

INTO THE TREES

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. FOREST TRAIL - MORNING

Rays of sunlight filter through the canopy of pine needles above, illuminating patches of the rocky hiking trail below.

The forest is a picture of serenity, immersed in the peaceful sounds of nature -- Birds chirping, insects buzzing and wind through the trees.

A faint conversation between man and woman increases in volume, as a family of three crest a small rise and come into view--

Your average husband and wife duo, mid-30s, and their nine-year-old daughter. The young girl is walking intently, almost robotically, about twenty feet ahead of her parents.

The blonde-haired, blue-eyed daughter, MADELINE DUNN, holds a small digital camera carefully in front of her chest, as though it were made of eggshell. Beneath her bright red hat, her eyes never leave the camera as she walks.

Her father, RYAN DUNN and mother, JACKIE DUNN, so engrossed in their conversation, don't take much notice when Madeline's twenty foot lead becomes thirty...

JACKIE

...Thought we were in for a rough morning -- Did Madeline seem anxious to you?

Ryan shrugs off the question, then--

RYAN

I'm sure she's fine.

Jackie nods, unconvinced.

Ryan looks up into the sky as his walking slows - Dark clouds are building.

RYAN (CONT'D)

Hey, we'd better pick up the pace before this storm hits.

Jackie swings her arm back and slaps her husband's ass.

JACKIE

Well then, giddy-up.

Ryan raises his eyebrows at his wife and Jackie nods toward the path ahead, her playful expression reads get-going.

Ryan's smile then begins to straighten as he notices Madeline's growing distance from them.

Jackie turns her head to follow Ryan's gaze.

RYAN

Madeline. Stop. You're getting too far ahead.

Madeline stops in her tracks. She draws her camera into her chest tightly and closes her eyes. Madeline has autism -- Her inability to use words and odd mannerisms reflect this.

She lets out a guttural screech as she begins to thump her forehead with her fist.

RYAN (CONT'D)

Be calm, Madeline. We'll get there.

Jackie gently places her hand on Ryan's arm.

JACKIE

She's showing some independence -- They keep telling us to encourage that.

Ryan considers for a brief moment, then gives a why-not shrug.

RYAN

Okay you can go on ahead, Madeline. But I want you to stay at least ten steps away from the water. We'll be right behind you.

Madeline opens her eyes and she recommences her intent walk.

JACKIE

Madeline, did you hear Dad's instructions?

Madeline stops and closes her eyes, rocking back and forth.

RYAN

Good girl. Okay, go for it.

Madeline takes off once more and begins to disappear down behind the rise in the path.

Ryan smiles at Jackie and they too continue on for several feet.

Ryan looks over to Jackie, about to speak, when he notices she has stopped walking.

RYAN (CONT'D)  
What's up?

Jackie stares off into the forest. Ryan attempts to move his face into her field of vision.

RYAN (CONT'D)  
Jackie?

Jackie holds up a finger to silence him -- She is listening hard.

JACKIE  
You hear that?

Ryan pricks up his ears, looks around, then back to Jackie.

The forest *is* oddly silent... The previous sounds of nature are now completely muted. The couple's words almost echo around them in the vacuum of silence.

RYAN  
Weird... I don't hear anything.  
Like *literally* nothing.

Jackie stares at Ryan, her concern deepening. Her footsteps towards him make no sound.

JACKIE  
Yeah, it's completely silent.

Jackie's eyes widen. Each audible breath the couple take between words seems to be magnified in the silence.

JACKIE (CONT'D)  
Something doesn't feel right.

Ryan looks up toward the trail.

RYAN  
Hey, Madeline!?

A deer suddenly bounds toward them from the direction of the lake... and Madeline. It seems to be in a panic as it darts past them and off into the forest, yet it too makes no sound.

Jackie looks up at the trail ahead of them as an inordinate amount of autumn leaves sprinkle down from the tree tops.

JACKIE  
Madeline!

Both parents break out into a dead sprint, up over the rise and down the other side.

EXT. FOREST LAKE - MORNING

A beautiful lake vista opens up before them. The trail leading down to the lake is silent. Empty.

The sounds of the forest begins to filter back into reality...

Ryan and Jackie are in near-hysterics when they stop running, huffing and puffing. They frantically turn in circles, scanning the area.

RYAN JACKIE  
Madeline! Madeline!

There is no answer...

Ryan heads toward the shore and looks out over the water. The lake is calm and serene.

RYAN (CONT'D)  
Madeline! I need you to come here!

No answer.

Jackie searches the forest on either side of the track -- She finds no trace. Tears begin to well in her eyes.

JACKIE  
Madeline!

INT. PSYCHIATRIST'S OFFICE - MORNING

The office is small, warm and inviting -- Rich wooden furniture, potted plants, and a long couch.

Stretched out on the couch is VANESSA "VAN" IDE, early-40s, hair cropped, short and tight. Van is spry with a calculating intelligence behind her eyes. She carries an air of resilience through some heavy emotional baggage.

Van has her eyes closed in a hypnotic regression. She is breathing fast and her eyes twitch -- Whatever she is reliving is not pleasant.

The psychiatrist sitting in a leather chair across from Van, clutching a pen and writing pad is DOCTOR GRAY -- Mid-50s with smokey-gray hair and icy-blue eyes.

DOCTOR GRAY

Van, you're still safe. Tell me  
what you see now.

INT. VAN'S CAR - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Van is behind the wheel, yet this is an earlier time in her life. She's younger, in her late 30s, and has long hair tied back in a ponytail. Her seatbelt reaches around her swollen, pregnant belly -- Determination burns within her eyes.

One hand has a white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel and the other has a cellphone pressed to her ear.

Faint ringing is heard through Van's phone. She looks up sharply into the headlights, glaring through the rearview mirror's reflection...

The car behind her is closing the gap...

Van presses her foot down onto the gas pedal, sinking it almost to the floor.

Van's phone call is suddenly answered and Van's expression shows momentary relief.

VAN

Nick!

NICK (O.S.)

Van! Where are--

VAN

Nick, they found me and... Oh  
shit...

Van glances up once again into the rearview mirror, the lights behind her grow in intensity. Her heart sinks...

INT. PSYCHIATRIST'S OFFICE - MORNING

Van stiffens in distress, still under the hypnotic spell.

VAN

Oh shit...

DOCTOR GRAY

Van, you see the lights in the  
mirror, what happens next?

INT. VAN'S CAR - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Van braces for impact and the pursuing car SLAMS into her from behind.

Her body lurches forward and she drops the phone into the footwell -- Nick can be heard shouting on the other end.

Van struggles to regain control of the car as it swerves violently, fish-tailing across the slick road.

The car hits a dip in the road and flips, rolling down over a steep embankment.

Still belted into her seat, Van is violently tossed about to the sounds of smashing glass, aluminum crunching... then a splash... The car is upside-down... and slowly sinking.

Van hangs from her seatbelt, unconscious. Blood-soaked hair is draped across her face.

Water pours in around her, filling the car as she regains consciousness.

INT. PSYCHIATRIST'S OFFICE - MORNING

Van recoils into the corner of the couch, her eyes remain closed.

VAN

I can't breath, I can't breath.

DOCTOR GRAY

You can breath just fine, Van.  
You're nice and calm. Let's keep  
going.

Van begins to cry amid near hyperventilation.

Doctor Gray sits forward, a hint of concern grows on his face.

DOCTOR GRAY (CONT'D)

Van, you're quite safe. Only  
watching, not experiencing.  
Continue with what you see.

INT. VAN'S CAR - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Van cries out in agony, the steering wheel has collapsed into her belly.

She is pinned. Water rising below her head...

Van presses the button to her seatbelt and thankfully hears the CLICK of its release.

She shoves against the wheel, attempting to slide herself free -- The excruciating pain involved with every inch of movement causes Van to let loose a bloodcurdling scream.

Her teeth are bared and white-hot tears stream down her face as Van pushes harder again.

Determination is clear in her expression as water engulfs her head... then shoulders...

She thrashes beneath the surface of the water...

DOCTOR GRAY (O.S.)  
One, two, three, wide awake.

INT. PSYCHIATRIST'S OFFICE - MORNING

Van shoots up to a seated position on a couch. She breathes heavily and although more shocked than upset, she wipes tears from her cheeks.

Doctor Gray is sitting forward with a concerned expression.

Van swings her legs over the edge of the couch and buries her face into the palms of her hands.

DOCTOR GRAY  
Van, you're back. This is the  
closest we've gotten to that  
moment. How do you feel?

As she attempts to steady her shaky breath, Van squeezes her eyes shut while fiddling with a BRACELET on her wrist--

A braid of thin, brown leather with a flat loop of silver attached. Embossed on the piece of silver is a SMALL HAND, with a date inscribed underneath.

DOCTOR GRAY (CONT'D)  
Reliving the event allows you to  
finally grieve, and release all  
that pain you're carrying.

Van opens her eyes and glares at the doctor, then stands abruptly.



VAN

That *pain* is how I remember... So maybe I'm okay with not being okay.

Doctor Gray's eyes narrow as he regards Van, then he calmly nods.

Van holds his gaze.

DOCTOR GRAY

Let's circle back to that in our next session, shall we?

He reaches over to his desk and picks up a leather-bound planner. The doctor flicks through pages until he finds what he's looking for.

DOCTOR GRAY (CONT'D)

Our next session is on the--

VAN

Actually, Doctor Gray... I think I'm done with all of this.

Van picks up her jacket and satchel from the back of the couch. Her movements are hurried.

DOCTOR GRAY

Vanessa, you've come so far in our time togeth--

Van turns abruptly towards Doctor Gray.

VAN

Look, I promised a friend that I'd do this for at least a year, and I've done that. So...

DOCTOR GRAY

Vanessa... Van. I must urge you to reconsider--

Van holds up her hand to the older man.

VAN

Thank you for trying, Doctor. I appreciate it.

Doctor Gray begins to say something then thinks better, as Van exits the room.

EXT. PARK - DAY

Green grass, a sparkling pond, people out and about enjoying the brisk Autumn day.

GLENN, mid-50s, is a bespectacled, pudgy man in a business suit. He sits on a park bench, anxious and fidgeting. Dark circles under his eyes.

His eyes suddenly lock onto Van as she walks toward him.

She waves a hand at him.

Glenn exhales, stands and takes a few steps toward Van, hand outstretched.

Van takes his hand as Glenn searches her face for any sign of news.

VAN

You haven't slept...

GLENN

Miss Ide, I'm a wreck. Please tell me you have news...

Van sits down on the bench, gesturing for Glenn to follow suit. He does, but literally on the edge of his seat.

VAN

Okay, Mister Forester--

GLENN

Glenn, please.

VAN

Glenn. I have news.

Van digs into her satchel and retrieves her phone. She unlocks the screen and pauses, looking intently at the poor man in front of her.

VAN (CONT'D)

Unfortunately, it's not good...

Glenn lets out an involuntary whine.

VAN (CONT'D)

Your suspicions were correct.

Glenn takes a deep, yet shaky breath and finds his resolve.

GLENN

Show me...

Van hands him her phone, opened to the PHOTOS APP and Glenn begins to swipe through a series of images:

- *A blonde woman in the passenger seat of a car with a good-looking man next to her in the driver's seat.*

- *They smile.*

- *He squeezes her breast.*

- *She closes her eyes in ecstasy.*

- *She reaches over to his lap.*

- *She lowers her head down...*

Glenn has had enough -- He abruptly hands back the phone, staring at the ground. His bottom lip wavers and his voice breaks--

GLENN (CONT'D)

I love her so much...

