

FACES OF FIRE

Written By
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Based on actual events.

FROM BLACK...

Comes the peaceful whisper of a summer night breeze.

Stirs a mighty forest, deep in slumber.

EXT. SUBURBAN HOME - NIGHT

Darkness. A vague outline of something moving.

VOICE (O.S.)

C'mon...

A BEAM OF LIGHT FLICKERS -- Illuminating a pair of hands, muscles straining as they tighten a set of yellow straps.

Their owner wears a HEADLAMP. He squints behind black-framed glasses as sweat beads irritate concentrated eyes.

The light of the headlamp DIES.

The MAN **grunts**.

He removes the headlamp from his head and smacks it against the palm of his hand until it springs back to life, allowing him to quickly finish securing a load of BACKPACKING GEAR on the roof of his BLUE-METALLIC FORD EXPEDITION, parked in the driveway of a modest tract home with Spanish roof tiling.

He's in his early 30's. A music composer. Rocks a worse for wear LED ZEPPELIN TOUR SHIRT, DIAMOND STUD in his right ear.

Goes by the name of RON.

RON

(wipes brow)

How's your side look?

The SUV rocks back-and-forth.

DAVE-O (O.S.)

Snug as a bug, baby.

DAVE-O (47) circles around from the opposite side of the SUV. He's six-foot three. Corn fed. Donned in full hiking regalia. Ron's best friend, and music partner.

RON

Time?

Ron gives the STRAPS a few more reassuring tugs.

DAVE-O
 (checks watch)
 Just past quarter-after.

Ron stops.

RON
 Shit.

He hops off the SUV and heads for its open trunk where his oldest son, NICK (12) struggles with his BACKPACK.

RON (cont'd)
 (to Nick)
 I've got it. Go get your brother.

NICK
 I say we just leave him.

RON
 (joking)
 And I say we leave you. Go.

Nick sulks up the driveway as Ron shoves Nick's bag inside and slams the trunk shut.

From around the car:

DAVE-O
 Hopefully it's clearer where we're headed. Would be nice to see some stars.

Ron looks to see that Dave-O is looking up at the MOON, which is only barely visible through clouds.

MATCH DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BOYS BEDROOM - NIGHT

A FULL-MOON SHAPED NIGHTLIGHT casts a soft glow across stained carpet littered with toys and dirty clothes.

A drum set is tucked in one corner of the room.

Video games and baseball memorabilia in the other.

The only sound is a slow-spinning CEILING FAN that provides soothing white noise. Not even the silent screams of the STUFFED ANIMAL hanging from one of the blades are heard, until...

The bedroom door opens and the fan light TURNS ON.

JANINE (O.S.)
All right, mister. Time to get up.

JANINE (42) enters the room wearing a night robe, immediately going through her daily routine of picking up the previous day's mess from the floor.

IN THE BACKGROUND: the top level of a BUNK BED slowly stirs to life, letting out muffled **groan** from under the sheets.

JANINE
Don't make me get your father in here.

A **louder groan**.

Nick enters the room and sees the moving heap under the bed sheets. He crosses the room, jumps on the bottom mattress, and VIOLENTLY ROCKS the top bunk.

NICK
Get up! Or Dad says we're leaving you.

The sheets fly off in a fury to reveal BRETT (10), freckled, just like Nick.

BRETT
Get off me!

He kicks at Nick and gets a charlie horse in return.

BRETT (cont'd)
Ow--! Mom!

Janine drops an armful of toys as yanks Nick off the bed.

JANINE
(to Nick)
What did I say about punching?
(points him back)
Go-- you did your job. There's breakfast burritos on the island.

BRETT
(from the top bunk)
Yeah...go. No one wants you here.

NICK
(to Brett)
Baby.

JANINE
Nicholas--!

BRETT
(to Nick)
Bitch!

JANINE
(to Brett)
BRETT!

INT. SUV - PREDAWN

Ron and Dave-O have been waiting in silence...

The backdoor opens and Nick climbs inside, holding a piping-hot BREAKFAST BURRITO.

RON
(to Nick)
Where's Brett?

NICK
Who cares.

DAVE-O
(re: burrito)
Where'd you get that?

NICK
Inside.

Dave-O stares at Nick...asking without words...

NICK (cont'd)
Seriously?!

Dave-O returns a subtle nod.

Nick pouts. He sets his burrito down and slides out of the car, slamming the door shut.

Ron turns to Dave-O.

DAVE-O
What? I'm a growing boy.

RON
I can see that.

INT. BOYS BEDROOM - SAME

Janine makes Nick's bed while Brett shoves clothes into his BACKPACK.

JANINE

I don't know what's gotten into you,
but you better watch your attitude,
or you won't be going on any
backpacking trip.

BRETT

Good.

A beat.

...Janine didn't expect that answer.

JANINE

Well you are going, so the least you
can do is act like you're excited.
This trip is important to your dad.
He barely gets to see you guys.
Besides, it's only a couple of days.
All your friends will still be here
when you get back.

Brett stops what he's doing.

Stares at Janine.

BRETT

You do know I have sleep in a tent
with Nick, right? Two nights ago he
lit a match between my toes while I
was sleeping.

JANINE

Then I'd suggest wearing socks next
time.

Janine finishes making Nick's bed.

BRETT

Why can't I just stay here with you?

She looks at him.

JANINE

Because this is my vacation too.

She leaves.

Brett kicks his BACKPACK over.

INT. GARAGE - DAWN

Brett emerges with a breakfast burrito of his own and before he can take a bite--it's slapped out of his hand.

INT. SUV - MOMENTS LATER

THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD: Nick races out the garage, Brett hot on his heels. Brett swings a kick at Nick and misses, falling to the ground.

RON
Still want kids?

DAVE-O
(smirks)
Not yours.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - SAME

Dave-O sticks his head out his window:

DAVE-O
Don't worry, Brett. I'll kick his ass for you.

NICK
Yeah, right!

As Brett brushes himself off, Janine comes from behind and hands back his breakfast burrito.

JANINE
He's just mad I put extra bacon in yours.

She smiles. Tussles Brett's hair. Leads him to the car.

INT. SUV - CONTINUOUS

Janine arrives at Ron's window and hands over the last two breakfast burritos, one of goes to Dave-O.

JANINE
You'll notice I opted for a driver friendly breakfast this time.

She shoots Dave-O an accusatory smirk.

DAVE-O
 Hey--you point those peepers over at
 your husband, lil' lady. He's the one
 with the driving skills of a sixteen-
 year-old.

JANINE
 Yeah, well, you're both losers in my
 book.

Dave-O shrugs. Digs into his long-awaited burrito.

RON
 (to Janine)
 You gonna be okay here alone?

JANINE
 I'm sure I'll be better than you...
 It's ladies night, remember?

RON
 Ah- right.

Dave-O leans over.

DAVE-O
 Michelle gonna be there?

JANINE
 Um...yeah, I think so.

Dave-O becomes crestfallen.

RON
 (changing the subject)
 I'll call you before we lose
 reception. Hide the good wine.

He fires up the engine.

Janine leans in and kisses him goodbye.

JANINE
 (yawns; to the boys)
 Love you guys. Be good!

NICK
 Later woman!

BRETT
 Bye mom!

Janine heads back inside.

Ron rolls up his window and checks on Dave-O, but before he
 can say anything, Dave-O TURNS ON the radio.

EXT. CUL-DE-SAC - DAWN

Six cookie-cutter homes. All pristine. The SUV backs out of the middle-right driveway and drives off as Janine disappears into the closing garage...

INT. SUV (MOVING) - DAWN

A GOLDEN SUNRISE penetrates the entire cabin.

Ron switches his BLACK-FRAMED GLASSES for SHADES.

Dave-O blocks the glare with his SUN VISOR.

Nick tucks his head against the window.

Brett tries to get comfortable... Can't. Stares out the window instead. Anxiety in his eyes.

EXT. I-5 NORTH, ON-RAMP - DAWN

The SUV merges onto the freeway, officially leaving the quiet comforts of suburban life behind...

INT. SUV (MOVING) - CA-99 NORTH - LATER

We're left with the CONSTANT HUM of the road. Somewhere in BAKERSFIELD. Shit city.

Both boys are now asleep in the backseat.

Ron tips back the rest of his coffee and notices Dave-O pensively staring out his window.

RON
Whatchu thinking 'bout, Freud?

...Silence...

RON (cont'd)
Come on... You haven't shut up about this trip for weeks.

...Dave-O turns forward.

DAVE-O
She hasn't returned any of my calls in three days.

RON
Then give her a few more. What did
you expect?

DAVE-O
...I don't know.

Dave-O looks back out his window where a SEA OF COWS pass
by. Residents of a SLAUGHTERHOUSE.

EXT. SLAUGHTER HOUSE - DAY

A CACOPHONY OF MOOING. The poor bastards lined up shoulder
to shoulder. Necks between bars, feeding autonomously out of
METAL TROUGHS.

ONE LOOKS UP and tracks the SUV as it rips across the
horizon...

EXT. CA-99 NORTH - CA - DAY

The SUV cruises along a two-lane highway splitting an
infertile vast plain as far as the eye can see.

INT. SUV (MOVING) - LATER

ON A NINTENDO 3DS SCREEN: **LEGEND OF ZELDA** hero, LINK, fights
VOLVAGIA, the flaming dragon boss. He's losing.

Ron watches Brett's building frustration through the REAR-
VIEW MIRROR.

RON
That the game you bought with your
birthday money? *Zolda*, right?

BRETT
Legend of *Zelda*: Ocarina of--
(slams game down)
BITCH!

Nick startles awake.

Dave peers up from scanning a TRAIL MAP.

DAVE-O
Ocarina of bitch? Huh...
(looks back down)
Didn't know your dad had an ocarina.

Ron SLAPS Dave-O's chest in jest, happy to see him returning to normal.

RON
 (to boys)
 You guys wanna play a game Dave-O's dad and your grandpa taught us when we used to do these trips?

NICK
 No.

RON
 Too bad. Ok, so, someone picks a landmark out on the horizon--a mountain, telephone pole, whatever--and we each guess how far it is. I'll track it here on the odometer, and whoever's closest wins.

DAVE-O
 Well since I was just violently attacked, I'll go first.
 (points)
 That sign up ahead. The big green one...One point six miles.

RON
 No shot.

Ron sets the trip ODOMETER to ZERO. Begins the countdown.

RON (cont'd)
 Nick?

NICK
 One point five.

DAVE-O
 (to Nick)
 Weak.

Nick smirks.

RON
 How bout you, Brett?

Brett stares out the window, disengaged completely--as if he'd rather be anywhere else on the other side of that thin layer of glass.

RON (cont'd)
 Brett. C'mon, we're getting close.

BRETT
I don't care.

Ron's tries to hide his reaction. The mood killed.

Dave-O notices. Feels his pain.

They pass the green sign which reads "NORTH FORK ROAD NEXT RIGHT":

NICK
1.3--I win!
(to Dave-O)
Loser.

DAVE-O
Yeah...I know.

Ron signals to get over and checks his mirror, catching a glimpse of Brett--so mentally removed he may as well not even be there.

EXT. GAS STATION - DAY

Situated off a TWO LANE ROAD, forest on both sides. TWO GAS PUMPS. A SMALL STATION STORE. Mountain town vibes.

The SUV rolls in and parks at the pump closer to the road.

They are the sole customer.

INT. SUV - DAY

Ron reaches into his back pocket, pulls out his WALLET, and slips out a TEN DOLLAR BILL. He hands it to Nick.

RON
Use the restroom. This is the last
stop till we get to the ranger
station.

Nick snatches the money. He and Brett fly out of the car.

EXT. GAS STATION - DAY

Ron exits the SUV. IN THE BACKGROUND: Brett and Nick enter the STATION STORE.

At the pump, a HAND-WRITTEN SIGN reads: "CASH ONLY, ATM INSIDE".

Ron checks his wallet: EMPTY. Gave all he had to Nick.

He opens the driver door--

INT. SUV - CONTINUOUS

Dave-O looks over.

RON
Cash only. Can you pull forty out
inside and put it on, uh...
(checks pump number,
looks around)
The one with a car.

He hands Dave-O his DEBIT CARD.

RON (cont'd)
7861.

Dave unbuckles his seat belt.

RON (cont'd)
Make sure they aren't buying any of
that sour candy crap.

DAVE-O
Aye aye, captain.

Dave heads into the station store as Ron pulls out his cell
phone with ONE BAR OF SERVICE.

