?

JESSE

Yeah. It does.

Jesse lifts the fusee from his belt, eyes on the crew.

JESSE (continuing)

Alright, guys — let's light up the burn line.

The rookies move out. Flame flares against the ridge, orange licking through green. Jesse stands firm, eyes bright in the glow.

FADE OUT.

THE END