Van sighs, looking down at her bracelet and she turns the embossed silver loop around the twist of brown leather.

VAN

Sometimes love isn't worth the fall  
it sets you up for...

Van looks back up at Glenn...

VAN (CONT'D)

I'm sorry... Look, now you know,  
right? Knowledge is power. If you  
file for divorce, her right to  
alimony--

Glenn stands suddenly, still staring at the ground. His eyes are wet with tears, yet he has a grip on it.

GLENN

I don't want to think about that  
right now.

Van gives him an understanding nod. Glenn wipes his eyes and looks down at her.

GLENN (CONT'D)

Miss Ide--

VAN

You can call me Van.

Glenn nods.

GLENN

Saying thank you right now doesn't feel appropriate, but... I appreciate your hard work. Expect payment by the end of the day.

Van gives him her best I'm-sorry smile and Glenn starts to walk away.

VAN

Glenn?

Glenn turns back to Van.

VAN (CONT'D)

Just take some time to think it over before you agree to anything, okay?

Glenn gives a subtle nod and continues on.

Van slides her phone back into her satchel.

She takes a moment to stare into the pond in front of her -- A young boy walking with his mother throws a rock into the water, stirring up the calm surface...

EXT. FOREST LAKE - DAY

Ripples of water lap the shoreline as park rangers launch a small boat loaded with searchers.

Officials and volunteers scour the area around the lake -- The quiet now alive with people searching for a little girl.

Ryan and Jackie Dunn wait to speak with the head park ranger.

The ranger, AUGUST WOODBRIDGE -- Mid-50s with auburn hair. He is a burly and mustachioed man's-man. His cap and shirt bear the logo of the National Parks service.

August speaks quietly with two other rangers before turning and approaching the visibly upset parents.

AUGUST

Okay, Mr and Mrs Dunn, nothing yet, but we have our canine unit on the way and the sheriff is pulling together resources as we speak. We *will* find your daughter.

(MORE)

AUGUST (CONT'D)

Kids wander off all the time --  
You'd be surprised how far they  
get... But, she's gonna be fine.  
Now you said she's autistic?

JACKIE

She has autism, yes. She doesn't  
speak, but she's able to  
communicate. In her own way.

AUGUST

Okay... Do you believe that she may  
have tried to go into the water? To  
swim maybe?

JACKIE

God no, Madeline is terrified of  
water; she can't swim. Look, she'd  
never just wander off -- Her life  
revolves around rules and  
structure.

August brushes his mustache with his finger as he thinks. He  
pauses briefly to look at both parents before he speaks his  
next carefully chosen words--

AUGUST

You folks, ah... See or hear  
anything before you lost sight of  
your daughter?

Ryan and Jackie look at each other.

JACKIE

Actually, we heard nothing. Like, I  
mean literal dead-silence... Look,  
one minute she was in front of us,  
the next she was gone -- That's  
just not possible.

August looks the parents over again, when he is approached by  
a younger ranger.

YOUNG RANGER

Hey August, FBI just called,  
they're sending a guy in. How in  
the hell'd they get wind of this so  
f--

August scowls at the young ranger and holds up a hand for him  
to stop. He then turns apprehensively around to the parents,  
who are now pale and wide-eyed.

RYAN

The FBI?

JACKIE

Is that normal?

AUGUST

Very normal. The FBI will get involved if a missing persons case involves a child. This is a good thing -- More people looking... You know?

Jackie shoots August uncertain look.

FEMALE RANGER (O.S.)

August! Hey August! Come take a look!

August, Ryan and Jackie run over to where the female ranger is; about fifty feet away from the edge of the lake, beneath a pine tree.

She points up into the tree, to a high branch about ten feet up -- A small digital camera hangs from the branch, gently swinging.

JACKIE

Oh my god...

Jackie covers her mouth with both hands.

Ryan puts his hands on his head while attempting to steady his shaky breathing.

Storm clouds roll overhead, now darkening the sky.

JACKIE (CONT'D)

That's Madeline's... How would it get up there?!

August looks around to the female ranger, slightly more defeated.

AUGUST

Better get a baggie... Wait, no... Let the FBI get it down.

The female ranger gives him a curious look.

Thunder rumbles from above the forest canopy and droplets of rain begin to fall...

INT. AQUATIC CENTER POOL - AFTERNOON

The glow of the setting sun blazes through the aquatic center windows, giving the pool water an orange hue. Only a few patrons occupy the lanes, swimming laps--

One of them is Van.

As the other swimmers casually turn their arms over, plodding through the water, Van pushes herself aggressively -- Charging from one end to the other, her wake washing over an elderly man that she passes.

She makes it to the end of her current lap and flops her arms over the edge of the pool, exhausted.

Van removes her swim goggles as her chest heaves in and out; she has pushed herself to the brink.

Van stares at herself in the mirrored finish of her goggles for a beat...

She then abruptly submerges herself underwater... The world beneath the surface is calm and quiet...

Her eyes widen and her chest spasms as her lungs beg for air, but she holds it, squeezing her eyes shut tight...

Beat...

A hand suddenly grabs her arm and yanks her up -- As Van's head breaks the surface she gasps uncontrollably, coughing and spluttering.

The elderly man who was sharing her lane, still holds her arm and looks at Van with no small amount of concern.

ELDERLY MAN

You okay, miss? Looked like you were in trouble.

Van catches her breath enough to speak--

VAN

Yes, I'm... Thank you. I was just... looking for something.

She launches herself up and out of the pool and makes a hasty retreat.

INT. GYM LOCKER ROOMS - AFTERNOON

Now dressed in jeans and a shirt, Van packs her wet swimming gear into a backpack.

Behind her, a television mounted in the corner of the room plays the news -- The current story concerns the yet-unsuccessful search for a little girl named Madeline, missing in a Colorado forest.

The footage shows search and rescue teams scouring the area as rain drenches the scene.

Van pauses briefly to watch the report.

She then zips up her backpack and exits the locker room.

EXT. FOREST LAKE - DUSK

The accumulating rainclouds begin to blot out the pale, orange glow of the remaining sunlight on the horizon. The previously calm surface of the lake now erupting with raindrops. Thunder rumbles.

A handful of searchers scour the forest area on either side of the dirt track.

Lightning lights up the sky.

August makes his way down to the water's edge to join the Search and Rescue canine unit, consisting of two female handlers and their dogs.

The dogs are lying down with all four paws on the ground, their heads down between front paws as they whine incessantly. Their handlers attempt to rouse them.

AUGUST

God damn... Nothing huh?

YOUNG HANDLER

It's really odd -- They had the trail... And it's like it just stops cold, right around here.

(beat)

I've never seen 'em just stop like this.

The younger handler looks up at the older handler, who is now silently staring out into the forest, a disturbed expression on her face.



The older woman, MARGARET, late 50s with a long, grey braid down her back. Native American blood is evident in her features.

YOUNG HANDLER (CONT'D)  
You think something has them  
spooked, Margaret?

Margaret stares into the forest, an unease in her expression.

MARGARET  
Seems like it.

As the young handler focuses her attention back to her dog, Margaret shoots August a knowing look of concern.

August gives Margaret his version of this same look--

This isn't their first rodeo...

August removes his hat and runs his fingers through his thinning hair.

AUGUST  
God damn, if we weren't having low  
numbers before, this oughta  
definitely keep people away...

MARGARET  
August, that's so callous.

August sneers at Margaret and marches back up the path in a huff. Margaret looks back into the darkening forest, a chill runs up her spine.

MARGARET (CONT'D)  
August...

August begrudgingly turns back to Margaret.

MARGARET (CONT'D)  
We need to tell people.

August glares at Margaret for a beat...

AUGUST  
Margaret, I don't know what you're  
talking about.

He replaces his hat, then simply turns and heads back up the path.

The searchers in the surrounding forest begin to switch on their headlamps and flashlights as they head deeper into the forest.

EXT. FOREST TRAIL - DUSK

The pitter-patter of the beginning rainfall, through the leaves above, fills the air.

August strides along the empty path, still fuming.

The sounds of searchers fades away behind him and the forest is suddenly very quiet indeed... August is alone in a rapidly darkening and silent forest.

A coyote wails suddenly, somewhere off in the distance--

August stops in his tracks as the hair on the back of his neck stands up. He stares back in the direction of the sound, mustache twitching.

He continues on for another few steps, when the coyote's wail cuts through the silence again. This time, much closer...

August pulls up again, turns and squints into the darkness. His breathing is heavy, unnerved.

August holds his position for a beat... Nothing. Silence.

When August continues along the trail once more, it is at a solid clip.

EXT. FOREST TRAILHEAD PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Rain now mercilessly pours down, the trees offer little in the way of respite.

Emergency vehicles and their occupants fill the area around the trailhead -- Tired police and rescue workers in orange-jumpsuits gather under a pop-up tarpaulin.

Flashlights begin to make their way down through the darkening trail towards a parked car belonging to Ryan and Jackie Dunn.

Ryan stands outside of his car wearing a plastic poncho, anxiously waiting in the rain.

August emerges from the trail entrance, leading a search and rescue team. He briefly chats with the team before he walks solemnly over to Ryan.

August peers around Ryan to look into the passenger seat of the car behind him--

Jackie sits there, staring fiercely into the dark forest.

AUGUST

How're you and the wife doing?

Ryan turns to look at his wife.

RYAN

I don't know how much more of this we can take...

August gives an understanding nod. He fingers his mustache.

AUGUST

Look, ah... Mr Dunn, with this rain... it just makes things exponentially more difficult. Even before it got this heavy, the canine teams failed to pick up the scent. Infrared scans from the chopper turned up empty. The FBI agent hasn't said much of anything, but he is analyzing the camera we found so... I just... I wish I had better news for you.

Ryan closes his eyes painfully. Hot tears roll down his cheeks.

August puts a comforting hand on his shoulder.

AUGUST (CONT'D)

We're not gonna give up tonight. Search-and-Rescue will continue the search. Now there's a hotel about three miles--

JACKIE (O.S.)

We're not going anywhere.

The two men are surprised to see Jackie standing outside of the car, unperturbed by the drenching rain -- Her wide-eyed stare now directed at them.

INT. VAN'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Rain patters against the large living room windows. Thunder rumbles and flashes of lightning intermittently light up the trees outside.

Van is slumped into the couch, holding a wine glass containing a small splash of red. She takes a long, slow, drunken blink before gulping it down.

The TV is on -- Another news story of the missing child, Madeline, is currently showing -- Jackie and Ryan Dunn are on camera making a heartfelt plea for anyone with information to please come forward.

Van leans forward to pick up a wine bottle from the floor and clumsily upturns it into her glass -- Only a drop falls, empty.

She holds the bottle in front of her face and gives a perfunctory smile.

VAN

You and me both, buddy.

She looks around the bottle to the TV screen and stares at the on-screen photo of Madeline.

Van's eyelids are now heavy-as-lead... They drop once, twice... and she's out...

INT. TRASHY HOUSE - FRONT ROOM - DAWN

Borderline dilapidated, more a place for the unscrupulous to hide than a home -- Filthy floors, holes in walls and exposed wiring are some of its highlights.

A small child's cries are heard from another room, followed by an aggressive shushing.

MAN (O.S.)

(harsh whispers)

Quiet, okay? Just be real quiet...

Fast moving footsteps shuffle toward a front window and a male figure carefully peeks outside from behind the curtain.

He steps back away from the window abruptly, hesitates, then begins to charge toward the back of the house--

BANG! Someone is kicking in the back door...

BANG! The MAN spins toward the front door, someone now wants in that way...