DIALS Janine...

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. HOME - KITCHEN - DAY

Within a small area of controlled chaos, Janine prepares
HORS D'OEUVRES for her Ladies Night.

Her CELL PHONE RINGS...

With one hand stirring a POT, she combs through the mess and
finds it underneath an OVEN MITT.

Tucks it against her shoulder and continues cooking...

JANINE
That was fast.

RON
I'm a fast guy.

JANINE
Don't I know. How are the boys?

RON
Nick slept pretty much the whole
time. Don't know what that's about.

JANINE
I do. He was already fully clothed
when he got out of bed this morning.
I don't think he slept.

Ron chuckles.

JANINE (cont'd)
What about Brett?

RON
Slept a bit...played his game.

Janine rolls her eyes.

JANINE
Well did you engage him?

RON
I'm sorry, I didn't realize our son
was a rocket booster.

JANINE
Don't be smart. You and Nick share
the music thing--It's easy for you
two. You need to play to Brett's
interests. Find some common ground.

Ron says nothing.

JANINE (cont'd)
Just show him some cool mountain
stuff. Like rocks, or whatever.

RON
Rocks?

JANINE
You know what I mean. It'll be good
bonding time for all of you.
(then)
Dave-O too.

RON
 This is a backpacking trip, not group
 therapy, Janine. Brett's fine. Nick's
 fine. Dave's fine.

JANINE
 Oh, I see... Is Ron fine?

The question hits Ron unexpectedly, but right then Dave-O
 lets out a WHISTLE.

Ron looks over. Dave-O gives a THUMBS UP.

JANINE (cont'd)
 Hello?

RON
 Yeah--sorry...I'll call you when we
 reach cell service in a few days.

Janine stops moving for the first time.

JANINE
 Ron.

RON
 Janine.

JANINE
 Just... Please be safe up there.

RON
 We'll be fine.

JANINE
 You better, or I'll kill you.

A POT STARTS BOILING OVER.

JANINE (cont'd)
 Shit! I gotta go--love you!

RON
 Love y--

The line is already dead. Ron pockets his phone.

He inserts the GAS NOZZLE and starts pumping...

INT. STATION STORE - MOMENTS LATER

The greasy CASHIER, 20's, name tag "SPENCER", places a SLIM JIM and a KEROSENE CANISTER inside a BROWN PAPER BAG next to a CASE OF WATERS for Dave-O.

SPENCER

That it?

Dave-O looks around... He spots Nick and Brett over in the candy aisle in the back.

DAVE-O

(to Spencer)

Yep. That's all she wrote.

The door CHIMES as Ron enters the store.

DAVE-O (cont'd)

Good?

RON

Yeah, thanks.

Dave-O frisbee throws Ron his credit card as Spencer hands him the receipt.

SPENCER

Where y'all headed?

DAVE-O

Bout eight miles up Fernandez Trail to Lady Lake. Hoping to hit some prime time fishing.

SPENCER

Y'all got earplugs?

DAVE-O

...For?

SPENCER

The whistlin' bastards.

(off Dave-O)

Marmots, man. Got some if you need 'em.

DAVE-O

You have...marmots?

SPENCER

No, dude--*Earplugs*.

RON
I think we're covered.

SPENCER
Suit yourselves.

Ron takes the case of waters. '

IN THE CANDY AISLE

Nick has chosen SKITTLES. Brett is still torn.

RON (O.S.)
Boys, we'll be outside.

They hear the DOOR CHIME, signaling Ron and Dave-O's exit.

NICK
Hurry up.

BRETT
Which one should I get?

NICK
I don't care.

Put on the spot, Brett grabs SKITTLES.

NICK (cont'd)
Copy cat.

Nick heads for the cash register...

Brett swaps for STARBURSTS and runs after him.

EXT. SUV - DAY

Dave-O hops inside with his SLIM JIM hanging out his mouth like a greasy cigar as Ron tosses the case of waters in the trunk and goes to finish with the GAS PUMP.

EXT. STATION STORE - SAME

Nick carries a PAPER BAG, blocking Brett from the SUV's line of sight as he shoves the CANDY down his pants.

NICK
You better not get caught this time.

BRETT
I won't.

INT. SUV - DAY

Nick jiggles the door handle from outside.

As Ron looks down to unlock the door, Brett quietly slips inside and hides the CANDY behind Dave-O's seat. Dave-O catches it in the rear-view mirror.

Nick hops in before Ron can find the button.

NICK
Never mind.

Ron turns back to the boys, unaware he's just been duped.

RON
No candy, right?

Nick pulls out a bag of CHEEZITS and BEEF JERKY from the paper bag.

RON (cont'd)
Change?

Nick drops the snacks: EMPTY HANDS.

RON (cont'd)
Ah, there's the catch. Gimme a piece of that jerky then.

Nick hands Ron a piece. He offers Dave-O.

DAVE-O
(re: Slim Jim)
Already gots mine.

RON
Alrighty then... Next stop, freedom.

He starts the engine.

Dave-O turns back. Throws a discrete wink back at the boys.

EXT. GAS STATION - MOMENTS LATER

The SUV merges back onto NORTH FORK ROAD.

INT. SUV (MOVING) - DAY

WIND WHIPS THROUGH THE CABIN. ALL WINDOWS DOWN.

Ron shuts his eyes. Inhales nature's fresh scent.

Dave checks his CELL PHONE - "NO SERVICE".

DAVE-O
 ... And we are officially off the
 grid.

Ron opens his eyes, smiles.

RON
 Feels good to be back.

Brett and Nick gape out their windows as MASSIVE PINES
 swallow them whole.

EXT. BEASORE ROAD - DAY

A DOE and TWO FAWNS mosey across a single lane dirt road.
 Suddenly, the DOE stops. LOOKS UP, right at CAMERA.

Then her FAWNS.

THE SUV, IN THE DISTANCE, GETTING CLOSER...

The deer flee into the forest--As the SUV ROARS by.

EXT. RANGER STATION - PARKING LOT - DAY

A dust cloud kicks up as the SUV rolls into a small dirt
 parking lot. At one end, a wooden shack serves as RANGER
 STATION. Across from that, two parked cars: a NATIONAL PARK
 SERVICES PICKUP TRUCK and a dusty, old HATCHBACK SUBARU.

Ron parks between the two vehicles and the crew hops out,
 immediately stretching stiff limbs.

RON
 (to boys)
 Dave and I have to check-in with the
 Ranger. Stay close to the car.

NICK/BRETT
 Okay!

They run into the forest...

RON
 WHERE I CAN SEE YOU!

They disappear. Ron turns to Dave-O in disbelief.

DAVE-O
They're fine. C'mon.

Ron reluctantly follows Dave-O to the RANGER STATION.

EXT. RANGER STATION - DAY

Dave-O raps on the door while Ron nudges a WOODEN ROCKING CHAIR, accidentally knocking a HALF-SMOKED CIGAR from the armrest.

RANGER (O.S.)
S'open!

Ron replaces the cigar. Wipes his hands on his pants.

DAVE-O
Dumb ass.

Dave-O twists the DOORKNOB...

INT. RANGER STATION - CONTINUOUS

...and they step inside.

As the door closes, Ron turns back one last time--But still no sight of the boys.

Inside, a SMALL DESK is guarded by a sleeping OLD HOUND. The PARK RANGER, 50's, a Rooster Cogburn-type, sits with his feet propped up, sipping from a thermos. There's an Uncle Sam-esque SMOKEY THE BEAR POSTER above his head: "*I WANT YOU TO STOP FOREST FIRES*".

PARK RANGER
Howdy.

DAVE-O
Morning, sir. How're you today?

The PARK RANGER drops his feet and sets his coffee down.

PARK RANGER
Eh, woke up with damn kink in my neck. Was having a good dream, too. One a them sexy ones.
(looking at his hound)
Frank and I got to watch the sunrise though. That was nice.

Ron and Dave eye the old dog named FRANK. He doesn't move a muscle.

RON

Good name.

PARK RANGER

Better partner.

(stands, sticks out
his hand)

Bud Mader.

Ron and Dave-O introduce themselves. Bud looks them over.

BUD

Bit far from Graceland. Where you
rockstars headed?

DAVE-O

Ultimately, Lady Lake, but tonight
the plan is to camp at Vanderburgh.

Bud puts on a pair READING GLASSES, opens a LOG BOOK, and begins writing...

BUD

Asian fella took off that way a
coupla days ago. Said he was cutting
over to Staniford though, so by the
time y'all get up there you should
have the place to yourselves... Still
got some snow, too. Frank and I was
just fixing markers up that way last
week.

(then)

Fishing?

DAVE-O

That's the goal.

BUD

(continues writing...)

Good man. Goddamn feeding frenzy this
time of year. Ain't that right,
Frank?

Nothing from Frank.

BUD (cont'd)

Man of few words.

RON (O.S.)
Nick! Brett!

They stop.

BRETT
Told you!

Nick stares...an evil grin slowly spreads across his face. He pours another MOUTHFUL OF SKITTLES and raises the gut-covered stick at Brett.

EXT. RANGER STATION - DAY

Just as Ron's about to holler again, Brett BURSTS out of the forest and into the parking lot with Nick hot on his heels.

He reaches Ron, out of breath. Hides behind his back.

BRETT
He's trying to make me eat it!

Ron looks at Brett, confused, then turns to Nick, spotting the gut-covered stick.

RON
Jesus, Nick...What the hell is that?

Nick looks at it. Shrugs.

RON (cont'd)
Get rid of it.

He TOMAHAWK THROWS the stick into the forest. Guts fly through the air, fanning out across the parking lot.

RON (cont'd)
Apologize to your brother.

NICK
I was just kidding.

BRETT
No he wasn't!

RON
I don't care! I told you boys to stay close and you neither of you listened.
(to Brett)
He didn't get you did he?

BRETT

No.

RON

Good.

(to both)

Go grab your fishing licenses, and no more shenanigans, you hear me?

The boys sulk toward the SUV.

DAVE-O (O.S.)

Thanks again, Bud!

Ron turns around and sees Dave-O exit the Ranger Station.

RON

What's up?

DAVE-O

Nada. Let's rock n' roll.

RON

What about the boys?

DAVE-O

Turns out Bud's a bud. We're good to go.

Dave-O pats Ron's shoulder, leads him to the SUV.

EXT. SUV - MOMENTS LATER

The TRUNK hatch opens.

DAVE-O removes CARGO from the roof.

RON sprays himself with DEET, then hands it to Nick.

Nick sprays his arms. Then Brett's face.

Dave-O puts on a SWEAT-STAINED BUCKET HAT and SUNGLASSES.

Ron checks his watch. In front of him, everyone stands at the ready, loaded down by their means of survival for the next three days.

RON

Let's hit it.

EXT. RANGER STATION - DAY

FROM ABOVE, our troops, in single file line (Dave-O, Nick, Brett, Ron), disappear into the forest...

EXT. FERNANDEZ TRAIL - DAY

Starting with a friendly wide, flat trail. The group is surrounded by towering LODGEPOLE PINES, BOULDERS, FALLEN LOGS. Everything is massive in scale.

It's a whole new world, and spirits are high.

EXT. FERNANDEZ TRAIL - LATER

Ron notices Brett adjusting his BACKPACK ahead of him.

RON
You want to put the bear canister in
my pack?

Brett tries one last option: tightens the straps. It works.

BRETT
I'm good.

Ron smiles.

EXT. FERNANDEZ TRAIL - LATER

A MASSIVE RED FIR PINE TREE. The letter "i" is carved deep into its trunk. Dave-O's hand SLAPS next to it.

DAVE-O
Alright you scoundrels. Gather
'round.

The boys approach.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
Now, your teachers may be suckin'
down vodka cranberries in Vegas right
now, but that don't mean you two are
free from getting schooled today. So,
pop quiz: What is this?

Nick and Brett shrug.

Ron raises his hand.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
Yes--you, poor man's Jimmy Page.

RON
It's a trail blaze.

DAVE-O
(applaudes)
Bravissimo! A trail blaze it is. Or,
if you so prefer, a trail *marker*.

BRETT
Why does it look like an "i"?

Dave-O looks to Ron:

RON
I honestly have no clue.

The boys look back to Dave-O for the answer but he doesn't know. Instead of acknowledging this, he simply diverts answering by acting like the question never existed.

DAVE-O
Point is: you'll be seeing these
every so often, especially when the
forest is dense. So always be on the
lookout, because their *only* job is to
let you know you're on the right
path. See--look...