MAN (CONT'D)

(under his breath)

Fuck...

The man exits the front room into an unknown location, as one more bang from both front and back doors prove too much for the cheap locks that hold them in place.

CRASH! The front door flies inwards revealing a younger-looking Van, long hair tied in the back. She wears a flack-jacket and holds a 9mm pistol out in front of her, as she carefully steps into the front room.

VAN

FBI!

Van sweeps the room with her gun.

The child's screams from the other room continue.

Fast steps are heard coming from the back of the house.

NICK (O.S.)

Partner?

VAN

Front is clear.

The second FBI agent joins her from the back -- This is Special Agent NICK CHAMBERS -- Late 30s, clean shaven with pomade-slicked, hair. His solid frame suggests a man who looks after himself and knows how to throw down when push comes to shove.

NICK

Back's clear too.

Nick gestures to Van that he is heading toward the crying child and for her to follow.

Van nods in agreement.

INT. TRASHY HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAWN

The two agents, weapons poised, swiftly and quietly move through the short hallway and into the bedroom with the crying child.

A black-haired LITTLE GIRL of about 2 or 3 holds the bars of a grimy crib, tears streaming down her terrified face.

Nick gives the small room a scan; an open and empty closet is the room's only feature.

Nick looks down at the child and he bends down to comfort her.

NICK

Hey... hey, it's okay. We're gonna  
get you back to mommy. Okay, honey?

Van, covering the hallway watches Nick reach into the crib to pick up the little girl.

VAN

(harsh whisper)  
Where *is* he?

Nick has the whimpering girl in his arms, brushing the hair from her eyes.

NICK

Must have bolted.

Suddenly Van's eyes lock onto something just above Nick--

The barrel of a gun is slowly edging its way from an open corner of the attic access hatch in the ceiling.

It aims toward Nick...

Van does not hesitate, instantly raising her gun and emptying the clip into the ceiling.

Nick crouches, using his body to shield the screaming child.

CRASH! The man's body breaks through the drywall and THUMPS to the ground.

As the dust settles, Van stares down at the man's expression of wide-eyed shock, frozen on his face. Blood oozes from the many bullet wounds in his chest and neck.

To Van's distress, the man tries to reach for the little girl, as tears roll down his cheeks.

Now wailing, the little girl reaches out to the man, who bears a strong resemblance to her...

The man is trying to mouth a word to his daughter as the life fades from his eyes--

INT. VAN'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Van suddenly erupts into a seated position, the nightmare violently ripping her from slumber. She whips her head around, scanning the room for imaginary intruders.

Bleak morning light filters through large floor-to-ceiling windows. A sea of pine trees outside alludes to the forest setting in which Van's house is located.

Van takes a moment to catch her breath, realizes she feels awful and slumps back into the couch.

A cellphone rings, giving her a start. She blindly fumbles around on the floor before her fingers lock on to it.

She brings the phone up to her face... **"NO CALLER ID"** is displayed...

She answers--

VAN

This is Vanessa Ide.

MALE VOICE

Hi, Partner... Did I wake you?

Van sits up.

VAN

Nick?

Van rests her head in her hand, it throbs.

NICK

Look, I know last time we spoke, we decided to keep our distance... but I wouldn't have called if this wasn't important.

Van takes a beat as memories flood her thoughts. She wants to say something, but shelves it.

VAN

What's up?

NICK

Ah, look, I can't explain everything right now, but, can we meet? I'm in town.

VAN

What are you doing in Colorado?

NICK

I really need to talk, can you meet? Dive bar called Sammy's, not far from you. Know it?

Van lifts her head and narrows her eyes, sensing something is off.

VAN  
Yeah I know it...

NICK  
One o'clock?

Van holds her phone out to check the time, then returns it to her ear.

VAN  
I'll be there.

NICK  
Thanks, Partner...

Nick hangs up before Van can say goodbye. She sits for a beat of thought, the wheels visibly cranking over in her brain.

INT. SAMMY'S BAR - DAY

Sammy's is a dimly lit dive -- About a decade past a time when an owner gave a shit about offering patrons anything, other than a place to get drunk.

A man in a white shirt and loosened tie sits at a booth in a back corner -- Nick Chambers, still looks mostly the same apart from his now greying hair.

Nick unconsciously turns a glass of brown booze in circles on the table in front of him. He rubs his bloodshot eyes.

The bar's front door opens, bright light floods through -- A female silhouette fills the sunlit entrance. Nick looks up, recognizing her shape... Van.

Van spots Nick almost immediately and pauses -- This is not going to be easy.

She sucks it up and walks over to Nick's table. He stands to greet her, looking her up and down -- It has been too long.

NICK  
Hi, Van.

Van shoots him a smile.

NICK (CONT'D)  
Thank you... for coming.



Nick awkwardly twitches, as he decides on whether a hug or a handshake is most appropriate -- Van makes the decision for him by just sitting in the seat opposite Nick.

Nick nods and sits down with her.

NICK (CONT'D)  
It's good to see you.

Van begins to say something, then thinks better of it. Instead, she goes with--

VAN  
You too, Nick.

Nick stares deep into her soul for a beat.

NICK  
How are you, Van?

Van takes in a deep breath.

VAN  
Oh, you know...

A perky waitress appears.

WAITRESS  
What can I get ya?

VAN  
Black coffee, please.

WAITRESS  
You got it.

The waitress bites her lower lip as she looks over to Nick -- Her demeanor becoming not-so-subtly flirtatious.

WAITRESS (CONT'D)  
Looks like you're still fine...

The waitress gives Nick a saucy smile before turning on her heels and sauntering away.

Van raises her eyebrows as she watches the waitress leave.

Nick pays no notice and just stares at Van.

NICK  
You look good... Still seeing  
Doctor Gray?

Van stares blankly for a beat, then smiles.

VAN

A promise is a promise. Look, can we get down to it, I don't have long.

Nick sighs.

NICK

I'm sorry, Van. My head's a mess.

Nick drops his gaze to the drink in front of him. He wrings his hands together, before taking a large mouthful of booze.

NICK (CONT'D)

I was hoping maybe time would make things easier.

Van leans forward, elbows on the table.

VAN

Time is irrelevant, Nick.

Van offers up a short smile and Nick reciprocates.

VAN (CONT'D)

So, what's up?

Nick gives a solemn nod.

NICK

Madeline Dunn. Little girl who went missing yesterday; I'm working the case and I need your help.

VAN

You can't call for back-up? I don't *FBI* anymore, Nick.

Nick pauses, looking gravely at Van.

NICK

I don't know who I can trust right now...

Van slowly tilts her head in disbelief.

Nick holds up his hand to her.

NICK (CONT'D)

Just... listen. Okay?

Van slumps back into her seat and sighs. She then signals her willingness to listen with raised eyebrows.

Nick takes a beat to contemplate his next words--

NICK (CONT'D)

There was this agent at the bureau -  
- Raymond Martins. After your time.  
Old-school type, good guy,  
*brilliant* investigator.  
Anyway, a couple years back, he  
gets handed this case -- Kid goes  
missing during a family camping  
trip. So Raymond, the poor bastard,  
just can't pull a loose string on  
this thing. I mean, this kid is  
gone, without a trace.

(beat)

You worked missing persons, we deal  
with that shit all the time. But,  
for some reason this one just eats  
away at Raymond. Until he finds a  
connection...

Van narrows her eyes, intrigued.

NICK (CONT'D)

Turns out this kid is just one of  
many people. All with the same M.O.  
-- Happily walking through the  
woods one second, gone without a  
trace the next. Never seen again.

(beat)

These aren't animal attacks, or  
serial killers -- Those things  
leave evidence -- These people just  
*vanish*.

Nick pauses, ensuring this is sinking in.

VAN

Ninety-odd-thousand people go  
missing across the United States  
every year, for whatever reason...  
So how many people are we talking  
here?

Nick shrugs and thinks about it briefly, before--

NICK

In any given year, only a handful.  
Just enough to fall under the  
radar.

Van sighs, still not on-board.

VAN

So what makes these cases so special?

Nick sits forward with renewed vigor.

NICK

It's *how* they disappear, Van. There's suddenly an empty void where a person used to exist. But it's not just the disappearances, the cases are also being systematically covered up. Someone, higher up the chain, knows something and they're keeping a tight lid on it.

Van regards Nick with obvious skepticism.

VAN

Okay...

NICK

So, ultimately Raymond became hyper-paranoid. Said he was being *watched*... Then one day, he just up-and-quits. Walks away from everything and the bureau assigns a new agent to the case--

Nick jerks a thumb toward himself. Van nods.

NICK (CONT'D)

Only, I get this caveat -- No investigations, just get the details and get out. On to the next case.

Van takes in a deep breath and exhales, unsure how to feel.

Nick instinctively looks over his shoulder, giving a solitary old lady with her back to them a brief once-over.

Van watches Nick's movements closely.

VAN

You getting paranoid now?

Nick gives a sheepish shrug.

NICK

Van, I feel like I'm being dangled out there like bait, while *they* watch to see what happens.

(MORE)

NICK (CONT'D)

Only I don't know who *they* are  
right now... So I need you.

Van leans forward as a deep crevasse forms between her  
eyebrows.

VAN

Jesus, Nick... Listen to yourself.

Nick takes a gulp of his booze.

NICK

I just need you to surveil me. Just  
to *see*... See if what I *think* is  
happening, *is happening*. I need  
peace-of-mind before I lose what's  
left.

Van stares at Nick for a brief moment, weighing up her  
options. Nick's eyebrows raise in a pleading expression as he  
awaits her answer.

The waitress suddenly breaks the moment, as she places the  
coffee down in front of Van.

WAITRESS

Black coffee. Anything else I can  
bring you?

Van shoots the waitress a brief smile.

VAN

All set, thanks.

The waitress turns to Nick, brandishing her best come-fuck-me  
smile.

WAITRESS

How about you?

Nick is about to answer, when--

VAN

He's all set too.

The waitress whirls her head around to Van, who is calmly  
looking into the coffee mug she holds with both hands. Van  
takes a sip.

Nick's heart swells for her.

WAITRESS

Okay...

The waitress walks away in a slight huff.

VAN

Okay, look, since you're clearly becoming unhinged here... I guess I could run a little stake-out for the afternoon. Would that ease your mind a little?

NICK

Thanks, Partner.

Nick pulls something out of his pocket. He reaches across the table and places a cheap-looking cellphone in front of her.

NICK (CONT'D)

Contact me *only* through this burner. You'll find a message on there with the address of where I'm staying.

Van picks up the burner phone and scrolls down a list of settings in the phone until she gets to MESSAGES -- Sure enough, the address for Nick's motel is the only message.

VAN

Okay, got it. I'll let you know what I find.

Van stands and begins to leave, when Nick grabs her hand.

Van stares down at Nick frowning.

NICK

It really is good to see you, Van.

Van's face softens. She smiles, nods, then pulls her hand away from Nick's.

Nick watches her leave, desperately wanting to call out to her... He decides better and remains silent.

EXT. PINWOOD MOTEL - PARKING LOT - AFTERNOON

The roadside motel backs onto a sea of dark-green forest. Worn red doors mark each tiny room. The filthy, weather-worn road-side sign offering "RO MS AVAIL" and "IN ERNET" indicate less-than-deluxe accommodations.

Van's red, compact SUV pulls up into the parking lot.

A handful of other cars occupy spaces: a couple of older model sedans, a boxy SUV, a rusty RV and a brand-new white van with darkened windows.

Rain droplets begin to cover the windshield, obscuring her view between wiper blade swipes. The sky rumbles with thunder.

She picks up Nick's burner cellphone, selects the 'messages' icon from the menu and opens the only message -- It contains the Pinewood Motel address, followed by "Room 8."

Van looks up to the red door with a once-chromed number eight nailed to it. A "DO NOT DISTURB" sign hangs from the knob.

Van sips cold coffee from the to-go cup sitting in the center console.

Van powers down her window, hangs her elbow out and takes in the sweet forest air. Her brief, peaceful moment is interrupted by a door opening -- Room number seven.

A thin, bandy-legged, OLD MAN in a black cowboy hat emerges, closing the door behind him. He is remarkably agile for being in his late 70s. Sunken eyes and a map of deep creases run throughout his face.

He has a ragged, grey animal fur draped over one shoulder.

He rubs the tips of his old leather boots on the back legs of his jeans, grabs hold of his huge belt buckle to hitch up his pants, before spitting a slimy, black wad into the dirt.

To Van's amusement, he begins to mosey on over to the rusty RV she is parked next to. As he approaches Van, he grins, flashing Van a set of teeth like a row of busted tombstones. His eyes also point in different directions.

The old cowboy tips his hat to Van.

OLD MAN

Hi there. Lovin' this weather.

Another rumble from above...

Van gives him a brief, cynical smile, trying not to take her attention off the motel.

The old man pauses for a beat to stare at her, with his one good eye at least... Van feels his stare peripherally.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)

Well now, ain't you somethin' special.

This doesn't sit well with Van. She doesn't give him the satisfaction of looking at him.

VAN

Thanks...

The old man nods his grinning face and enters the RV. A split-second before he turns, his eyeballs appear to move independently of each other...

Van powers up the window as she watches the old man in her side mirror -- Her eyes narrow as he rounds the back of his RV and disappears from view.

Van turn's her attention back to Nick's hotel room in time to see--

Door number eight opens and a short Hispanic woman in a gray maid's uniform pushes her room service cart out of the room.

Van fumbles around for her personal cellphone while she intently watches. She opens the video application, hits record and she begins to zoom in.

The rain-dappled glass and continuous swishing wiper blades make viewing anything of value pointless.

VAN (CONT'D)

God damnit!

Van throws down her phone in frustration as she scrambles out of her car and hustles over toward the maid.

The phone lands on the passenger seat, camera lens facing the driver-side window...

VAN (CONT'D)

Excuse me! Ma'am?

The maid whips around in shock, not expecting to see a woman aggressively marching toward her. The maid takes a few steps back.

VAN (CONT'D)

Is it standard procedure to clean a room with do-not-disturb hanging from the doorknob?

The maid stares wide-eyed at Van, no clue what is being asked of her.

Van pulls the 'DO NOT DISTURB' card from the door handle and holds it out in front of the maid.



Something catches Van's eye over the maid's shoulder -- The grinning face of an old lady beams at her from the window of room number NINE.

The old lady's odd grin and seemingly black eyes momentarily have Van's attention, when--

MAID

*No toqué nada.* I just clean.

The maid opens the door to Nick's room to show Van.

MAID (CONT'D)

See? Is okay. I clean. Is okay, yes?

Van glances back to the window next door before entering Nick's room, the creepy old lady is gone.

INT. NICK'S HOTEL ROOM 8 - DUSK

Van squints into the darkness, before finding the light switch and flipping it on.

The room is small, barely enough space to swing a cat. The time-worn walls and carpet show evidence of having been occupied by hundreds of guests over the years.

The bed has been freshly made, and Nick's meager belongings -- a travel bag and white, cardboard filing box -- are neatly placed on the dresser.

An inch-thick folder sits atop the box, it is labeled -- RAYMOND MARTIN'S FILES.

Van opens the folder for a cursory glance at a few pages, then closes it again.

She scans the room as an object in the corner catches her eye -- A video camera on a tripod is facing the room.

A shudder runs down Van's spine as she approaches the camera, but she is momentarily halted by--

MAID

Is okay, yes? *Disculpa*, I just clean.

Van waves the maid away.

VAN

Yeah, you're okay.

The maid lets the door swing shut as Van reaches the camera.

Van turns on the camera -- The viewing screen shows the bed in center frame and the room door in the background.

She looks up at the bed, noticing a large map on the wall above it and switches the camera off.

Van waddles on her knees across the bed to give the map some closer scrutiny.

It is a map of the USA, dotted with small, red stickers. It gives Van pause to take in the sheer number of them. One red dot in particular stands out -- Not a sticker, but a red push-pin. A small note is pinned there -- MADELINE DUNN.

INT. VAN'S CAR - MOTEL PARKING LOT - DUSK

Van drops down into the driver's seat and takes a few beats to think.

She reaches into her pocket and retrieves the burner phone and begins typing a text message -- *YOUR ROOM IS SHITTY BUT LOOKS SECURE.*

She tosses the phone onto the passenger seat, it lands next to her personal phone.

Van looks up at the room 8 door again. She shakes her head and let's out a depressed sigh.

VAN  
(under her breath)  
What am I doing?...

INT. VAN'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Save from the desk and chair, Van's office is sparse in any decor. A small desk lamp and the blue glow of Van's laptop screen supply the only light in the room.

The article Van is reading on-screen is entitled -- *MISSING IN THE WOODS: THE STRANGE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THOSE WHO WENT IN AND NEVER CAME OUT.*

She is totally engrossed as she finishes the final sentence.

Van sits back in her chair, slides open her desk drawer and retrieves a small, silver flask.

She unscrews the lid and stares down into the dark mouth, brown liquid sloshes within.

A beat of contemplation...

Van carefully screws the lid back onto the flask and places it back into her desk drawer, closing it.

She brings her hands up to the keyboard to type once again, when a slamming door makes Van jump.

VAN

Hello?

No response...

Van slowly slides open her desk drawer and rests her hand on a black taser gun with a bright yellow grip.

Another noise... Someone shuffling their feet?

Van picks up the taser. She is calm, her eyes cold and her breathing slowed...

VAN (CONT'D)

I'm closed. You'll have to come  
back tomorrow.

A figure begins to emerge from the dark entryway and into the dim light of the office--

It's an attractive blonde woman, clutching her expensive-looking purse. She's well-dressed and in her 30s. The makeup smeared around her eyes and running down her cheeks, alludes to an earlier deluge of tears.

It is the married woman from the earlier, scandalous photos on Van's phone -- MRS. FORESTER.

A subtle sway in her posture and labored breathing also indicate she is more than half a bottle of vodka into the night.

Van squints at the woman, trying to place her.

VAN (CONT'D)

I'm closed for the night, but I'd  
be happy to help first thing--

MRS. FORESTER

Oh you've helped out plenty...

Mrs. Forester takes a couple of unsteady steps toward Van. Van's index finger traces the lip of the taser's trigger.

Van then visibly *clicks* as to who this woman is--

VAN

Oh, Mrs. Forester...  
Look, whatever it is you hope to  
accomplish by being here isn't  
going to end well for you.

MRS. FORESTER

Oh fuck you. Seriously, bitch, go  
fuck yourself.

The woman almost stumbles over with this outburst.

Van sighs in relief, now confident that Mrs. Forester is of  
no threat to her. Van eases the desk drawer closed.

VAN

Mrs. Forester, your anger is  
directed at the wrong person here--

MRS. FORESTER

If Glenn had any actual balls  
behind that tiny dick, he could  
have just talked to me... Instead  
of some home-wrecking bitch.

(breaking down in tears)

He never talks to me. He's never  
even home... What a waste...

Mrs. Forester collapses to her knees and sobs. Van stands up  
and walks around the desk to Mrs. Forester. She crouches down  
next to her.

VAN

Look, Mrs. Forester, I'm going to  
call you a cab.

MRS. FORESTER

No... Oh no no no... You don't get  
to just turn my life into shit and  
walk away clean. This shit is on  
you too!

Van sighs and attempts to help Mrs. Forester to her feet.

VAN

Come on, Mrs. Forester, let's get  
you up.

Mrs. Forester screams in anger and swings a clumsy open hand  
toward Van's face. Van easily grabs Mrs. Forester's wrist  
before it makes contact.

Mrs. Forester's lips waver, as the last ounce of anger drains  
from her system.

VAN (CONT'D)  
It's time to go...

Fresh tears run down Mrs. Forester's face. She nods in agreement, sniffing back her tears and picking herself up.

Before she exits, Mrs. Forester pauses in the darkness of the entryway. Without turning around she calmly states--

MRS. FORESTER  
I'm sorry for what I've done.

Van picks up her phone and begins to dial.

VAN  
Let me call you a--

Mrs. Forester abruptly leaves the office; the entry door bangs closed behind her.

The sound of a car screeching away is heard from outside.

Van takes a deep, calming breath as she sits on the front of her desk. She places her head in her hands.

A sudden and aggressive BANG at the front door startles Van. She stands and steps toward the entryway...

Through the diffused glass panel in the front door, Van sees a dark silhouette standing motionless.

VAN (CONT'D)  
Mrs. Forester--

BANG! Whoever is on the other side of the door slams the door hard enough to rattle the glass this time...

Van's blood boils and she charges to the door, swinging it open violently--

VAN (CONT'D)  
Mrs. For--

Van glares out at her solitary car in an otherwise empty parking lot...

Her blood runs cold.

Van quickly shuts the door with her back pressed against it. Her mind races for a beat, when--

A sudden buzzing in her pocket makes her jump.

She pulls out her phone to see a message from Nick --  
TRAILHEAD. 8AM TOMORROW.

INT. VAN'S CAR - FOREST ROAD - MORNING

Van holds her phone against the steering wheel as she drives. Every few seconds she looks down at the GPS application on the small screen.

The forest around her is dense and lush. Morning sunlight leaks through the trees in golden beams, momentarily blinding Van until she winds around another corner.

Van is suddenly forced to swerve sharply back to the left when a four-legged animal appears around the corner ahead --  
A COYOTE...

Van overcorrects and her car leaves the blacktop, hits the gravel and spins 180 degrees before coming to a complete stop.

She sits in silent shock, wide-eyed... Her quivering hand slowly raises to cover her mouth, attempting to quell a full-blown anxiety attack.

Feeling claustrophobic and panicky inside the car, she throws off her seatbelt and makes a hasty exit.

EXT. FOREST ROAD - MORNING

Van leans against the car door with her hands on her knees, trying to slow her breathing. She unconsciously feels around her belly, then realizes what she is doing and stops.

Van shuts her eyes tight, smothering her emotions.

She opens her eyes and slowly turns toward the road -- The coyote is standing there, silently observing Van.

VAN

Asshole!

The coyote seems unfazed. It merely licks its chops.

Something is just not right about this animal. Its eyes seem black and deeply sunken into its skull.

Van's eyes suddenly focus hard on the animal as a wave of haze washes across it, distorting its form slightly, like a heat mirage...

The coyote takes a couple of steps toward her and Van gently opens the car door...

Van feels the hair stand up on the back of her neck...

In one fluid movement, Van drops into the driver's seat and closes the door behind her.

INT. VAN'S CAR - FOREST ROAD - MORNING

Van stares over the steering wheel at the odd coyote -- It hasn't moved. She fires up the engine...

The coyote then loses interest, turning around and trotting off into the dense thicket of trees on the other side of the road.

A cold shiver runs down Van's spine as she turns around and pulls out onto the road once more.

EXT. FOREST TRAILHEAD PARKING LOT - MORNING

Several Search-and-Rescue SUVs and police cars occupy the parking lot -- A far cry from the previous circus.