Dave-O points ahead at another TRAIL BLAZE carved into a tree trunk in the distance. They head towards it...

NICK
What happens if you don't see one?

Dave-O walks several feet and stops. Crouches into a catcher's position.

DAVE-O
Then look for one of these bad boys.

He points to a SMALL STACK OF ROCKS, diminishing in size from bottom to top, like the "*Tower of Hanoi*" game.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
The other type of marker--Called a
duck. Wanna know why?

BRETT
Because it looks like one?

Bingo! Brett steals Dave-O's shot at redemption.

NICK
What happens if you don't see one of
these either?

RON
Then you're shit out of luck.

Dave-O silently confirms Ron's statement. Meanwhile, Brett
adjusts his backpack. Discomfort setting in again.

BRETT
How much longer?

DAVE-O
We just started, dude.

NICK
Stop whining.

BRETT
I'm not whining.

NICK
I'm not whining.

RON
(to Nick)
What did I say?
(to Brett)
I told you I can lighten your pack.

NICK
Should have gotten him a rollie-
backpack.

DAVE-O
Like the one you used to have?

Ouch. Nick shuts up.

RON
(to Brett)
Last chance. Either way, no more
complaints.

Brett wants so badly to take Ron's offer, but doesn't want
Nick to give him more shit.

BRETT
I'm fine.

DAVE-O
 Yeah you are, big man. We're all
 fine. Look at where we are! Now,
 enough chit chat, more switchbacks.

Dave-O resumes hiking, followed by Nick, then Brett...

Ron hangs back a beat. Weary of the early difficulties.

EXT. FERNANDEZ TRAIL - LATER

FROM A DISTANCE, through towering pines, the troops march.

Still leading the pack, Dave-O WHISTLES a lil' ditty.

Behind him, Nick leaps over rocks, having a great time.

In the back, Ron watches as Brett angrily swats mosquitoes from his face.

EXT. SWITCHBACKS - LATER

Higher elevation. About 8,000 feet. Less vegetation, more rocks. And now, random traces of SNOW.

DUCK MARKERS guide the way up the trail, which currently zig-zags across a steep incline like a long set of stairs.

Everyone is struggling now. Especially Brett.

Dave-O and Nick have created a sizable gap. They're a full zig-zag above, heading in the opposite direction...

DAVE-O
 (to Ron and Brett)
 How's the weather down there?

Ron is too worn to retort. He nips at Brett's heels.

RON
 We need to catch up.

BRETT
 I'm going.

Ron patience is just about gone.

EXT. CREST - LATER

The top of the switchbacks, now onto the other side of the mountain, with a breathtaking view of the Sierra Nevada mountain range below.

Dave-O and Nick are posted up against a gigantic WESTERN WHITE PINE tree, jetting out of pure granite slab.

Brett and Ron finally arrive and join them.

DAVE-O
Oh, hey--Almost forgot you guys were here.

Ron doesn't reply. He unzips his pack, removes a BAG OF JERKY, and shoves a fat chunk in his mouth.

BRETT
I need to pee.

NICK
Then go.

BRETT
Where?

Ron points to a fallen tree just off the trail.

RON
Over there.

Brett heads to it.

DAVE-O
(to Ron)
Everything good?

Ron grunts, his mouthful of jerky.

EXT. FERNANDEZ TRAIL - LATER

Back to the hike. Same lineup as before. Only difference is now Dave-O is aware of the tension between Ron and Brett. He spins into a backpedal to check the situation.

Like before, a sizable gap is forming. Not good.

He returns forward. Up ahead, the trail begins a slight curve where through trees, he can spot an open clearing. A smirk spreads across his face.

DAVE-O
 (to the boys)
 You boys ever wonder what Heaven
 looks like?

EXT. MEADOW - MOMENTS LATER

An open field of saturated colors. EMERALD GRASS. WILD FLOWERS in full bloom. A hidden paradise in the middle of forest, straight out of a fantasy tale.

The group emerges from the forest line and stops dead in their tracks, in awe of the breathtaking beauty.

Everyone but Brett, that is. Instead, he drops his backpack and lies down next to it.

Meanwhile, Nick picks up a RIFLE-SHAPED STICK and runs into the meadow, hacking the vibrant flowers in his path.

Ron and Dave-O stand next to each other, soaking it all in.

DAVE-O
 I mean...Goddamn.

A beat.

RON
 Yeah... Goddamn.

BRETT

Stares up into the sky and closes his eyes as listens to the meadow dancing with the slight breeze, finally feeling relief from the weight of his pack.

RON (O.S.)
 Somethin' else, huh?

Brett opens his eyes: Ron stands above him, peering ahead into the meadow. He looks down at Brett.

RON
 This spot taken?

Brett hesitates...then moves the bag over to his other side. Ron lies down next to him. They don't say another word to each other. Just watch the clouds together, father and son.

NICK

AIMS his stick like a RIFLE.

Tracks a RED-TAILED HAWK circling above...

STICK POV: The hawk disappears over tree line.

Nick lowers his pretend gun, bummed.

DAVE-O

Kneels down and beholds the meadow in front of him. Soaks it all in. The sights. The smells. The sounds. All his troubles, gone. The awe-inspiring power of nature.

Until suddenly, his FACE FALLS.

NICK'S RIFLE STICK POV:

Scanning the forest line...

...across the tops of trees, moving down lower...

...and finally, landing on a BLACK BEAR CUB.

Nick lowers the stick, mouth agape. A BIG HAND lands on his shoulder. He looks up.

Dave-O puts a finger to his lips: *Shhh*.

THE CUB

Slowly meanders. Innocently sniffs the forest floor.

DAVE-O

Observes the awe in Nick's eyes. But the CUB's appearance has implications:

DAVE-O
You have your whistle?

Nick looks down. It hangs from his neck.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
Get ready to blow.

BRETT AND RON

Lie side by side in the tall grass, eyes closed.

Ron turns his head and sneaks a peek at Brett. For the first time this trip, he seems at peace.

Content with this tiny moment of perfection, Ron looks back to the sky and closes his eyes once again...

UNTIL A SHADOW CROSSES HIS FACE.

He cracks opens his eyes to find Dave-O and Nick peering down overhead with big, toothy grins.

EXT. FERNANDEZ TRAIL - MOMENTS LATER

Back on the trail, adjacent to the meadow.

The group MOVES SLOWLY AND SILENTLY...All eyes on the CUB in the distance, visible through trees.

RON
No sign of mom?

DAVE-O
Not yet. But she's around.

BRETT
How do you know?

DAVE-O
Because a parent never leaves their child.

Brett fixates on the cub... Senses a shared connection, and suddenly, the cub looks up--DIRECTLY AT BRETT.

SMACK--! He runs straight into Dave-O's back.

Dave-O whips his arm back and holds Brett where he is.

BECAUSE THIRTY FEET UP AHEAD: IS MAMA BEAR.

She ambles through the forest, a magnificent beast. Unaware yet of the foreigners nearby.

Nick steps forward for a better view and accidentally SNAPS a STICK underfoot...

CAUSING MAMA BEAR TO WHIP HER HEAD AROUND AND LOCK EYES WITH THE GROUP.

VERY QUICKLY:

Dave-O launches his arm out and rips the WHISTLE from Nick's neck.

HE STARTS BLOWING.

LONG BURSTS.

OVER AND OVER...

MAMA BEAR'S

Motherly instincts kick in: She races to her cub and together they disappear, deep into the forest.

ON BRETT, eyes wide as the WHISTLE SHRIEKS...

EXT. FERNANDEZ TRAIL - LATER

GOLDEN RAYS cut through pine trees, BACK LIGHTING our group of hikers into ghostly soldiers.

Ron watches Brett: His movement lazy, dragging his feet.

Then checks his watch and regards the setting sun.

BRETT (O.S.)
This sucks.

RON
Excuse me?

Brett is silent.

RON (cont'd)
Stop walking.
(Brett does)
Now look at me and say it again.

A test...

After a beat, Brett looks up at Ron. Fire in his eyes.

BRETT
I SAID THIS SUCKS!

Unleashed, Brett CHUCKS his backpack down in a fury.

Up ahead, Dave-O and Nick hear the commotion.

DAVE-O
That ain't good.

Ron steps close to Brett. Towers over him.

RON
 Maybe you should have stayed home
 then.

BRETT
 I wanted to! Mom wouldn't let me!

Ron is taken back.

Dave-O and Nick arrive.

DAVE-O
 Hey- what's with all the excitement?

NICK
 (re: Brett)
 He just wants attention.

BRETT
 Shut up.

RON
 Not now, Nick.

NICK
 Why? Everyone knows what he's doing.

BRETT
 I said shut the fuck up!

WHACK--! Ron clips Brett across the backside of his head. He falls to the ground. Dave-O intervenes before Ron does anything else.

DAVE-O
 Whoa, Hey-! He's just tired. Hell, we
 all are. It's been a long day.

RON
 No...Nick's right. He just wants
 attention.
 (to Brett)
 Get up.

DAVE-O
 Ron...

RON
 (snaps)
 What, Dave?!

Brett's begun to cry.

Seeing this, Ron's ice cold demeanor begins to melt into regret. Dave-O attempts a second approach:

DAVE-O
We're only about half an hour from
Vanderburgh. Why don't you and Nick
go ahead? I'll hang back with Brett.

RON
We're fine...
(steps forward)
Brett, I'm--

He tries to grab Brett's arm--

BRETT
(yanks arm away)
DON'T TOUCH ME!

Brett climbs to his feet and storms off.

Ron steps for him, but Dave-O blocks him.

RON
He's MY son, Dave.

DAVE-O
I know.

Ron helplessly watches Brett sulk into the forest...

Dave-O turns to Nick. Tries to change the mood.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
If you guys hurry you might make just
make it in time to cast a few lines.

Nick nods, clearly wanting to get the hell out of there.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
(to Ron)
I'll hang back with Brett. Give him a
minute to chill. We'll be right
behind you, alright?

He says it in a way that Ron is unsure of the meaning behind the words. Is Dave-O saying he *can't* handle Brett?

But before he can question it, Dave-O's already after Brett.

So, Ron stands there, hating himself. Unable to peel his eyes as another man goes to comfort his son from the trauma of his own actions.

NICK (O.S.)

Dad?

Ron looks over, in a daze of regret.

RON

Yeah--sorry.

He gestures for Nick to take the lead.

They resume hiking... but Ron's eyes never leave Brett.

EXT. SMALL CREEK - MOMENTS LATER

BRETT'S TEAR-FILLED EYES reflect back at him through ripples.

DAVE-O (O.S.)

Thirsty?

Dave-O kneels down. Removes a WATER PUMP from his bag.

DAVE-O

Got your bottle?

Brett pulls it out. It's half full.

DAVE-O (cont'd)

Dump that shit out.

Brett lights up slightly. Does as told.

DAVE-O (cont'd)

Here- Take this sucker.

Dave-O trades him for the WATER PUMP.

DAVE-O (cont'd)

Now stick that end in the water where the most ripples are.

Brett does. Looks to Dave-O for more instructions.

DAVE-O (cont'd)

Pump away, cowboy!

Brett starts pumping...and soon WATER begins to snake through the tubing, back into the bottle in Dave-O's hand.

Brett smiles at Dave-O.

MOMENTS LATER

The bottle is full. Dave-O removes the pump and hands the bottle back. Brett takes a sip. Cold, crisp. Best water he's ever had.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
Well?

BRETT
How's it so good?!

DAVE-O
Cause it's straight from the source,
that's why!
(points to mountains)
When that snow melts, it ends up in
the lakes and these creeks.
(re: Brett's bottle)
So that right there? That's *au
naturel*, baby.

Brett takes another huge gulp.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
What'ya say we keep moving?

Brett stands and extends his hand to Dave-O. Dave-O smiles. Lets Brett pull him to his feet.

EXT. FERNANDEZ TRAIL - DUSK

Ron and Nick walk in silence, trying to avoid acknowledging what just happened at all costs...But Ron is unable to think of anything else. Part of him feels like he should go back. The other tells him it's too late.

The right answer eludes him.

NICK (O.S.)
Do you think we'll catch anything?

RON
...Probably not.

NICK
But we can still try though, right?
I watched some YouTube videos last
night on how to cast it super far.

Ron manages a smile at that. At least someone is excited.

EXT. MADERA PEAK - DUSK

The final rays of daylight creep up the granite face of Madera Peak as the blue hour claims its place.

UP CLOSE, a MARMOT sits on a granite boulder, repeatedly voicing it's trademark WHISTLE.

EXT. FERNANDEZ TRAIL - NIGHT

Visibility on the trail has diminished significantly. Dave-O's HEADLAMP is on Brett, guiding the way.

DAVE-O
Wanna help me light the camp fire
when we get there?

BRETT
Can I light it?!

DAVE-O
You have to! I'm too scared.

BRETT
No you're not.

DAVE-O
How do you know?

BRETT
Because I'm not dumb.

DAVE-O
(smiles)
Coul'da fooled me.

EXT. CAMPSITE - NIGHT

Ron and Nick enter the campsite: A small clearing, surrounded by an army of gently swaying pine trees. To the left, VANDERBURGH LAKE glistens under the moonlight.

They set their backpacks down against a LARGE BOULDER. Ron removes the TACKLE BOX from his bag.

RON
You got the poles?

Nick pulls them off the side of his bag.

RON (cont'd)
Poles. Tackle box. What else...?

NICK
Nothing, let's go! It's already dark.

RON
...Ah. Headlamps.

Ron straps his on. Tosses one to Nick.

RON (cont'd)
Let's hope these fish are hungry for
dessert.

EXT. VANDERBURGH LAKE - DUSK

The water: glass. FULL MOON vibrant in its reflection.

EXT. SHORELINE - NIGHT

Ron pulls a MOSQUITO FLY from the TACKLE BOX and gestures
for Nick's pole.

NICK
I wanna do it.

RON
You remember how?

Nick nods. Ron hands it over.

With expertise, Nick loops the FISHING LINE through the
eyelet, around the line itself several times, and back
through the LOOP in the line. A perfect execution.

Ron is impressed.

RON (cont'd)
Now let's see that long toss you were
talking about.

Nick stands, winds back, and casts his line into the lake.

It lands with a SPLASH way out far, distorting the
reflection of the moon in a wave of ripples.

EXT. CAMPSITE - NIGHT

Dave-O and Brett enter from the trail. They spot the backpacks against the boulder, but no Ron or Nick.

Dave-O locates them on the shoreline.

DAVE-O
Ain't gonna catch diddly at this
hour.

Brett stares at his brother and father...feels as if they were teaming up against him.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
Guess that means were on setup duty.

Dave-O unzips his backpack. Removes a HATCHET and MATCHBOOK.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
C'mon--grab those sleeping bags.
Let's get this fire going.

Brett sets his backpack down and grabs his BRIGHT BLUE SLEEPING BAG. He follows Dave-O into the middle of the campsite, eyes locked on Ron and Nick the entire time.

EXT. VANDERBURGH LAKE - NIGHT

Nick and Ron sit quietly.

RON
I don't think we're gonna get any
bites, Nick.

Nick reels his line in.

NICK
I know. I just wanted Brett to have
some space for a minute.

He casts it back out into the lake.

Ron is caught of guard by Nick's awareness of the situation...

He turns back toward the campsite--

EXT. CAMPSITE - NIGHT

Dave-O uses the BEAM of his HEADLAMP to stack DEAD BRANCHES in a pyramid around a pile TINDER.

DAVE-O
Alrighty, she's just about ready.

He turns back--

Brett sits on top of his sleeping bag, zoned out.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
Yo- Brettle.

Brett looks at Dave-O.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
Still wanna light it?

Dave-O extends the MATCHBOOK toward Brett. An invitation.

Brett rises and shuffles over. Kneels down next to Dave-O.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
Alright. See this stuff here- the dead pine needles and what not? That's called kindle. Normally, it should light right up, but since everything here's a little damp from the snow, it might take a few tries, so don't be bummed if you don't get it first try.

Brett stares at the matchbook...

DAVE-O (cont'd)
This your first time starting a fire?

BRETT
No.

DAVE-O
First time starting a *campfire*?

Brett smirks.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
(chuckles)
Alright then lil' pyro, let's how well your skills translate.

Brett pulls a match and strikes--It fails to ignite.

He tries again...

and again...

and again...

But Dave-o grows hesitant, now feeling like this should be Ron's moment, even despite the current circumstances.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
You know what--?

Brett stops.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
I'm gonna grab your dad. He's got the good matches. Those ones suck. Sit tight.

Dave-O makes a point to grab his hatchet, but leaves the matched. He pops to his feet.

MOMENTS LATER

Dave-O pushes through the underbrush just outside the campsite, heading toward the shoreline.

Suddenly--his headlight FLICKERS, AND SHUTS OFF.

Dave-O stops. Presses the POWER BUTTON on top -- NOTHING.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
Piece of shit.

He tries again -- IT TURNS ON.

He continues...

BACK AT THE CAMPSITE

Brett flips the matchbook through his fingers as he sees Dave-O reach Ron and Nick at the shoreline.

A *THUD*: Brett looks down.

THE MATCHBOOK lays on the ground. Open. Waiting to be lit...

He picks it up and rips out another MATCH.

Strikes it once... twice... BINGO -- THE PHOSPHORUS IGNITES.

An ORANGE GLOW under-lights his face.

He peers back in the direction of everyone else...

Then returns to the small but powerful flame at his fingertips.

EXT. VANDERBURGH LAKE - SAME

Nick finds himself caught in the middle of a heated altercation between Ron and Dave-O.

DAVE-O

What are you talking about--? I'm not trying to pick a fight with you, Ron.

RON

Of course you're not. You're just trying to tell me how to raise my son.

DAVE-O

All I said was that *you* should be the one to teach him how to light a campfire!

RON

Oh--Don't give me that shit. This entire trip you've been undermining me. And now what? You--of all people--are trying to give *me* lessons on how to raise my children?

DAVE-O

What's that supposed to mean?

RON

Well according to you, I'm sure no expert, but I think it's safe to say that leaving a child alone in the wilderness with a box of matches isn't the best parenting move, is it?

Dave-O looks back to Brett...realizes his mistake.

RON (cont'd)

But how could you know that, Dave? It's not like you have any experience.

RON (cont'd)

(then)

So, before you try and tell me what to do, why don't you just go back over there and stick to doing what you're good at.

DAVE-O

(seething)

And what is that, Ron?

RON

Playing the carefree, fun-loving pseudo-uncle--who clearly, can do no wrong.

NICK

(interjects)

Dad--

RON

Go back by your brother, Nick. It seems Dave-O might be a little tired. Heck, we all are, aren't we?

(then)

I'll hang back here with him... give him a minute to chill.

Nick solemnly obeys...

There's pregnant moment of silence as Dave-O gathers his words.

DAVE-O

You're right, Ron. I'm not a father. As much as I wish I was, I can never be that...But I'm a big boy, and I can take your shit. So here's what I do know: The image you present of yourself to those boys, at this age, is what they're going to hold onto for the rest of their lives.

(beat)

You of all people should know that.

Ron falls quiet. Turns his eyes to the ground.

Dave-O inches closer, almost going for an embrace... But is stopped by Ron, slowly peering up with at him an ice cold glare which stops Dave-O dead in his tracks.

A tense beat.

RON
 Fuck you, Dave.

With that, Ron turns his back, giving attention to repacking the tackle box.

Dave-O can't believe his ears. Doesn't even recognize the man in front of him. A complete stranger in this moment. At this point the best thing he can do is just walk away.

So that's exactly what he does...

Leaving Ron completely alone in the wilderness.

EXT. CAMPSITE - SAME

On hands and knees, Brett BLOWS on a small patch of SMOLDERING TINDER.

NICK (O.S.)
 Way to ruin the trip, idiot.

Nick's voice startles Brett. He quickly scurries onto his sleeping bag as Nick drops the fishing poles at the backpacks, never once looking over.

BRETT
 I didn't do anything.

NICK
 (mimics)
"I didn't do anything."
 (then)
 You got dad and Dave-O all pissed off at each other.

Conversation over. Nick heads into the forest...

BRETT
 Where are you going?

Nick doesn't respond, but the sound of DAVE-O stomping into the campsite diverts Brett's attention.

Seeing this, Brett realizes that maybe Nick was right...and now, wanting to disappear, he crawls inside his BRIGHT BLUE SLEEPING BAG.

As he does, we SLOWLY PULL BACK...

TO SEE THE SMOLDERING TINDER STILL GLOWING RED.

DAVE-O

Tosses the HATCHET next to his backpack and pulls out the RECTANGULAR KEROSENE CANISTER from the gas station.

We TRACK ALONG as he carries it over to the unlit firewood...

When he arrives, Brett leans up from his sleeping bag.

EXT. VANDERBURGH LAKE - SAME

Somewhat cooled down, Ron drags his feet back to the campsite, preparing to face the music.

EXT. FOREST LINE - SAME

Nick zips up his pants and pulls out his SKITTLES, pouring a mouthful. He turns back for the campsite...

EXT. NIGHT SKY - SAME

A breathtaking canvas of stars. Almost a window into another world, far far away.

Brett, looking up, longs to be there.

Longing to be anywhere, but here...

EXT. VANDERBURGH LAKE/CAMPSITE - SAME

RON: trudges through the last bit of underbrush...

NICK: crumples the SKITTLES WRAPPER into his pocket...

DAVE-O: raises the KEROSENE over the firewood...

BRETT: closes his eyes...

PINE TREES: sway to Mother Nature's lullaby...

AND AS RON finally steps into the campsite --

FIRE

EXPLODES AND ENGULFS THE CANISTER IN DAVE-O'S HAND.

DAVE-O

FUCK!!!

IN A FLASH: He chucks the CANISTER backward, away from the flames, where it lands on

BRETT

Opening his eyes not to the beauty of the celestial heavens above, but to SCORCHING HELL FIRE swallowing him whole.

T I M E S L O W S . . .

DAVE-O REACTS: PURE HORROR.

NICK REACTS: FRIGHTFUL AWE.

NOW ON RON, PUSHING INTO EXTREME CLOSE UP... Where a HELLISH-ORANGE GLOW dances in the reflection of his eyes...

EXT. STANIFORD LAKE - NIGHT

A perfect vantage point about a mile north of Vanderburgh where a SOLO HIKER stands next to a small campfire of his own. He watches the explosion down below in silence.

EXT. CAMPSITE - NIGHT

The DANCING ORANGE GLOW on Ron's face quickly fades, melting with it his previous embitterment with it. What's left is an empty shell of a man, who now watches:

Brett, instantly on his feet, covered head-to-toe in SCORCHING FLAMES, SCREAMING BLOODY MURDER.

...And now that empty shell fills back up.

Ron drops the TACKLE BOX and races toward his son, as his son races toward him, a SCREAMING BALL OF FIRE...

Not even sure what he's going to do, Ron charges forward, only knowing he needs to reach his son as quick as possible.

But suddenly--DAVE-O TACKLES BRETT FROM BEHIND.

Two-hundred-forty pounds destroying ninety. Their twisted bodies tumble through the dirt, like a lion on a gazelle.

It's brutal, but necessary.

As they skid to a stop, Dave-O rolls off Brett's smoldering body. Ron arrives and uses his own JACKET to smother the remaining flames.

The entire time Brett SCREAMS uncontrollably. He thrashes about, trying to escape phantom flames.

Ron attempts to control him.

RON
Brett, stop moving!

He doesn't, keeps screaming...

RON (cont'd)
DAVE, HELP!

Dave-O jumps in and together, he and Ron are able to pin Brett's arms, wrestling him under control.

That's when they get their first look at the damage:

THIRD DEGREE BURNS cover the majority of Brett's frail body. Besides his pants, the rest of his clothes are pretty much gone. That of it which remains has melted into his skin.

But most of the damage is on Brett's chest, where the KEROSENE landed. It's a mess of mangled tissue. Puss. Blood.

The gnarliest thing either of these men have ever seen.

Brett peers up, eyes full of tears, barely conscious. He's able to choke out only one word:

BRETT
...Dad...

RON
It's okay, Brett. I'm here.
(turns back)
Dave, get me the first aid kit from
my bag.

But Dave-O, wide-eyed, is unable to peel his horrified gaze from Brett's injuries.

NICK (O.S.)
DAD!!!

Ron turns back to Nick, who points at:

THE BURNING FOREST FLOOR. Ablaze in the wake of the explosion.

Ron's EYES WIDEN...

RON
DAVE--the campsite!!!

The sight of more flames instantly sends him into action...

Ron peers back down at Brett. Change of plans.