A group of five Search-and-Rescue members make their way up the trail.

Ryan and Jackie Dunn are being confronted by August, who stands in front of his SUV, arms crossed.

Van's car pulls into the far end of the lot, only briefly taking the attention away from the conversation at hand, as Van and Jackie's eyes meet.

INT. VAN'S CAR - TRAILHEAD PARKING LOT - MORNING

Van parks, letting her car idle while she scans the parking area -- Jackie and Ryan stand talking to August in front of the trail entrance.

Van checks the time and sighs, then retrieves the small burner cellphone from her jacket pocket and begins typing a message -- "AT THE TRAILHEAD. SEE YOU SOON?"

A low rumble causes Van to lift her head, looking into her rearview mirror -- Two large military trucks roll into the parking lot and pull up next to each other by the trailhead.

Twelve heavily-armed special forces soldiers pile out, six in each truck. Without pause, they march in formation through the entrance onto the trail.

Jackie and Ryan watch on with growing concern. They begin a frantic conversation with the park manager.

Things seem to be getting heated and Van lowers her window to listen.

EXT. FOREST TRAILHEAD PARKING LOT - MORNING

Jackie stands with her hands firmly placed on her hips, as August nonchalantly cleans his sunglasses with his tie.

JACKIE

... But you're turning away volunteers. Why would the National Parks Service suddenly not want as much help as they can get? I mean really, I'd love to know.

AUGUST

Mrs. Dunn, you have to understand my hands are tied as far as jurisdiction goes here. Special Forces is here to aid in the search, but they want all volunteers to clear the area.

August very carefully slides his sunglasses back on.

Jackie marches off in a huff back to her car and Ryan mops his face with his hand.

JACKIE

(yelling back)  
Y'know I get the distinct feeling that we aren't being told everything. Did something change?

AUGUST

If something changes you will be the first to know, Mrs. Dunn. But we have experts here, so maybe just trust that we know what we're doing, huh?

Jackie marches back up to the two men. She throws Ryan his jacket as she finishes sliding an arm into her own.



JACKIE

Then it'll be too little, too late...

AUGUST

This is difficult, I get it, but here's the thing--

JACKIE

I'm done talking. Madeline is out there right now, I can *feel* it.

Ryan takes her hand and the two march toward the trailhead, when August steps ahead of them, cutting them off. His open hand raised.

AUGUST

Mr. and Mrs. Dunn -- I say this with the utmost sensitivity for your situation -- I can't have you causing trouble out here...

JACKIE

Are... Are you fucking kidding me right now?!

INT. VAN'S CAR - TRAILHEAD PARKING LOT

Van watches on as the scene becomes volatile. She curses under her breath as she powers up the window and steps out of the car.

EXT. FOREST TRAILHEAD - MORNING

Ryan and Jackie begin to walk around August and he side-steps to block their trajectory once again. August holds up both hands in an attempt to calm things.

AUGUST

Listen, there are good people out there looking for your daughter. Now, my *advice* is to go home and get some rest.

JACKIE

We're not leaving until we find Madeline.

August exhales heavily.

VAN (O.S.)

Excuse me, Sir?

Jackie, Ryan and August turn their attention toward Van.

VAN (CONT'D)

I'm a private investigator assisting Mr. and Mrs. Dunn. Could you explain to me why Special Forces are getting involved? I'm quite familiar with missing persons procedure and this is *odd*, to say the least.

The Dunns both look sharply at Van, who nods, giving a knowing smile to the couple.

August seems less-than-thrilled by Van's inquiry.

AUGUST

I'm just trying to do my job... The military didn't tell me squat -- Just that they were sending in a team and to clear the path.

August looks between Van and the distressed parents, then sighs in defeat.

AUGUST (CONT'D)

Look, I don't wanna stop you from looking for your little girl. Just... do me a favor and stay out of their way, okay?

Jackie nods sternly and that's good enough for August. Before he turns, he gives Van a stern glare, then lumbers off onto the trail and into the forest.

Van faces Ryan and Jackie.

VAN

I'm so sorry about Madeline.

RYAN

So, wait... who are you?

Van smiles warmly and extends her open hand in greeting.

VAN

My name is Van Ide.

She shakes both of their hands. They are now more than a little confused.

JACKIE

And you're a private investigator?  
Who hired you?

Jackie looks at her husband, who shrugs his shoulders.

VAN

Oh, I'm just... I'm doing some work  
in the area. Sorry I lied. I just  
don't like bullies.

Jackie's heart sinks.

JACKIE

Oh...

Van gives a half smile as she regards the desperate couple  
for a beat. She looks at her phone.

VAN

Look, I have a few minutes... May I  
join you on the trail?

JACKIE

Oh, please do. We'll take any help  
we can get.

Van gives her best attempt at a smile and nods.

EXT. FOREST TRAIL - DAY

The dirt path is littered with the dying red and yellow  
leaves of fall. The overcast sky above the tree tops gives a  
pale glow to the surrounding forest.

Van walks alongside the Dunns, arms folded.

JACKIE

We had a whole canine team come  
down from Wyoming offering to join  
the search. Park Manager told them  
'no thanks.' Can you believe that?

VAN

Huh.

RYAN

Yeah, and there was this FBI agent  
here the day Madeline went  
missing... It was unsettling  
actually -- We both kinda got the  
feeling that we were just  
confirming things he already knew.

Van nods.

VAN

Those guys like to play their cards close to their chest.

Jackie folds her arms in a huff.

JACKIE

It's like there's some big secret that we're not allowed to know. I mean, it's only *our* fucking child.

Ryan rubs Jackie's back.

RYAN

We had hoped maybe *someone* would advocate for us a little.

Van considers the Dunns for a beat.

VAN

Look, I'm working this other case in the area, but if something comes up that might be helpful...

Jackie looks annoyed--

JACKIE

So you *might* throw us a bone if *something comes up*?

VAN

I didn't mean that to sound... like that.

JACKIE

No, it's fine. I get it -- We just have to help ourselves.

Jackie marches past Van and starts shouting Madeline's name.

Van sighs.

Ryan jogs up to join his wife. Jackie becomes increasingly frantic with every shout of her daughter's name and the subsequent silence that follows.

Ryan places his hands on her shoulders, attempting to calm her.

Jackie shakes him off and marches back over to Van, her eyes welling with hot tears.

JACKIE (CONT'D)  
Madeline is my *life*... My heart has  
been ripped out.  
If you could only know how that  
feels...

Van coldly stares back at the distraught woman in front of  
her for a beat of silence. Then snaps--

VAN  
You're right, I don't know how you  
feel... *My* baby died before I could  
meet him.

Jackie's face softens, feeling a heavy lump of faux pas in  
her gut. She grasps for words, but the sounds of Search-and-  
Rescue teams break the moment--

August is headed in their direction. Margaret, the S&R worker  
and her dog, walk in-step with him.

August curses under his breath upon spotting Van and the  
Dunns, but continues on toward them.

August holds a clear plastic baggie in his hand, with  
something inside. *Somethings*...

As he approaches Van and the Dunns, the somethings inside the  
baggie take form -- A pair of children's shoes -- Madeline's.

Jackie covers her mouth as the recognition hits, the shock  
forming a lump of ice in the pit of her stomach.

August, short of breath, stands before them and holds the bag  
out.

AUGUST  
Looks like maybe you recognize  
these...

Ryan's knees buckle a little, but Jackie catches him, still  
staring gravely at the shoes.

RYAN  
Oh god... They're Madeline's. Where  
were they?

MARGARET  
Just off the side of the path, down  
by the lake... We had covered that  
area many times already.

Margaret and August exchange a knowing look -- Van takes note  
of this exchange.

A lightning bolt of determination hits Jackie and she begins running down the trail toward the river. Ryan runs after her, calling her name.

Margaret watches the parents, her brow furrowing deeply.

August sighs, then gives Van a look up and down.

AUGUST

So they hired a private investigator, huh? Got much experience with searching thousands of acres of rugged wilderness?

VAN

No.

Margaret suddenly marches off the path and back out into the forest, the other S&R team in-tow.

August watches Margaret leave, then shoots Van a wry smile.

AUGUST

You gonna question the local wildlife, Miss...?

August extends his hand to shake and Van reciprocates, staring him down as she does so.

VAN

Ide. Vanessa Ide, and if by wildlife you mean Park Rangers, then, yeah, I'd have some questions for you.

AUGUST bristles.

AUGUST

Vanessa, my name is August, I'm the Park Manager. The ranger station is by the park entrance, you passed it on your way in. I'll be there in about an hour, if you truly have questions.

He holds up the bagged shoes.

AUGUST (CONT'D)

Excuse me.

Van nods, looking sideways at him.

August tips his hat as he walks past Van, back up the path.

Van pulls out the burner phone and checks the screen -- No messages. She selects the only number in the contacts list.

The phone rings once before Nick picks up. He sounds tired--

NICK (O.S.)

I'm sorry, I'm still at my *shitty* motel room...

VAN

How am I supposed to keep an eye on you if you keep ducking me?

NICK (O.S.)

I'm sorry, I had a rough night. Didn't sleep.

VAN

Nick, a Special Forces team turned up here this morning -- This isn't normal.

NICK (O.S.)

See what I mean?

(beat)

Van, will you do me a favor and just hang there? See what goes down?

VAN

Nick, that's not what you hired me to do.

NICK (O.S.)

I know, I know... I just need to lay low for a while. Thanks, Partner.

Nick hangs up and Van grunts in irritation.

She takes a few beats to think, when an eerie silence begins to close in around her...

She looks around at the seemingly endless forest that surrounds her -- It's too quiet... and the forest has eyes.

A shiver runs down Van's spine.

Then movement suddenly... Something ducks behind a tree in her peripheral vision, about twenty feet into the woods... Or did it?

She stares in that direction... Nothing... Not a god-damned thing.

A faint, barely audible noise is heard, deep within the forest -- The sound of crying... A baby...

Van quickens her step as she heads off down the path in the direction of the muted cries.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - MORNING

Dense forest encircles a patch of long grass, twenty-or-so feet in diameter. Grey clouds above diffuse the sunlight, yet the opening in the forest ceiling gives the area an odd glow.

Van rounds a corner in the forest path and spots the serene clearing. She pauses for a beat, taking it in, then heads toward it, as if drawn to it.

Her eyes narrow as she approaches, something about the clearing catches her eye -- The whole space seems to have a shimmer to it... like heat waves from a desert road...

Silence, like the vacuum of space, gradually consumes all sound...

The hairs on Van's arm stand up with static electricity...

SWOOSH! Something in the forest behind her moves and she spins around...

Just trees.

Van cautiously scans the forest around her, before returning her attention back to the clearing.

CRACK! A twig snaps under the weight of something heavy.

Van spins around again... nothing. The forest is quiet and still. Too quiet. Too still.

MARGARET (O.S.)

What did you see?

Van jumps with a start. Her hand instinctively lowers to her hip, hovering over a non-existent sidearm, as she pivots toward the voice--

Margaret, stands on the path about ten feet away. Her dog obediently by her side.

Van sighs in relief and lets out a nervous chuckle.

VAN

Oh, nothing. I just... thought I heard something.



Margaret nods slowly, curiously regarding Van.

MARGARET

Well, be careful. Easy to get disorientated out here.

Van nods as she surveys the area.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

You're helping those parents find their little girl?

VAN

Oh, not really. I just... happened to be here.

MARGARET

Not many people happen to be *here*.

Margaret looks Van up and down, as Van surveys the surrounding forest.

VAN

Would you mind pointing me in the direction of the lake? I should... say goodbye.

MARGARET

Head back the way you came. Turn right at the fork.

Van begins to head down the path. She smiles again at Margaret as she passes.

VAN

Thank you.

MARGARET

Don't always trust what you hear and see out here. The forest plays tricks.

Van pauses to look back at Margaret's intent stare, then continues down the path.

EXT. FOREST LAKE - DAY

Van pauses as she summits the small hill before the trail extends down to the lake.

Jackie sits staring out into the calm water as Ryan gives comforting strokes through her hair.

Van walks hesitantly toward the couple. Jackie quickly stands, her eyes red yet she appears fiercely determined.

JACKIE

I'm so sorry for how I spoke to you before. I didn't realize... Can I ask how long ago it was?

Van bites her lower lip...

VAN

He would have three years old.

Jackie gets to her feet.

JACKIE

I'm so sorry.

Van waves it away.

VAN

No, it's me. I shouldn't have gotten involved.

Jackie takes a step towards her.

JACKIE

Would you... *please*, get involved? I'm begging you. You understand more than anyone else could; You're a *mom*...

Van blinks, taken aback. Ryan puts an arm around his wife.

RYAN

We'll pay whatever it takes.

Van's eyes are simmering, a fury ignited within her. She takes a beat to blink away tears.

VAN

No, you won't.

Jackie lets out a sob of elated hope and embraces Van.

Van pulls a business card from her jacket pocket and hands it to over to the couple.

VAN (CONT'D)

I'll do whatever I can.

INT. PARK RANGER STATION - DAY

The small, concrete government building has a scuffed-linoleum-meets-utilitarian-brown-carpet kind of aesthetic.

Van pushes through the glass entryway doors and heads for the front desk.

The 40-something lady behind the front desk has the look of a no-nonsense librarian -- Mousy-brown hair tied in the back, oval-framed glasses and a girthy frame suited to someone grown accustomed to desk work. Her name tag reads -- SAM.

Sam is digging through folders in a drawer cabinet, unaware that Van has approached the desk.

VAN

Hi, I have an appointment to see August.

Sam turns to her, somewhat taken aback.

SAM

Oh, I didn't hear you come in.

Van gives a half-smile, not in any mood for small talk.

VAN

Is August in? He asked me to stop by.

Sam sits heavily into her straining office chair and begins tapping away at the boxy, old computer in front of her.

SAM

Hmm, no, I don't think he did.

VAN

I'm sorry?

SAM

I'm not seeing any appointments right now.

Van sighs... definitely not in the mood for this shit.

VAN

Well, I *just* spoke with him.

Behind Van, a bathroom door opens with the accompanying sounds of flushing water -- August emerges from the bathroom, with a folded gun magazine tucked under one arm as he finishes tucking in his shirt.

His pleasant expression alludes to a successful mission.

He and Van make eye-contact.

AUGUST

Oh right, the private eye. Let's go  
into my office.

August walks to a wooden door bearing his name and title. He holds it open for her and follows her inside.

Sam sneers at this most irregular procedure.

INT. AUGUST'S OFFICE - DAY

It's a quaint office, yet obviously looked after by a person who enjoys his position.

AUGUST

Vanessa, right?

VAN

Just Van.

August slowly turns to face her as he sips coffee from a mug on his desk. He smirks at her.

AUGUST

Okay, Van. You don't strike me as  
the type of gal who gets up to the  
forest much. More of a city--

VAN

August, I'm sorry. Do you mind if  
we just get right to it here? I'm  
paid by the hour.

August's smile slowly fades.

AUGUST

Sure. Have a seat.

He gestures to the seat in front of the unnecessarily large wooden desk, as he steps around it to collapse into a leather chair.

Van sits, holding her satchel on her lap.

VAN

That Special Forces unit--

August holds a hand up to her.

AUGUST

Whoa, hang on now, Van.

Van raises her eyebrows.

AUGUST (CONT'D)

I had a law enforcement buddy of mine run a quick check on you. Hope that's okay?

Van sits back in her seat, smirking, as August looks down at a sheet of paper in front of him.

AUGUST (CONT'D)

You're ex-FBI... Didn't last long at the bureau though.

Van is a blank canvas.

VAN

Okay, let's talk about the FBI then; have you been in contact with the agent assigned to Madeline Dunn's case?

AUGUST

Yeah, we talked, and *like yourself*, I'm trying to understand how he could possibly be of any help out here.

August leans forward onto his elbows.

AUGUST (CONT'D)

You have no search and rescue experience...

VAN

The Dunns feel like they're not being told everything and I *do* have experience in finding secrets.

August folds his arms defensively.

AUGUST

I've got nothing to hide.

(beat)

Besides, I feel for the Dunns, I do -- My heart goes out to them -- But, they *have* to let us do our job.

Van tilts her head at him.

VAN

Why are you turning away volunteer searchers?

AUGUST

Same reason I told the Dunns -- We have professionals out there, who have time-tested methods. Too many cooks impede a search.

VAN

A canine unit from Wyoming Search-and-Rescue aren't professionals?

August bristles.

AUGUST

My team here are plenty capable. They've done this many times.

VAN

Really? And how many times *has* this happened?

August rubs his neck.

AUGUST

How many times has *what* happened?

VAN

Can I get a list of missing persons from within this National Park?

August glares at her, fuming.

AUGUST

Well that's just not something we keep track of.

VAN

Oh come on... That's obviously bullshit--

August stands suddenly, marches around his desk and aggressively opens the door.

AUGUST

And now I need you to leave. You've taken up enough of my time.

Van stands, silently staring at August, who refuses to make eye contact.

VAN  
Madeline isn't a one-off, is she?

AUGUST  
Sam?!

Sam comes trudging in on command.

SAM  
Yes, sir?

AUGUST  
If Miss Van here doesn't leave the premises within the next ten seconds, please call the Sheriff.

Sam's cheeks flush scarlet.

Van rolls her eyes and begins to casually stroll out of the office.

VAN  
Relax, Sam. I got what I needed...

Van continues her nonchalant stroll towards the entryway as August and Sam watch on.

EXT. PARK RANGER STATION - PARKING LOT - DAY

Van strides out into the parking lot, when a vibrating phone steals her attention -- She pulls the burner phone out of her jacket pocket and answers.

VAN  
Jesus, Nick.

A beat of silence.

VAN (CONT'D)  
Nick?

NICK (O.S.)  
Yeah, I'm here...

He sounds awful. Barroom jukebox music and chatter can be heard on Nick's end.

VAN  
You're at a bar?

NICK (O.S.)  
Yeah, I'm at Sammy's again.

VAN  
...Are you drunk?

NICK (O.S.)  
I didn't want to be alone. Van, I'm  
sorry I got you involved in all  
this. I shouldn't have done that.

Van continues walking to her car.

VAN  
Nick, shut up. I need to know  
what's going on. Now.

Van's eyes dart around as she waits for a reply... Then--

NICK (O.S.)  
There's this Nietzsche quote... Goes  
something like, "*you stare long  
enough into the abyss. The abyss  
stares back into you*"... This isn't  
what he meant but... I can't stop  
thinking about it.

Van opens her car door and drops into the driver's seat,  
staring into the middle distance as she tries to comprehend  
Nick's words.

VAN  
Nick, I... I'm worried about you.

A few beats without a reply.

VAN (CONT'D)  
Nick?

Nick lets out a shaky sigh.

NICK (O.S.)  
(voice breaking)  
I don't know what to do, Van...

Van starts her car.

VAN  
Okay, just wait there for me. I'm  
on my way.

She throws the phone onto the passenger seat and tears out of  
the parking lot.



INT. SAMMY'S BAR - DAY

Nick sits alone in a booth in an empty, dingy back corner of the bar. Dark circles rim his bloodshot eyes and his blinks are slow and heavy.

He nurses a bottle of beer and stares blankly, lost in his own thoughts.

Van suddenly slides down into the seat across from Nick, making him jump.

NICK  
Jesus Christ, Van...

VAN  
Nice to see you too. Now, what the fuck?

Nick takes a long pull from his beer.

Van watches him, stiffening.

VAN (CONT'D)  
You can't go on like this, Nick.

Nick slumps back into his seat and looks longingly over to Van, pausing for a beat to take her in...

NICK  
These people... these *kids*... it's like, they're just forgotten about.  
(beat)  
So who's going to go on if I don't?

VAN  
Nick, this crusade you're on --  
It's admirable. It really is, but nothing will ever fill that void.

Nick lip wavers as he stares down at his beer.

NICK  
I'm sorry. I wasn't there for you when you lost the baby... *Our* baby. Henry.

Van looks sharply at Nick.

VAN  
Don't, Nick...

Nick reaches over and holds her hand, gives it a squeeze. He runs his thumb over the hand-engraved loop of metal attached to Van's leather bracelet.

NICK

There isn't a single day that I  
don't feel sorry.

Van's eyes become glassy.

VAN

I don't want to do this right  
now...

A tear overflows down Van's cheek and she wipes it away. She looks away from Nick and pulls her hand free from his.

Nick's expression hardens.

NICK

Christ, Van... Look at the mess  
I've become! Couldn't we have tried  
to work through it *together*?

Van snaps her head up to scowl at him.

VAN

(breaking)

There is no working through it,  
Nick -- The pain never goes away.  
Sometimes it's unbearable... but  
it's how I remember.

A few beats of silence, then Nick slowly nods his head. His voice breaks during his next words--

NICK

That night... when you called me,  
and I heard you screaming... the  
sound of the crash... I've never  
felt so helpless and terrified...

(beat)

Until now.

Van sees the earnest dread in Nick's face. She wipes her eyes and her demeanor softens.

VAN

Why?

NICK

I feel like I'm falling into an  
abyss...

Van's brow furrows, the twang of pity evident on her face.

VAN

I think you just need to sleep. You can't help anyone like this.

NICK

Van, I haven't slept because it found me in my dreams... Do you understand how insane that is?

Van reaches across the table and takes Nick's beer away from him.

Nick's heart sinks further. He then spots something over Van's shoulder, causing him some concern.

She turns to follow Nick's gaze -- The same old woman sits alone, with her back to them. Van regards her broken ex-partner sitting across the table.

VAN

Listen, why don't you get out of that shitty motel and come stay with me?

Nick rubs his eyes and stands abruptly.

NICK

What am I doing?...

VAN

Nick, come on. Just calm down--

NICK

Van... Forget everything and go home. Please. I fucked up -- I shouldn't have brought you into this.

Nick slides out from the booth and Van grabs his hand before he can leave.

VAN

Nick, I know you wouldn't have asked me for help if you didn't need it.

NICK

Listen to me -- It was a mistake. I'm sorry, Van.

He gives her hand a squeeze and scuttles out of the bar.

VAN

Nick...

INT. VAN'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON

Heavy rain spatters across the large windows as thunder rumbles.

Van sits upright on her couch, sitting on her hands. She stares down at her personal cellphone, on the coffee table in front of her.

She takes a moment of pause before whipping her hand out and picking up her phone, then hunting through contacts. She finds the one she's looking for.

Van presses the phone up to her ear as it rings.

VAN

Hi, I'd like to speak to Special Agent Lucas... Can you tell him it's Van Ide?

Van sets the phone to speaker and places it back down on the table in front of her. She folds her arms and closes her eyes as she waits.

AGENT LUCAS (O.S.)

Van?

VAN

Hey, Lucas, how are you doing?

AGENT LUCAS (O.S.)

Oh you know, keeping busy. It's so great to hear from you though. What's up?

Van sighs and leans forward, her forehead resting on her hands.

VAN

Oh, where do I begin?...