RON (cont'd)
I have to get the first-aid kit...

Brett grabs Ron's arm. Continues to cry. The last thing Ron wants to do is leave him...

But he has to.

RON (cont'd)
I'll be right back.

Ron makes a break for the backpacks...

While in the background, FIRE AND CHAOS continue as Dave-O and Nick tend to the burning forest floor.

Meanwhile, Ron slides into his backpack, rips it open, and throws out item after item until he finds the FIRST AID KIT.

At the same time, Dave-O and Nick finish stomping out what's left of Brett's burning sleeping bag. As Dave-O wipes the sweat from his forehead something lands on his hand.

He peers up--noticing the FLAMING PINE NEEDLES raining down from a LOW-HANGING BRANCH on fire directly above.

DAVE-O
Nick--the hatchet! By my bag!

Nick RACES to the backpacks while Dave-O climbs up to the branch on fire.

Seconds later:

NICK
Here!

Dave-O catches the hatchet one-handed and immediately starts hacking at the burning branch, making quick work of it.

It crashes to the floor in an ERUPTION OF BURNING EMBER.

Dave-O leaps out of the tree, and together, he and Nick extinguish the remainder of flames...

SENDING THE CAMPSITE INTO **DARKNESS**.

RON

TURNES ON his headlamp. Shreds the first-aid kit open next to Brett's burnt body and spills its contents onto the ground. Uses his hands to shuffle them around, searching for...

A MINIATURE PACKET OF NEOSPORIN.

He tears it open with his teeth. Squeezes the entire tube onto Brett's chest. Begins massaging it in...

Brett CRIES out.

RON

I'm sorry. I have to.

Ron blows air on the wound to try to ease the pain as he finishes up. The final results are practically useless. Allover, Brett's skin has become taunt from the burns.

He needs to keep it moist somehow...

An idea:

RON (cont'd)

Butter... Someone get me the butter!

Dave-O quickly realizes what Ron's going for. He runs to the backpacks and pulls out the BEAR CANISTER from Brett's bag.

At the same time, Nick arrives over Ron's shoulder. His is face twisted with fright as he looks down on his severely injured brother, lying helpless in the dirt.

NICK

Is he okay?

RON

No.

Dave-O arrives with the BUTTER.

Ron takes it and mashes it between his hands until it becomes soft and spreadable, then rubs it into Brett's wounds as Brett continues to scream in agony...

Nick turns his head away and hugs onto Dave-O.

Dave-O looks down at Nick's trembling frame. Realizes that Brett's not the only one he's failed.

Finally, Ron finishes. Wipes his buttery hands in the dirt.

He leans Brett to an upright position, revealing the continued damage on his backside...

Fuck.

But there's no time to lose, so he grabs the jacket he used to smother the flames and gently drapes it over Brett's back.

DAVE-O

Nick and I will carry the backpacks.

RON

You're staying here.

DAVE-O

What?

RON

I'll move much faster alone. At first light, you and Nick will pack up camp and head back to the ranger station. Use Bud's satellite phone to call me.

Ron grips Brett's wrists. Wraps them around his neck.

RON (cont'd)

Alright, Brett. Deep breathes.

Ron stands. Brett slips and SCREAMS.

Dave-O rushes to Ron's aid and forces his hands on Brett's burnt backside as Ron lowers him back to the ground. He backs away, staring at his opened palms, glistening with butter and blood.

RON (cont'd)

(to Brett)

Are you okay?

BRETT

(crying)

It hurts!

RON
I know, but we need to leave. I need
to take you to the hospital.

BRETT
I can walk.

Ron sees he means it. He tries to think of any other way...

RON
Alright. Let's go.

He grabs Brett's hand. Gingerly helps him to his feet.

Nick rushes over.

NICK
Let me come too. *Please.*

Ron recognizes the fear in Nick's eyes. He pulls him into a hug. The best he can do right now.

Ron looks at Dave-O, dead in the eyes:

RON
Call me as soon as you can. I'll tell
which hospital we're at.
(re: Nick)
Don't let anything happen to him.

The statement sinks deep. Dave-O swallows hard. Nods.

Holding Brett's hand, Ron begins to backtrack the eight-mile hike in darkness, leaving Dave-O and Nick with nothing to do but watch until Ron's headlamp is eventually swallowed by darkness...

...Leaving them in EERIE PITCH BLACK SILENCE.

MOMENTS LATER

Dave-O steps up to the PIT OF ASHES from the accident with his HEADLAMP emitting a softer, but more ominous RED LIGHT.

He stares down, eyes lost, haunted by sounds of Brett's screams. The unforgiving flames. The irreparable damage.

He can't take it anymore--

He looks away to escape, but finds his gaze instead sucked into the dark abyss where Brett and Ron disappeared into...

If only he paid closer attention...

...If only he had minded his own business, maybe none of this would have happened...

...Maybe he doesn't know what it means to be a parent...

NICK (O.S.)

Dave-O?

His sunken eyes shift to Nick, who is on the verge of breaking completely.

NICK

...Is my brother going to die?

And the levee falls--

Dave-O, broken himself now, strides forward and embraces Nick fully. He uses all his might to remain the source of strength, knowing very well that the words he's about to say could be far from the truth:

DAVE-O

No, Nick... He's not gonna die.

(then)

...Everything's going to be alright.

He begins to silently cry behind Nick's back.

EXT. FERNANDEZ TRAIL - NIGHT

ADRENALINE fuels Ron's calculated steps as he's guided only by the narrow scope of his headlamp (on WHITE light) and the small amount of moonlight penetrating the dense forest.

He pulls Brett along, navigating rocks and fallen logs with expertise. It's as if his entire life of hiking this trail has prepared him for this moment.

But Brett's already beginning to fade...

His hand slips from Ron's and he stops walking. Ron turns back. Brett sways upright, head lolling.

Ron lurched forward and catches him before he falls. He checks his surroundings, looking for a place to rest, but decides to keep going by carrying Brett instead.

He bends down and wraps Brett's limp wrists around his neck, then hoists him up into piggyback position. This time Brett doesn't cry.

LATER

One foot in front of the other, Ron pushes on.

The HEADLAMP illuminates a tree trunk with a "i" TRAIL BLAZE. Ron passes it, following its lead.

LATER

Through trees, we see Ron pushing on by the light of his HEADLAMP.

LATER

A steeper decline. Weighed down by Brett, Ron's knees are taking a beating. He slows...

RON

You okay?

No response. Ron grows worried:

RON (cont'd)

Bret, tug my shirt collar if you can hear me.

Brett weakly grips Ron's collar. Thank god.

RON (cont'd)

You need to stay awake.

BRETT

Okay.

Brett's voice is faded and weak. Ron is getting nervous, but he's also tired. Adrenaline can only take one so far. Nonetheless, Ron continues...

He strains with every step, but refuses to slow down. This is his baby boy, and nothing will stop him.

Around the upcoming bend, the MEADOW from earlier appears, through trees.

EXT. MEADOW - NIGHT

It's prior beauty has been transcended under the conditions of glowing moon. The grass is almost luminescent--as if fairies occupied this land.

Cutting directly across the field in the straightest line possible, Ron can't help but to momentarily be taken away from his dire situation, but still he keeps moving...

RON

Brett.

Brett tugs his collar.

RON (cont'd)

...Look up.

Brett lifts his head from Ron's shoulder. Blinks his eyes.

A surreal view the MILKY WAY GALAXY above.

FROM AFAR, capturing the tragic beauty of this physical location juxtaposed with the current circumstances, Ron keeps trucking, allowing Brett a full glimpse of this magical place, just in case...

MOMENTS LATER

They reach the forest line.

BRETT

I'm thirsty.

Ron thinks...

RON

...Alright. I'm gonna have to put you down.

BRETT

Okay.

Ron spots a suitable boulder. He approached and peers over his shoulder, backing up like a truck in reverse...

RON

I'll tell you when to let go.

He painfully squats until he feels Brett firmly land.

RON (cont'd)

Okay.

Brett lets go. Ron spins around, still in a crouched position. He hands Brett his WATER BOTTLE, and with his HEADLAMP shining on Brett's face, he's able to get his first glimpse in full light since the accident.

And it's a strange sight...

Despite his injuries, Brett has an aura of peace. A smooth complexion. Youthful eyes. Truly stoic.

At first, Ron is taken aback...but then, he recognizes it as a reconfirmation of the seriousness of the situation--That he's in a race against time now.

Gingerly, Ron pours water into Brett's mouth, like a father bottle-feeding a helpless newborn. But a sip is all Brett can manage. Water dribbles down his chin and Ron gently wipes it away.

He lifts Brett's jacket and checks on his burns. Brett's chest glistens under Ron's headlamp: Bright red. Buttery. Blood vessels exposed.

BRETT

Are you gonna drink?

RON

I don't want to waste it, we still have a while to go.

BRETT

Then you should drink.

Ron concedes, admiring Brett's selflessness.

RON

Just a little.

Ron raises the BOTTLE to his lips and squeezes-- *CRUNCH*.

He lowers the bottle and regards its form... Then squeezes it again--*CRUNCH*.

But a different sound than the first time...

Instantly, Ron SPRINGS to his feet on high alert, scanning the immediate area, but restricted by the narrow range of the headlamp.

Left. Right. Left. Right. His movement is frantic.

BUT SOMETHING IS OUT THERE.

Finally, he spots it in the trees: the BEAR CUB from before.

...BUT NO MAMA BEAR.

Understanding the implications, Ron spins back around to face Brett--and instantly goes WHITE.

Because about twenty feet behind Brett are TWO GLOWING EYES.

MAMA BEAR steps forward into Ron's light and HUFFS a bone-chilling warning.

Ron quickly turns off his headlamp, finding himself in the worst case scenario: separating mom from cub.

BRETT

What is it?

RON

(whispers)

Stay quiet. Don't move.

The CUB whimpers. Ron remains statuesque as he hears the cub approach and then pass by, back towards its mother.

After just a few moments that feel like eternity, the CUB and MAMA BEAR reunite. Seeing an opportunity, Ron takes advantage of the distraction and begins to step as quietly and careful as possible to better shield Brett...

CRACK--! HE SNAPS NICK'S FORGOTTEN RIFLE STICK WHICH SENDS MAMA BEAR ONTO HER HAUNCHES, TO A HEIGHT OF SEVEN FEET TALL.

Although frightened to his core, Ron is trained for this. He steadies his ground. Thinks only of Brett. Ready to do whatever it takes to keep him safe.

MAMA BEAR TURNS SIDEWAYS, SHOWING HER MASSIVE PROFILE. SHE ISSUES ANOTHER RESOUNDING HUFF--SIGNS OF A CHARGE.

But Ron has already made his choice. He takes a step forward... And throws his arms in the air, puffing out his chest in order to make himself as big as possible.

And then, HE SHOUTS BACK AT HER--As loud as humanely possible. Veins bulging. Primal.

He doesn't let up. Attacks like a barrage. Louder... more powerful... giving everything he's got...

But like all animals, he runs out of steam. And to his dismay, MAMA BEAR still stands.

Thus, as quickly as he found it, Ron's thin masquerade of confidence wafts away like a plume of smoke.

MAMA BEAR drops to all fours. Lowers her head.

Ron grounds himself. Prepares for the charge...

But...to his surprise...she doesn't make the move. Only stares. As if gauging Ron's next moves, as he does hers.

It's a full blown MEXICAN STANDOFF: Parent vs. Parent. Each waiting for the other to make their move.

But it doesn't come... And suddenly Ron realizes it's not him she's looking at...

...it's Brett.

Ron watches in utter disbelief as MAMA BEAR suddenly relaxes, ushering her cub back into the darkness...

And just like that--they're gone. Ron stands in silence, emotions at an all time high...

BRETT
What did she want?

RON
She was just protecting her cub.

BRETT
Like you.

Ron chokes up. Keeps it to himself.

BRETT (cont'd)
I'm tired.

Ron crouches and fixes the jacket on Brett's back, lifting his head so their eyes meet.

RON
I know you are, but you have to stay awake. Ok? Promise me you'll stay awake.

BRETT
...I promise.

Ron kisses Brett's head.

RON
Let's go home.

Ron spins around lifts Brett back onto his back. He TURNS ON his headlamp, and they continue back onto the trail...

EXT. CAMPSITE - NIGHT

Nick lies on top of his sleeping bag, laid out over the blackened spot where Brett's once was.