AGENT LUCAS (O.S.)

Everything okay, Van?

VAN

So, a missing persons case turned up in my neck of the woods and who should happen to be assigned, but *Special Agent Nick Chambers*...

She chuckles nervously...

VAN (CONT'D)

So, he came to see me and... Well, I'm worried about him. He seems to be having some... issues, Lucas. Like I think he may be on the verge of a mental episode--

AGENT LUCAS (O.S.)

Van, hold on a second, where is Chambers now?

VAN

He's staying at a motel, just outside of town.

AGENT LUCAS (O.S.)

Okay, Van, listen -- Nick Chambers was placed on indefinite leave about two months ago, pending psychiatric evaluation. He went AWOL and we haven't heard from him since. Whatever he's doing out there is *not* sanctioned by the FBI.

Van sits back into the couch for a beat of stunned silence.

AGENT LUCAS (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Van? Are you there?

A hard knock at the door suddenly jolts Van from her thoughts.

VAN

Yeah... Ah, Lucas, I have to go. Someone's at the door.

AGENT LUCAS

Van, just wait one second--

Van hangs up the phone and exits the living room.

A flash of lightning lights up the house exterior as a BOOM of thunder crashes.

INT. VAN'S HOUSE - FRONT ENTRYWAY - DAY

The small vestibule, with its wood and slate finishings, seems to fit in perfectly with the home's mountain forest surroundings. The front door is flanked by tall windows of dappled glass, which obscure the silhouette of whomever is currently knocking.

Van takes a moment to study the small, feminine figure at the front door before she opens it--

Van unlocks and opens the door to reveal a lady in her late 60s, dressed for a cool-weather hike -- *The same grinning old lady from the window of motel room nine...*

She has cold, grey eyes that are sunken into her age-worn face. Her smile creates deep wrinkles that almost resemble a snarl.

OLD LADY

So sorry to bother you, but we were hiking around this beautiful area and seem to have lost our way in this lovely weather. Would you mind terribly if we came inside?

Lightning flashes once again, followed by a roof-rattling BOOM.

The old lady doesn't flinch at all, not even a blink -- She just continues her smile.

Van looks around outside for anyone else, but the old lady is alone. Van senses something very off...

VAN

Have we met?

The old lady completely ignores the question.

OLD LADY

Oh look at that bracelet, looks very special... But we get this very bad feeling from it. Perhaps you should take it off?

Van looks down at her bracelet, confused, then back up to the grinning old lady.

VAN

There aren't any hiking trails up here... Where did you say you came from?

The old lady's smile seems to widen.

OLD LADY

If you'd just be so kind as to invite us inside, we won't be of any bother.

Van very subtly begins to lean back, this whole situation feels wrong...

Her gaze suddenly fixes on the old lady's eyes -- A hazy mirage-like distortion begins to reveal oil-slick black pools where the eyeballs should be. Van blinks hard.

VAN

No... I don't think so.

The old woman's wide smile does not falter.

OLD LADY

Awww, well aren't you a clever cunt...

Van holds her ground, narrowing her eyes.

Her phone suddenly rings in her hand as she stares in disbelief at the old woman.

OLD LADY (CONT'D)

Oooh, that'll be the FBI again, searching for Nick.

Ice runs up Van's spine.

VAN

Who are you?

OLD LADY

Think they'll get to him before we do?

The old lady begins to laugh hysterically and a wide-eyed Van slams the door in the old lady's cackling face, quickly locking the bolt into place.

Van takes a few steps back from the door, her heart thumping in her chest.

The old lady's cackles stop... Silence...

BANG! The front door is hit so hard, it sounds as though a sledge-hammer were swung at it -- The door frame cracks a little in the corners.

Van jumps back. The phone in her hand rings out. Silence once more.

Van peers out through the dappled glass and sees nothing.

She swiftly backs down the hallway, then returns moments later holding an empty wine bottle in her hand, like a club.

Van carefully unlocks the door and opens it a crack...

She swings the door wide to an empty porch.

EXT. PINWOOD MOTEL - PARKING LOT - AFTERNOON

Faint rumbling thunder, grey skies and drizzling rain persist from the previous storm.

Van parks her car and sits, staring at motel room number 8 for a beat of trepidation before she exits the car.

Heading toward Nick's room door, she passes the old Cowboy's RV, giving it a cursory glance--

Her thoughts are silenced -- a sudden, dreadful feeling sinks deep within her...

Van moves up by the RV's clouded window and peers in to see--

The old Cowboy staring back at her. His one lazy eye makes it difficult to tell where he is looking, but it's almost certainly at Van.

An odd, hazy distortion begins to warp Van's view of the Old Man...

His mouth is slightly agape, seemingly in a blank, trance-like state... then he smiles, lifts his hands in front of his face and mimes taking a photograph of her. *CLICK...*

It makes Van's skin crawl.

The RV starts up, sending plumes of white smoke into the air as it pulls out of the parking lot.

Van backs away for a few cautious steps before heading straight for room number 8.

INT. NICK'S HOTEL ROOM 8 - DAY

Every possible source of light in the room is illuminated. Nick sits on the edge of the crisply-made bed.

He stares down with dread at the 9mm automatic pistol he is mindlessly caressing with one hand, as the other hand rubs the rasping stubble on his cheek.

A knock at the door makes him jump--

VAN (O.S.)  
Nick? It's me.



Nick blinks hard a few times as he answers.

NICK  
Door's open.

Van eases open the door, her feminine silhouette is framed by midday sunlight for a beat before she enters, satchel hanging on her shoulder.

VAN  
You left the door unlocked?

NICK  
I was gonna leave... You need to do the same.

Van slowly walks toward Nick, taking note of everything in the room as she moves. She regards the gun Nick holds in his lap and stops walking.

VAN  
Hey, Nick... You need to give me that gun. Don't argue, okay?

NICK  
Van, I wasn't--

VAN  
Please... Don't argue.

Nick solemnly gives in and hands the gun to Van.

Van swiftly removes the pistol's clip and racks the slide, allowing the chambered bullet to drop to the floor.

She then drops the gun into her satchel and slowly sits on the bed next to Nick. She stares at the ground for a beat as she thinks, then folds her arms across her torso.

VAN (CONT'D)  
I'm not going to leave you like this, so if you want me to drop this case, then you need to do the same.

Nick's lower lip trembles.

NICK  
I think it's too late for that...

Van looks at him sternly.

VAN

Nick, I know the bureau put you on  
leave, so don't bullshit me.

Nick nods solemnly, looking at the ground for a beat. Van's eyes burn holes in him.

VAN (CONT'D)

Yeah, I know...

Nick stands suddenly and makes his way over to the television behind Van -- The video camera is wired up to the TV.

NICK

I need you to see something.

Van begrudgingly turns her attention to the TV screen as Nick switches the camera on.

ON SCREEN: Van's reflection is replaced by a freeze-frame -- An infrared-green shot of the room she now sits in -- Nick is fast asleep in the bed, the room door in the background.

Nick hits PLAY on the camera and stands to the side, as if refusing to watch it again.

ON SCREEN: Nick's chest rises and falls as he sleeps. His breathing, crickets and the whirr of the room's fan above, can be heard.

Fairly unexciting viewing, yet Van studies the screen closely.

ON SCREEN: Nick's peaceful sleeping continues for another beat... Then the video playback suddenly goes silent.

VAN

What happened to the sound?

ON SCREEN: Nick's eyes shoot open. His mouth begins to move as if in conversation. His faint whispers are heard, yet no words are clearly discernible.

Van's eyes narrow. She leans toward the screen, her eyes squinting, her head tilts slightly.

VAN (CONT'D)

Who are you talking to?...

ON SCREEN: Nick sits up, a blank stare on his face. He throws the blanket aside and slides his legs over the edge of the bed, his back now to the camera.

VAN (CONT'D)  
You sleepwalk now?

He shakes his head; Van looks back to the screen--

ON SCREEN: Nick stands and walks robotically over to the door and opens it slowly...

Outlined in pale moonlight, a familiar silhouette trots into frame -- The coyote. Clouds of condensation billow from its snout with every exhale.

Van's mouth drops open, yet no sound escapes her lips.

ON SCREEN: Nick holds the open door... The coyote suddenly shrinks back, ready to pounce--

NICK  
(on screen)  
No!

ON SCREEN: Nick slams the door shut, his knees then buckle and he drops to the floor, unconscious.

The screen goes blank as Nick powers off the camera and Van is once again staring at her reflection in the TV screen.

NICK (CONT'D)  
Two nights in a row, I woke up on the floor, in front of that door... No recollection of the night before. The third night I filmed it...

All Van can do is stare up at Nick. She swallows hard.

NICK (CONT'D)  
I haven't slept since seeing that.

Van's heart is pounding in her chest.

Nick mops his face.

VAN  
Nick, something really fucked-up is ha--

BANG! A sudden thud slams against the motel room door...

Van shoots to her feet, both she and Nick face the door.

NICK  
Van, give me my gun...

Van holds her hand up to Nick, wait...

She steps briskly towards the door and swings it opens it to see--

No one... Just the parking lot.

Van sticks her head out and looks in either direction before carefully stepping outside.

Her hand instinctively hovers over the weapon in her satchel.

EXT. PINWOOD MOTEL - PARKING LOT - AFTERNOON

Van turns around as she moves, scanning the parking lot.

Nick cautiously joins Van, he too is scanning the immediate area -- The coast is clear.

Nick places his hands on Van's shoulders, looking intently into her eyes.

He pulls her in tight for a calming embrace. It takes Van an uneasy beat, but she finally wraps her arms around him.

NICK

I'm not going crazy, am I?

Nick pulls back to look Van in the eyes.

NICK (CONT'D)

I don't want to be alone, Van.

Van begins to boil over.

VAN

What am I supposed to do here,  
Nick?!

Nick struggles to find the words, then--

NICK

I want my partner back...

Nick rubs his stinging, glassy eyes. He manages a smile, melancholy keeps it brief.

NICK (CONT'D)

That was selfish of me. I'm sorry.

Nick turns away.

Conflicting emotions collide within Van... She reaches out and catches Nick's arm.

VAN

I've got your back, but you *have* to have mine too.

Nick's hands gently hold either side of Van's head as he looks deeply into her eyes. He surprises her with a kiss on the lips.

NICK

Stay with me tonight.

Van pauses for a beat of trepidation, then kisses him back deeply.

EXT. FOREST TRAIL HEAD - PARKING LOT - LATE AFTERNOON

August walks up to meet the special forces unit as they begin to stroll in from the trailhead. Not in any formation, very nonchalant.

Their commander bangs the back end of the closest military truck twice and their men begin to load up.

AUGUST

Anything?! Did you find anything at all?

The commander regards August with a brief, stern glare, then looks back to his men.

AUGUST (CONT'D)

Sir? Ah... Commander? May I inquire as to--

The commander suddenly holds an open palm in August's face--

COMMANDER

Step aside. I won't ask twice.

August is taken aback as the commander simply hops up into the passenger seat of the truck.

August swallows hard and watches on helplessly as the unit slowly continues loading up.

He glances toward the Dunns, who watch on from a distance in desperation.

Flustered, August brushes his mustache and marches straight back over to his truck.

INT. NICK'S HOTEL ROOM 8 - DUSK

Nick and Van sit on the edge of the bed, next to each other.

Nick's eyes are glassy as he caresses Van's cheek. She leans into it, wanting more.

Van slides over toward Nick, closing the gap. Their kisses are hungry. They've both needed this.

The two ex-lovers begin to undress each other.