Dave-O remains standing over the remnants of the fire, looking more worn now. He lets ASH and DIRT slowly sift through his hands...

RUSTLING ON THE TREE LINE breaks his trance.

Dave-O snaps to attention. He immediately clocks Nick and quickly strides towards him...

When out of nowhere, an ASIAN MAN emerges from the darkness. The SOLO HIKER who witnessed the explosion from Staniford.

Both men stop at the sight of each other, neither sure what to do next. The Man looks at the burnt ground near Dave-O's feet, then at Nick...

Dave-O can only stare: *Who is this man?*

MOMENTS LATER

The other hiker, PAUL, 50's, helps Dave-O pack. He speaks calmly, a veteran of the wild.

PAUL
Left as soon as I saw the explosion.
Lit up the entire valley.
(then)
Knew what it was right away.

Dave-O replays the incident in his head.

DAVE-O
I don't even remember pouring the kerosene... His dad and I had just had words. I thought he wasn't--Fuck. But, look what I did...
(beat)
He must have tried to light it while I was gone.
(to Paul)
I left a child, by himself, with a box of matches. What kind of fucking idiot does that?

PAUL
Try not to blame yourself. Not yet at least.

PAUL (cont'd)
(re: Nick)
You're still in this.

Nick quietly rolls up his sleeping bag behind them. Simply going through the motion, lost in the aftermath of trauma.

Dave-O swallows. Sees a scared child, alone in the wild, without his father and brother...All because of him.

Suddenly, a wave of resolve washes over. Dave-O stands and swings both his and Ron's backpacks over each shoulder.

DAVE-O
How fast do you think we can get down?

PAUL
In the dark, with minimal breaks-- maybe five-six hours?

Nick arrives with his sleeping bag. Dave-O and Paul silently watch as he attaches it to his backpack and puts it on. As he reaches for Brett's backpack--

PAUL (cont'd)
I can carry that for you.

Nick gazes at his brother's bag, hesitant to give up the only piece of him he has left...

He checks with Dave-O. Weary to trust this stranger.

PAUL (cont'd)
Don't worry, I'll keep it safe.

Nick concedes.

PAUL (cont'd)
We should get going then. Night's only gonna get colder.

Dave-O and Nick regard the campsite one last time...Eager to leave it behind, but also not. A piece of them has been left here forever...

FROM ABOVE, they exit the campsite in single file line with Paul's HEADLAMP leading the way...

And when they're gone, COMPLETE DARKNESS.

EXT. FERNANDEZ TRAIL - NIGHT

A DUCK MARKER is blasted by the light from Ron's HEADLAMP.

His foot lands next to it, then disappears.

Ron powers on, drenched in sweat. Crippled forward under Brett's dead weight.

He makes a tight turn to circumnavigate a BOULDER and without warning, his HEADLIGHT FLICKERS--

ONCE--

TWICE--

THE LIGHT GOES OUT.

Caught off guard, Ron loses his footing and inadvertently BASHES his knee into a jagged log protruding from the earth.

He CRUMPLES on impact, launching Brett over his back and into a nasty tumble, unknowingly taking out the next DUCK MARKER with him.

With only the WHITE OF HIS EYES showing through a dirt-caked face, Ron shouts in horror:

RON
BRETT!!

He army crawls over, clenching his teeth in excruciating pain from his throbbing knee, and pulls Brett's limp body into his lap.

RON (cont'd)
Brett--Brett!

Brett opens his eyes slowly. Hardly any light left.

RON (cont'd)
(panting)
Oh god. I'm sorry. The headlight--
are you okay?

Brett remains shockingly stoic.

BRETT
Yeah.

Ron checks his knee. His hand comes away covered in blood.

RON

Fuck.

He takes a moment to collect himself while spotting his HEADLAMP an arms length away. He reaches for it, wincing in pain. Tries to turn it on...

RON (cont'd)

COME ON...

He beats it against the palm of his hand BUT IT'S DEAD.

RON (cont'd)

FUCK!!

He CHUCKS it into the forest. As soon as it lands, anger turns to despair. That light source was everything.

RON (cont'd)

Brett...

Brett cracks opens his eyes, revealing the BRIGHT FULL MOON reflected in his unwavering wide eyes.

Ron looks up at the celestial nightlight...It'll have to do.

EXT. UNKNOWN TRAIL - LATER

The terrain is much different. Large boulders. Steep drops. Not much of a trail at all.

Ron trudges forward, barely, limping in pain. Navigating only by the subtle glow of the moon above. It's far from efficient. His head is on a swivel, trying to identify any indication of the path he's supposed to take.

BUT THERE'S NOT A TRAIL BLAZE IN SIGHT.

And judging Ron's growing state of panic, it seems he hasn't seen one in a while...

EXT. UNKNOWN TRAIL - LATER

Further along. The terrain only getting more unforgivable. Ron's pace has been reduced to a pitiful hobble, barely able to support Brett's weight now.

RON

Are you awake?

Brett weakly squeezes Ron's collar.

RON (cont'd)
I need to set you down for a second.

He finds a TREE STUMP and sets Brett down gently. Then removes the WATER BOTTLE from his pocket, regarding the amount left. Between the two of them, maybe a sip each.

RON (cont'd)
Can you try to just take a little sip?

Brett takes enough to wet his tongue. He hands it back to Ron, who decides to cap it in case Brett wants more.

BRETT
I'm cold.

Ron takes off his outer shirt and layers it over Brett. With both his outer layers on Brett, he's now fully exposed to the cold. Every breath a frosty vapor.

RON
I'm going to check if there's a creek to fill up. I'll be right back. Yell if you need me, okay?

BRETT
I'm not going anywhere.

Ron kisses Brett's forehead--

MOMENTS LATER

Ron moves as fast as he can with his injured knee, continually checking back to keep an eye on Brett.

He painstakingly climbs a FALLEN LOG for a vantage point and searches for his real aim: the path home.

RON
C'mon...

But he doesn't find it. So he looks down, searching instead for any sign of mankind having traveled these parts. Footprints, trash, ANYTHING...

But still, nothing. It can only mean one thing...

He's lost the trail.

The realization hits like a ton of bricks.

RON (cont'd)
 ...We're lost.

Not ready to give up, Ron jumps off and onto another BOULDER nearby. He scans the area again... same results.

His mind races: *Should they double back and look for where they went astray? Or should they continue, directionless?*

Out here, there is no correct answer.

Only instinct.

BRETT

HUMS to himself, rocking slightly back-and-forth. Chills taking over his body. A BIRD cries overhead.

Brett peers up into the sky and sees the silhouette of TWO WHITE Doves crossing through the light of the moon.

His eyes widen in wonder...

He becomes drawn to the FULL MOON. BRIGHT AS A SPOTLIGHT.

And it begins to grow brighter...and brighter...

THE GREAT WHITE LIGHT BECKONING...

Then, suddenly:

RON (O.S.)
 Brett.

Brett snaps out of it. Ron is back.

BRETT
 Did you find it?

Ron hesitates...

RON
 I think so.

EXT. FERNANDEZ TRAIL - NIGHT

Dave-O, Nick, and Paul walk in silence... After a few moments, Paul stops walking. His HEADLAMP is fixated on the ground ahead of him. Nick and Dave-O pull up from behind.

DAVE-O
What is it?

Paul turns to Dave-O, switching his LIGHT TO RED.

PAUL
(nods)
Over there.

Dave-O steps forward and turns his light (WHITE) to illuminate a pool of RON'S BLOOD underneath the jagged log he clipped earlier. The destroyed DUCK MARKER is there too, only now it appears as a random scattering of rocks.

Dave-o turns back to Paul. No words are needed.

NICK
Is that blood?

DAVE-O
Let's keep moving.

PAUL
Up ahead.

Paul's HEADLAMP is on an I-MARKER carved ahead. They continue, down the *right* path...

EXT. UNKNOWN TRAIL - LATER

The terrain has flattened out again. Although a nice reprieve, Ron moves very slowly now, barely able to put one foot in front of the other. It's been close to twenty-four hours since he's slept. Ten since he's eaten anything. Two since he's drank anything. All on top of having now hiked close to fifteen miles in total, with half of that in freezing temperatures, and ninety pounds of dead weight on his back.

Without warning, Ron's KNEE BUCKLES--He doesn't go down, but stops walking right then and there, unable to go any further.

He finds a TREE several feet away and sets Brett down against the trunk. Painfully, Ron lowers himself to the ground and checks Brett's injuries, then his own. His knee is the size of a grapefruit. Tender to the touch. Pants caked with dried blood.

Ron hangs his head. Completely exhausted.

RON

Brett.

He doesn't answer.

Tears begin to well in Ron's eyes... The severity of the situation crashing in...

As his last bastion of strength finally disintegrates, he confesses to his son:

RON (cont'd)

I don't know where we are.

A WIDE VIEW OF THE FOREST: Thick silence... Only the gentle tune of nature's lullaby, extending for miles and miles.

Ron tries his best to quietly stifle the wave of overwhelming emotion.

BRETT

(barely audible)

Can I have more water?

RON

(back to action)

Of course.

He slides the WATER BOTTLE from his pocket: it will be the last sip he has to offer. He feeds it to Brett without hesitation.

Ron tries to stand but the pain too great. He falls back down, crying out in pain. And now utter frustration takes over as Ron breaks down completely.

He SLAMS his fists into the ground, over and over and over. Clenches dirt.

SHOUTS his pain into the heavens above.

Eventually he falls silent again as anger transitions to defeat. He scoots close to Brett and leans his head against Brett's shoulder. Begins to silently weep.

After a few moments, Brett lifts his head.

BRETT

Dad?

Ron leans up. Wipes his bubbling snot away.

RON
Yeah, son?

A long beat.

BRETT
...I'm sorry.

The statement knocks Ron's wind out.

And now the tears don't stop, the flood gates opened. He's completely broken. He failed his boy. A father's worst nightmare. He cradles Brett's face, hands shaking.

RON
You did nothing wrong. You hear me?

A beat.

BRETT
...I was just jealous.

RON
(shocked)
Jealous? Of what?

BRETT
You and Nick.

And now Ron realizes his real failure...and it's a worse feeling than that of the physical circumstances. He caresses Brett's hair and pulls him close.

FROM AFAR

Their shadowy forms in embrace are swallowed by the vastness of the wild.

MOMENTS LATER

Ron leans upright. Sniffs. Wipes his eyes.

BRETT (cont'd)
Are you hungry?

RON
(chortles through
tears)
I could eat a horse.

Brett tenderly reaches into the remnants of his pocket...

BRETT
Don't be mad.

...He pulls out TWO STARBURSTS: One ORANGE, one PINK.

BRETT (cont'd)
You can have the pink one.

Ron laughs out loud, half-crying. Loving his son more than ever in this moment.

He takes the PINK ONE and meticulously peels the wrapper off the melted candy inside, then does the same for Brett.

With both candies unsheathed, Brett sticks his ORANGE ONE out to cheers. Ron obliges. They both pop the Starbursts in their mouths and suck on them like foreign delicacies.

RON
Way better than a horse.

Brett laughs, triggering an uncontrollable coughing fit.

Ron grabs the water--it's Empty.

RON (cont'd)
Shit.

He leans Brett forward, and VERY gently pats his back to avoid hurting his burns.

RON (cont'd)
It's okay. You're okay. Wrong pipe.

Eventually, Brett regains control.

BRETT
You made me laugh.

RON
First time for everything.

Brett begins to laugh-cough again. Ron pulls his close.

RON (cont'd)
No--sorry.

Brett settles once again. He looks to his dad.

BRETT
Are we lost?

Ron stiffens. Playtime over. He swallows hard, unsure whether to be honest or tell the brutal truth...

But the answer is evident in Ron's eyes.

BRETT (cont'd)
At least we tried, right?

Ron regards his baby boy, unable to find his words, in awe of Brett's unfounded courage; wondering where the hell it came from.

RON
Hey-what happened with your Zelda game earlier?

BRETT
What do you mean?

RON
In the car. When you slammed your game down. Did you lose?

BRETT
Yeah--well...at first.

RON
What did you do?

BRETT
I kept trying.

RON
And...

BRETT
And then I beat him.

The answer Ron has needed for himself. Inspired beyond belief by his baby boy, he draws from Brett's strength, and makes a decision. Painstakingly, Ron climbs to his feet. Jumps on his good leg to find balance.

RON
I can't carry you anymore--

BRETT
It's okay, dad.

RON
--so you have to walk.

Brett looks at him in confusion.

RON (cont'd)
You said it yourself. Just like
Zelda, we're not gonna give up
either.

BRETT
Link is the fighter. Zelda is just
the princess.

RON
Perfect. Your mom always said I was a
princess. So get up and link hands
with mine.

BRETT
But Zelda is just a video game.

RON
Even better. That means we have an
advantage.

BRETT
What advantage?

Ron smiles.

RON
We have two players.

Brett grins. Ron extends his hand and connects it with
Brett's. He pulls Brett to his feet and gently into an
intimate embrace.

BRETT
I love you, dad.

RON
I love you too, son.

WIDE ANGLE on their embrace.

After a warm moment, Ron pulls back and looks at Brett.
Something catches his eye over Brett's shoulder--

Ron's face immediately goes slack. His eyes begin to
glisten, tears returning full force...

But these tears...

...are TEARS OF JOY.

And to Brett's surprise, Ron starts to laugh...

Because behind Brett, on the TREE TRUNK they've been leaning against this entire time, is the letter "i" carved into it's trunk.

The same RED FIR PINE Dave-O used to describe trail markers.

BRETT

What's wrong?

Ron happily turns Brett around by his shoulders and shows him the MYSTIC SYMBOL, clearer than day. A symbol of hope, triumph, and to them: home.

BRETT (cont'd)

You found it!

RON

No, Brett... WE found it.

EXT. RANGER STATION - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Ron's SUV and the HATCHBACK are still parked. BUD'S RANGER TRUCK is gone.

INT. SUV - SAME

THROUGH THE FROSTY WINDSHIELD: Ron and Brett materialize from the forest line.

INT. SUV - MOMENTS LATER

Ron opens the back door. He spins around and expertly lays Brett across the seat on his side in order to minimize skin contact and adjusts the jacket over his shoulders.

RON

You okay?

BRETT

Never been better.

Ron smiles and closes Brett's door. Brett watches in the REAR VIEW MIRROR as Ron pops the trunk, retrieving TWO WATER BOTTLES. He shuts the hatch and moves to the driver side, then opens his door and climbs in.

He hands one of the bottles back to Brett.

Brett slowly drinks while Ron chugs his own in one gulp. When he finishes, he chucks the empty plastic bottle on the passenger seat floor and fires up the cold engine.

EXT. SUV - SAME

The EXHAUST SPUTTERS--then ROARS to life, billowing like a chimney stack off the cold morning air.

INT. SUV (MOVING) - BEASORE RD - MOMENTS LATER

Ron squints his eyes and grips the steering wheel tight as the car bounces along uneven ground.

He turns on his HIGH BEAMS.

STEPS ON THE GAS.

EXT. BEASORE ROAD - NIGHT

Where the DOE and her TWO FAWNS were grazing the morning before. No signs of life now.

The SOUND of the SUV ROARING in the distance.

The BEAM from the HEADLIGHTS appears--

AND THE SUV FLIES BY.

INT. SUV (MOVING) - SAME

WIND WHIPS THROUGH THE SUV.

This time not to enjoy the outside air, but to keep Ron awake. His blood-shot eyes blink repeatedly.

He checks on Brett. Passed out, head lolling.

Ron reaches back and shakes him awake--

RON
Stay awake.

BRETT
It's starting to hurt again.

RON
Try not to think about it.

Ron checks his phone: ZERO CELL SERVICE.

BRETT

I want Mom.

Ron is caught off-guard...*Mom? What about dad?*

INT. HOME - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Janine and the "Ladies"--RANDI, BARBARA, and MICHELLE--are in the midst of riotous chit-chat each with a GLASS OF WINE in hand. Picked over food plates sit in front of them.

JANINE

All I'm saying is that you need to put his ass in check, girl.

(then)

Who needs another glass?

RANDI

(raises empty glass)

Uh huh, honey!

MICHELLE

(stands)

I'll help.

Janine and Michelle walk to the

KITCHEN

Where Janine uncorks another bottle of wine.

JANINE

So...

MICHELLE

So...

JANINE

What's up with you and Dave?

Michelle looks down. A sore subject.

MICHELLE

I don't know... I guess I overreacted.

JANINE

No such thing. He should have told you sooner.

MICHELLE

I was just caught completely off guard. For a second I thought my dream of us having a big happy family together was over.

JANINE

But...

MICHELLE

But I realized it's not, and now I feel like such a bitch for not understanding how hard this must be for *him*. All he's ever talked about it having kids. He loves your boys.

JANINE

And they love him.

MICHELLE

I love him.

JANINE

Then you should tell him that when he's back.

(then)

But until then, grab those glasses. Let's get back over there before Randi's drunk ass paints the floor red.

They head back to the living room...

EXT. GAS STATION - NIGHT

Bud's RANGER TRUCK is parked outside the gas station store. A NEON SIGN on the door buzzes "OPEN".

INT. STATION STORE - NIGHT

THE CASH REGISTER POPS OPEN--*DING!*

A DIRTY HAND slides a BEAT UP DOLLAR BILL in its slot.

Bud stands across from SPENCER, who's even greasier appearance seems to indicate he's still on the same shift. On the counter is a STEAMING CUP OF COFFEE, and a TWINKIE.

SPENCER

'Nother restless night?

BUD
Nah... Just like lookin' at ya.

Bud tweaks his neck and opens the Twinkie, handing it down to FRANK below. He gives the wrapper back to Spencer.

BUD (cont'd)
Frank says thanks.

Spencer leans over the counter.

SPENCER
Looks tired.

BUD
Don't we all.

Bud picks up his COFFEE and takes a piping hot sip as HEADLIGHTS appear in the window behind Spencer, BEAMING directly inside, and blinding Bud.

Spencer turns as Ron's SUV SCREECHES into the parking lot.

SPENCER
Asshole.

Bud becomes puzzled...He recognizes Ron's SUV.

INT. SUV - NIGHT

Ron unbuckles his seat belt.

RON
I'll be right back.

He opens the door--

BRETT
Don't leave me!

Ron looks back. Sees Brett upright, scared.

RON
I have to find out where the nearest hospital is.

He checks his cell phone: Finally, ONE BAR OF SERVICE.

BRETT
Please.

Ron DIALS...

RON
I'm calling mom. Talk to her while I
go inside, that way you're not alone.
Let me just tell her what's going on
first.

(points)
Keep drinking that water.

INT. HOME - FRONT ENTRANCE - DAY

The night has come to an end. Janine and Michelle carry
Randi to the door. Hugs and kisses all around.

MICHELLE is the last to go.

JANINE
You okay to drive?

MICHELLE
I hope so.

JANINE
Give me a ring when you get home.

They hug. Michelle steps out the door, but turns back--

MICHELLE
Let me know when you hear from the
boys?

JANINE
Of course. Ron said a few days.

MICHELLE
Thanks.

JANINE'S CELL PHONE RINGS back in the living room.

INT. HOME - LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

ON JANINE'S PHONE, CALLER ID: RON <3.

She answers, knowing a call this early can't be good.

JANINE
Ron?

INTERCUT WITH RON:

He doesn't beat around the bush.

RON
Janine, there's been an accident...

Janine's heart drops. Her worst nightmare coming to life.

RON (cont'd)
Brett's been severely burned. I'm
taking him to the hospital.

JANINE
Burned?! What do you mean?!

Michelle approaches, remaining respectful of Janine's space
as she uncontrollably shakes. The mystery too much.

RON
I don't have time to explain right
now. I'm going to give the phone to
Brett--Hold on.

Ron turns and stops. Bud is on the other side of Brett's
window looking through. He locks eyes with Ron...

JANINE (O.S.)
RON?!

RON
Sorry--here he his.

Ron opens the car door. Brett looks over.

RON (cont'd)
It's mom.

He hands Brett the phone and shuts the door.

JANINE
Brett, baby...can you hear me?

BRETT
Hi momma.

Janine bursts into tears.

JANINE
Hi, baby. Are you okay? Can you tell
me what happened?

BRETT
I caught on fire.

So innocently said. Janine's world drops into a tailspin.

BRETT (cont'd)
Can you come here?

JANINE
(choking back tears)
Of course, baby. I'm on my way. Where
are you?

EXT. GAS STATION - SAME

Ron briskly follows Bud to his Truck. Frank follows.

BUD
Nearest hospital's in Fresno. Bout a
forty-five minute drive. Maybe
fifteen by Medevac.

RON
You think they can send one?

BUD
We're about to find out.

Spencer stands outside the station store.

SPENCER
What's going on?

BUD
Grab us a bag of ice.

SPENCER
Please?

BUD
NOW, SPENCER!

SPENCER
Jesus.

Spencer heads inside.

They reach Bud's truck. He opens the door and Frank jumps
into the passenger seat as Bud grabs his SATELLITE PHONE
from the center cup holder. He DIALS the hospital...

Ron turns back to the SUV.

BUD
Go.

Ron nods. Runs back to Brett.

BUD (cont'd)
 (into phone)
 Hello, this is Bud Mader, National
 Park Services. I am requesting an
 immediate Medevac for a ten-year-old
 child with severe burns...

INT. SUV - SAME

Brett is still on the phone with Janine.

BRETT
 We saw a bear. She was protecting her
 cub... Like dad.

INT. HOME - LIVING ROOM - SAME

Janine has the phone tucked in her ear. Michelle helps her
 toss the necessities into her purse, preparing to leave.

JANINE
Wow, that's cool! Is your dad back
 yet?

Ron crosses in front of the windshield.

BRETT
 Yeah. Here he is.

JANINE
 Okay, give him the phone. I love you
 so much, Bretty. I'll see you soon,
 baby.

BRETT
 Love you too, momma.

Ron flings the driver door open and gets in. Brett hands him
 the phone.

RON
 Janine, you there?

JANINE
 Ron, what's going on?! Where are
 you?!

Bud arrives at his window.

RON
 Hold on.

JANINE

RON!!

Ron puts the phone down. Bud shakes his head: NO MEDEVAC.

RON

Fuck.

He puts the phone back to his ear.

RON (cont'd)

Janine?

Bud smiles at Brett. For a man who's seen pretty much everything in these mountains, this is definitely a first.

Meanwhile, Janine and Michelle are outside the house now, walking to JANINE'S CAR...

JANINE

Tell me what the fuck is going on!

RON

We're driving to Fresno Hospital. I need you to meet us there.

Janine looks at Michelle.

JANINE

Fresno Hospital, got it.

Michelle begins looking up directions.

JANINE (cont'd)

Ron, how bad is it? I need you to tell me the truth. Is Brett going to be okay?

Ron doesn't know. He sure doesn't look good. But he can't lie to her. This is *their* baby.

RON

...I don't know, Janine.

(beat)

It's bad.

Janine's legs almost give out.

RON (cont'd)

Dave and Nick are still on the mountain. I have the SUV.

JANINE
You left Nick?!

RON
I had to. Call Dave, leave him a message. They'll get it when they get down. I've gotta go.

JANINE
(hysterical)
Tell Brett I'm coming, Ron. Please tell our baby his momma's coming!

Ron tries to hold it in...

RON
I will. I love you.

He hangs up.

Janine leans against her car and SOBS.

BUD
(to Ron)
Follow me. Hospital knows we're coming.

Spencer arrives with the BAG OF ICE.

SPENCER
(snarky)
Your ice, Mr. Mader.

BUD
It's not for me.

Bud snatches it out of his hand and gives it to Ron, who proceeds to wrap it with a towel and place it on Brett, allowing Spencer to finally understand the situation.

RON
I know it's cold, but it should help with the pain.

BRETT
Okay.

Ron turns to Spencer.

RON
Thank you.

Spencer is speechless.

BUD
 (to Ron)
 Ready?

RON
 Let's go.

Bud taps the roof of Ron's SUV. Runs to his TRUCK. Ron buckles his seat belt and STARTS THE ENGINE.

EXT. GAS STATION - MOMENTS LATER

Ron and Bud's vehicles peel out of the parking lot and are gone within seconds.

We're left with Spencer, slack-jawed. Behind him, the neon sign still buzzes "OPEN".

INT. RON'S SUV (MOVING) - NIGHT

Pedal to the medal, tailing Bud's truck.

Ron hears the BAG OF ICE slip to the floor. He looks over-- Brett is out cold.

He goes to shake him awake, but STOPS. Sees Brett's chest slowly drawing breath. It draws Ron into a trance... The peacefulness of sleep...Knows how bad he could use it himself right now.

But reality crashes back in when a BLARING CAR HORN informs him that he's veered into oncoming traffic.

Ron jerks back into his lane, instantly alert. He refocuses, the final stretch ahead.

He rolls down the windows, turns the stereo on MAX VOLUME, and grips the steering wheel tight with both hands.

THEN...A SECOND THOUGHT--

He reaches and HOLDS BRETT'S LIMP HAND.

Much better...

EXT. CA-41 SOUTH - SAME

FROM ABOVE, tracking Bud's truck and Ron's SUV as they tear down the highway...

THE MOUNTAINS IN DARKNESS BEHIND THEM.

MORNING LIGHT RISING OVER THE DESERT IN FRONT.

EXT. SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS (AERIAL) - PREDAWN

AS RON'S STEREO MUSIC CONTINUES (until noted)...

A stunning shot of the Sierra Nevadas. The SUNRISE just above the ridgeline. A gradient of muted colors through the morning haze.

EXT. CAMPSITE - SAME

The burnt remains of the incident...

EXT. MEADOW - SAME

MORNING DEW, glistening on emerald grass...

EXT. FERNANDEZ TRAIL - SAME

The "i" TRAILBLAZE engraved in the RED FIR PINE. FRESH SAP working to close its wound...

EXT. RANGER STATION - PARKING LOT - SAME

The parking lot, now coated in morning fog, empty... Until Paul, Nick, and Dave-O enter from the forest looking worse for wear, but much better than Ron and Brett had been.

Dave-O's eyes immediately go to the empty parking spots where Ron's SUV and Bud's truck had been. Only Paul's HATCHBACK SUBURU remains.

He feels something. Looks down--Nick is holding his hand.

EXT. JANINE'S CAR (MOVING) - SAME

Janine's TAILLIGHTS FLASH RED. Her car SWERVES around a much slower moving vehicle.

INT. JANINE'S CAR - CA-99 NORTH - SAME

Janine white knuckles the steering wheel, the world outside passing in a blur. Her red eyes are tight on the road.

Her face is a mess: Dried tears on her cheeks. Smudged eyeliner. But she's on a mission, totally locked in.

INT. RON'S SUV (MOVING) - SAME

Ron swallows hard. Face contorted in emotional pain.

The outcome he hasn't known, soon to be answered...

EXT. FRESNO COMMUNITY HOSPITAL - PARKING LOT - MORNING

(CUT MUSIC) MEDICAL STAFF and HOSPITAL PATRONS mill about. It's quiet... until the *SCREECHING* of Bud's truck and Ron's SUV as they skid to a halt in front of the hospital doors.

INT. RON'S SUV - DAY

Ron unbuckles his seat belt and flies out of the car.

The back door OPENS--Brett weakly lifts his head. Ron unbuckles his seat and wraps Brett's arms around his neck, operating the same way he had been doing it all night, only now with expertise.

EXT. RON'S SUV - SAME

They're instantly swarmed by MEDICAL STAFF. A tornado of chaos. People yelling, hands grabbing. Sensory overload.

Ron hugs Brett tight, disoriented by the overwhelming commotion around him compared to the quiet forest.

A NURSE rushes up and takes the jacket off Brett's back, revealing the full intensity of the burns in morning light.

A STRETCHER arrives and nurses motion for Ron to hand Brett over. He pulls back and looks into Brett's eyes. Doesn't want to let go after all they've been through together...

...But he has to...

And for the first time since the accident, Ron is no longer in control of the situation.

He stands motionless, watching as Brett is ripped from his arms and placed on the stretcher.

Bud's hand lands on his shoulder.

BUD
Come on, let's get you cleaned up.

Ron looks down at himself. Hands stained with dirt. Pants caked in dried blood. Completely tattered.

Bud leads him inside, sticking close to Brett all the way.

INT. JANINE'S CAR (MOVING) - DAY

Janine's phone RATTLES the CUP HOLDER. She hastily picks it up, but nerves lend to shaky hands and it falls by Michelle's feet.

Michelle bends over to pick it up and is greeted not by Ron's CALLER ID, but Dave-O's.

She puts it on SPEAKER PHONE. Holds it out for Janine.

JANINE
Dave?! Where are you? Ron said you
we're still on the mountain.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. PAUL'S HATCHBACK (MOVING) - SAME

Dave-O rides shotgun, a bucket of nerves.

DAVE-O
We couldn't wait. I got your message.
I'm in the car with Nick.

JANINE
Oh thank god. Who's car are you in?

DAVE-O
Paul's--Another hiker, giving us a
lift. We're almost there. How far are
you?

JANINE
About an hour. Can I talk to Nick?

Dave looks into the backseat. He's passed out.

DAVE-O
He's asleep. I can wake him if you
want.

JANINE

No--as long as he's okay, let him rest.

(relieved)

Thank you for looking out for him, Dave. I'm sure you're both exhausted.

Dave-O doesn't reply, just watches Nick.

JANINE (cont'd)

Dave...what happened up there?

Tears begin to well in his eyes...

DAVE-O

...It was me, Janine.

Janine and Michelle exchange confused looks.

DAVE-O (cont'd)

This is all my fault.

INT. HOSPITAL BATHROOM - LATER

CLEAN WATER POURS OUT OF A FAUCET...AND DIRTY BLOOD WATER SPIRALS DOWN THE DRAIN.

Ron stares at himself in the mirror, hardly recognizing the hardened face that looks back at him. The dirt. The tired lines. The bloodshot eyes. These things apart of him now. A reminder. And in a weird way, a badge of honor.

Suddenly, the OVERHEAD LIGHTS flicker. Ron peers up--

They FLICKER again, and REMAIN ON. He smirks.

THE BATHROOM DOOR OPENS.

Ron quickly returns his attention back to the sink as a man enters and uses the URINAL. He WETS a PAPER TOWEL and raises his foot onto the sink. Wipes DRIED BLOOD from underneath his FRESHLY BANDAGED KNEE.

The other man arrives at the sink next to Ron. RACK FOCUS: It's PAUL. As he washes his hands, Ron's BANDAGED KNEE catches his eye.

PAUL

That don't look fun.

He notices Ron's battered hiking attire.

PAUL (cont'd)
You come down from the mountains?

RON
Yeah.

PAUL
Mmm...Mountain biking?

RON
Hiking.

PAUL
Geez. What trail? Gotta make sure I
avoid that one.

Ron finishes. He rolls his pant leg back down and places his foot back onto the ground. Tosses the towel in the trash.

RON
Fernandez to Lady Lakes.

Paul's face drops.

RON (cont'd)
Take care.

Ron exits the bathroom as Paul's recognition hits hard.

EXT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

As Ron walks toward the waiting room doors... Paul emerges from the bathroom in the background, in awe at the sight of Ron as he pushes through DOUBLE DOORS...

INT. WAITING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

...and steps into the waiting room with his head down.

NICK (O.S.)
Dad!

Ron looks up as Nick flings himself into Ron's arms. He can't believe it. Over Nick's shoulder he sees Dave-O, mid-conversation with Bud. Their eyes meet...

And understanding what he did to get them there so fast, Ron gives Dave-O the subtlest of nods - "Thank you".

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Nick stands over Brett, laying on a STRETCHER. His body completely wrapped in bandages.

NICK

You look like a mummy.

Brett lightly punches Nick's stomach. Nick laughs.

Near the door, Ron and Dave-O speak with a DOCTOR.

DOCTOR

We were able to remove as much of the dead tissue as possible, but the burns on his chest are too severe for treatment here at this facility.

RON

So where do we go?

DOCTOR

A Medevac is on its way to transfer him to Grossman Burn Center in Los Angeles, where he will most likely undergo immediate skin graft surgery.

RON

Oh, so now we're able get a Medevac? Why the hell couldn't they send one when we asked two hours ago?

DOCTOR

Because you called this hospital, and we don't have a Medevac. That, and we didn't know the extent of your son's injuries to know if it was viable to call one in from somewhere else.

Ron looks over to Brett, not wanting to hear this.

The Doctor tries a different approach:

DOCTOR (cont'd)

You *had* to come here.

(Ron returns his attention)

When skin tissue is significantly burned, your body redistributes fluids to the injured area as a healing mechanism. But, because the tissue is damaged, these fluids begin to leak.

DOCTOR (cont'd)
 And since your son suffered severe burns all over his body, he also experienced a severe loss of these essential fluids.

(Ron, understanding)
 If you had gotten here any later, he might not have made it.

(then)
 ...You saved your son's life.

Ron softens upon these words. He looks to Brett.

DOCTOR (cont'd)
 The Medevac will be here in the next twenty minutes. We'll begin prepping.

RON
 Thank you, doctor.

The Doctor leaves.

RON (cont'd)
 (to Dave-O)
 I need to call Janine.

DAVE-O
 Go for it...I've got these two rascals.

Ron gives Dave-O a brotherly hug.

RON
 I know you do.

Ron exits... Dave-O walks over to Brett.

DAVE-O
 Hey, kid.

BRETT
 Hey, man.

NICK
 (to Dave-O)
 Where'd my dad go?

DAVE-O
 Outside to call your mom.

NICK
 I'm gonna get a snack. Brett smells like burnt hair.

They laugh. Nick exits, leaving Dave-O and Brett alone.

DAVE-O
Brett, if I could just--I mean--you
have no idea how sorry I am. If I
could trade places with you--

BRETT
It's okay, Uncle Dave.

DAVE-O
You sure--? You can let me have it,
you know. Cuss me out, I don't care.
I deserve it.

Brett laughs.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
But seriously...If there's anything
you want: video games, toys...
Playboys... you let me know.

Brett smiles.

DAVE-O (cont'd)
But if it's the Playboys, I just
gotta make sure it's okay with your
dad first.

BRETT
Did dad tell you we saw mama bear and
her cub again?

DAVE-O
No. He must of forgot.

BRETT
Wanna hear what he did?

DAVE-O
If he pissed himself...yes.

Brett begins to tell Dave-O the story...

EXT. HOSPITAL - DAY

Ron exits the hospital, phone against his ear.

JANINE (O.S.)
Ron!

He looks up as Janine throws her arms around him. Michelle, gives an awkward wave from behind, which Ron happily returns.

JANINE
Where's Brett?

RON
He has a private room inside. A Medevac is going to transfer him to Grossman Burn Center in LA.

JANINE
Why can't they keep him here?!

RON
He needs surgery from a burn specialist as soon as possible. Grossman is the best of the best.
(off Janine)
...He's going to be okay, Janine.

A wave of relief.

JANINE
I want to see him.

Ron nods.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Ron holds the door and lets Janine step inside. Dave-O backs away from a stretcher to reveal Brett.

BRETT
Hi, momma.

Janine gushes. She runs across the room and embraces Brett. Everyone watches as mother and son reunite. Then Dave-O notices Michelle in the doorway. He's surprised to see her, but, after everything, happy to see her.

EXT. HOSPITAL - DAY

HELICOPTER BLADES CHOP AIR.

Ron, Janine, and Nick walk alongside Brett as he's wheeled toward the MEDEVAC...

JANINE
 (shouting over noise)
 First helicopter ride, are you
 excited?

Brett responds with TWO BANDAGED THUMBS UP.

They reach the helicopter. The FLIGHT CREW pulls the
 stretcher inside.

CREW MEMBER
 (yelling over noise)
 We can take one of you!

RON
 (yelling over noise)
 What?

CREW MEMBER
 (cups hands)
 Only one of you can come with.

Ron looks to Janine. She puts her arm around Nick. Signals
 for Ron to board. It's only right.

Ron pridefully accepts. He's handed a HEADSET and is shown
 his seat.

As he secures himself, the HELICOPTER LIFTS OFF.

Janine and Nick step back, watching it go.

Behind them, Dave-O and Michelle do the same. He feels
 something and looks down. Michelle is holding his hand. He
 looks at her. At her beautiful smile. And he smiles.

From the opposite side of the parking lot, Bud and Paul
 stand together drinking COFFEE out of PAPER CUPS. At their
 feet, Frank licks a TWINKIE WRAPPER, completely unfazed by
 the blaring helicopter noise.

INT. MEDEVAC - SAME

As the helicopter rises higher and higher Ron and Brett
 stare at each other, but say nothing. Their eyes say it all.

They made the journey through hell and back.

And through the fire, a new bond has been forged. Their
 relationship forever strengthened.

The helicopter TURNS--

And in the background, the SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS come into view...

But Brett and Ron don't even notice.

THE END.