Nick's fingers trail down Van's arm and hit her bracelet. He rubs his thumbs over the silver loop, with the small engraved hand.

Nick leans in and kisses Van again -- They fall back onto the bed and begin making love...

EXT. FOREST TRAILHEAD - PARKING LOT - DUSK

The last few soldiers load up into the back of the two dark-green military trucks. Their engines roar to life and they slowly roll out of the parking lot.

Jackie and Ryan Dunn stand in front of their car, watching the trucks leave. Theirs is now the only car in the lot.

Ryan looks despondent, while Jackie watches on, perturbed, as the Special Forces teams leave. She directs her glassy-eyed attention back toward the forest.

Ryan opens the car door for his wife and Jackie abruptly slams it shut again.

Ryan holds his hands out, palms facing up in surrender.

Jackie simply swipes the keys from Ryan's hand. She is breathing hard, upset.

JACKIE

I'm not leaving! If you wanna go,  
then go. I'm *staying* here until I  
find her.

Ryan can't look his wife in the eyes. He nods as tears roll down his cheeks. He holds his hands up in defeat, then turns and walks away.

Jackie buries her face in her hands and begins to sob.

Tucked into a cover of tall shrubs by the entrance of the parking lot, August sits in his vehicle. He watches the feud with a heavy heart.

August drops his head, a grave expression creases his face and he presses his fingers into his forehead.

INT. NICK'S HOTEL ROOM 8 - NIGHT

The soft pattering of raindrops against the room's windows makes for calming noise. Van sleeps on her side, knees tucked up in the fetal position.

She is chilled, wearing only her shirt and underwear.

A flash of lightning illuminates the room, closely followed by a *BOOM* of thunder that seems to rattle the walls.

Nighttime noise suddenly drops away into dead silence; the lack of sound is almost deafening...

Van stirs and wiggles back looking for the warmth of Nick's body -- She does not find it...

Half asleep, she rolls over and reaches for him.

The other side of the bed is empty and Van begins to rouse.

Van's eyes shoot open and she sits bolt-upright in bed.

She looks up toward the room door -- It's wide open and Nick is standing next to it, stark naked. He stares blankly, as if in some hypnagogic state.

VAN

Nick? Nick, what are you doing?

Nick's next words are a terrified whisper--

NICK

She needs my help...

A feeling of dread creeps into Van's gut.

VAN

What?

Van squints her eyes to look at him through the dark -- His cheeks are wet with tears... He is not looking AT her, but BEHIND her...

Van slowly turns and spots movement in the shadowed back corner of the room... Something is edging toward her...

Van's eyes grow wide with terror as the movement begins to take shape -- A coyote, black pools where eyes should be.

VAN (CONT'D)  
Jesus christ! Nick!

Van springs to action, she rolls across the bed, away from the dark animal and carefully backs up toward Nick.

Nick suddenly picks Van up in a bear hug, pinning her arms to her sides.

VAN (CONT'D)  
Nick! Wake the-fuck up!

NICK  
I have to help her...

Van flails violently in Nick's grip, but to no avail.

Van thrashes her body again, as Nick backs up through the open door.

The coyote steps closer...

Van swings her body once more and flies out of Nick's grip, SMASHING the side of her head into the door frame -- A FLASH OF HOT WHITE...

EXT. DARK FOREST - NIGHT - DREAM

A hazy light, from some unknown source, illuminates the moonless forest. A blanket of mist covers the ground.

Slow-motion footsteps run through the trees, dispersing the mist -- Van is running for her life, terror fills her eyes...

She turns back as she runs and sees--

A pack of fifty-or-so coyotes running behind her, weaving through the trees, snarling and crying out with their horrific wails of excitement.

Van pushes on, the slowed time makes it seem like she runs through thick molasses.

All at once, the forest clearing is ahead of her, lit up in an odd, dull glow...



EXT. FOREST CLEARING - NIGHT - DREAM

Van bursts through the circle of trees and into the long grass of the clearing.

She spins around to see the coyotes have surrounded a figure in the woods -- It's Nick -- He stares back at Van, a tear rolls down his cheek.

NICK

I'm sorry...

Van watches on, in painful slow-motion, as the coyotes begin to circle around Nick.

The wild animals suddenly latch onto him and begin ripping the skin from his body.

As Nick's skin tears away, bloodied grey fur is revealed beneath, until the form of coyote now stands in Nick place.

The Nick-coyote drops down to all fours, now indistinguishable from the rest of the pack.

Van tries to call out for him, but no sound escapes her lips... Tears run down her face.

She drops to her knees in anguish, as cascading brown, red and yellow leaves begin falling from above.

MADELINE (O.S.)

Have you seen my camera?...

A small hand suddenly rests on her shoulder and Van turns to see it belongs to Madeline -- The little girl stands barefoot in the long grass.

MADELINE (CONT'D)

I can't find it and I need it...

Van looks back to the forest -- The black-eyed coyotes, now coated in Nick's blood, stand silently around the edge of the clearing. Watching her.

MADELINE (CONT'D)

I like it here. I can be like the other kids. They like you, because of what's in here...

Madeline taps Van's forehead three times.

Van reaches up and takes hold of Madeline's hand. Madeline looks down at the leather bracelet on Van's wrist.

A chorus of wailing from the surrounding army of coyotes...

MADELINE (CONT'D)

They don't like that though...

Madeline begins to walk away, but Van tries desperately to pull the little girl back, shouting silent words.

Madeline turns back around to face Van, her eyes are now black pools... Van lets go of the girl's hand, stunned...

MADELINE (CONT'D)

Have you seen my camera?...

A violent gust of wind suddenly picks up, blowing a wave of leaves into Van's face.

She slowly falls back, covering her face -- A FLASH OF HOT WHITE...

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - DAWN

In the center of the clearing, encircled by dense forest, a human figure lies amongst the long grass, covered in fallen leaves.

The figure is Van and she begins to stir.

Van sits up, shivering and pulling leaves away from her face. She squints as her eyes adjust to the pale light from the rising sun.

Her head throbs as she gets to her knees. Her t-shirt and underwear from the night before offer little warmth, so she hugs her torso.

Van surveys her surroundings, deeply confused.

VAN

Nick?!

Her shout reverberates inside her skull, so she rests it in her hands.

Van gingerly gets to her feet and begins to walk, her first steps are decidedly wobbly. She makes it to a tree at the edge of the clearing and looks around.

VAN (CONT'D)

Nick!

No response. She pushes off the tree and staggers into the forest.

EXT. FOREST TRAIL - MORNING

Morning light is now blasting down the trail from the eastern horizon. Van weaves barefooted between trees, heading for the path.

She makes it to the path and brushes sharp debris from the bottom of her feet. She looks up and down the path...

VAN

Nick!

Van pauses for a moment to listen - Only the forest birds have an answer for her.

Still groggy, she continues heading down the path with her head down. She hugs herself tighter, shivering.

A dark figure, within the forest behind her, steps towards her... Van has no idea.

A hand suddenly grabs Van's shoulder...

EXT. FOREST TRAILHEAD - PARKING LOT - MORNING

Jackie leans against the hood of her car, staring blankly at the ground with her arms crossed for warmth. A cigarette smolders in one hand.

She brings the cigarette up to her mouth, about to take a drag when she spots something in her periphery--

Margaret walks with her arm around Van. They shuffle down the path toward the carpark.

Jackie drops the cigarette and quickly stamps it out, then heads straight for Van and Margaret, her speed increasing with each step...

Van's entire body shivers, chilled to the bone.

JACKIE

Van!?

MARGARET

She'll be okay. I'm gonna get her in my car and get the heat going.

Jackie, now panicking, puts a hand on Van's shoulder and stops her from walking.

VAN

Jackie... I'm really cold...

JACKIE  
What happened!? Did you find  
Madeline?! Please!

Van stares at Jackie with teeth chattering.

VAN  
I'm sorry...

Jackie holds back tears as she lets Van continue on with Margaret.

INT. MARGARET'S TRUCK - MOMENTS LATER

Van breathes a sigh of relief as feeling returns to her extremities. Now wrapped in a silver solar blanket, she holds her hands up to the air vents.

Margaret stares at Van, looking her up and down.

MARGARET  
What happened out there?

Van looks at Margaret from the corner of her eye.

VAN  
I don't remember.

MARGARET  
I should call an ambulance.

Margaret picks up her cellphone and Van promptly places her hand over the screen, pushing it down.

VAN  
No. No, please don't do that.

Margaret slowly puts down her phone.

Van looks her square in the eye.

VAN (CONT'D)  
I'm fine. Really. I just... I can't  
explain it right now.

Margaret quietly assesses Van for a beat.

VAN (CONT'D)  
Would you mind giving me a ride?

Margaret nods. She puts the truck into drive and begins to pull out of the parking lot.

MARGARET

You experienced something out there... You journeyed, didn't you?

Van doesn't look up.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

And that you're *here* right now... I think that means something.

Van scoffs.

VAN

Yeah? How does waking up half-naked in the woods help find a lost little girl?

MARGARET

That little girl didn't get *lost* out there.

Van looks sharply up at Margaret.

VAN

What do you mean?

Margaret sighs.

MARGARET

This has happened before. We all know, but no one says anything.

VAN

How about August, the Park Manager? Does he know?

Margaret nods slowly.

MARGARET

August... He's not a bad man. He's just scared.

Van's eyes narrow at Margaret.

VAN

Scared of what?

MARGARET

What everyone's scared of, I suppose -- The unknown. But there's good reason to be wary of the forest.

VAN  
And why is that?

Margaret pauses to think. She looks over to regard Van, then back to the road--

MARGARET  
My grandmother was Ute. We were warned repeatedly as children not to wander too deep into the forest, lest we end up *into the trees*. That's what she called it.

Van studies Margaret's face.

VAN  
*Into the trees?*

Margaret's strokes her dog's ear as it lays its head on the center console between the seats.

MARGARET  
When I was five, my best friend was Alice. We'd play together every day...

EXT. COUNTRY HOUSE - AFTERNOON - FLASHBACK

A quaint little home is nestled within a dense forest. Two little girls spin in circles on the small patch of grass within the backyard.

MARGARET (V.O.)  
She wasn't like other kids my age. That never bothered me though...

The girls both stop spinning and collapse from dizziness, giggling hysterically and full of joy. Young Margaret looks over to her friend -- Alice has Down Syndrome.

Alice sits up still giggling at young Margaret.

MARGARET (V.O.)  
One afternoon we were playing in her backyard when we heard a voice coming from the forest... It was calling Alice's name.

Alice whips her head around suddenly in the direction of the forest. The two girls see no one, just an expanse of shadowy woodland.

MARGARET (V.O.)

I was terrified by the voice and Alice, her sweet soul, she was spellbound.

Alice stands up smiling, she takes a step toward the trees. Young Margaret stands as well, a look of grave concern on her face.

MARGARET (V.O.)

Alice followed the voice, *into the trees*, laughing as she ran. I was too scared to move. All I could do was yell for her to come back.

Alice runs, smiling, into the forest as young Margaret cries out for her.

INT. MARGARET'S TRUCK - MORNING

Van is silent, taking in Margaret's words, yet her expression reveals some skepticism.

MARGARET

My grandmother told me if we could not *convince* Alice to return, she would become *stuck*. We never saw her again...

Van looks intently into Margaret's eyes.

VAN

Convince her to return?

Margaret looks at Van briefly.

MARGARET

The forest spirits are tricksters. They seduce, luring their prey. The more time one spends in their world, the more difficult it is to leave.

Van stares at the older woman for a beat.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

You may not hear its heartbeat, but the forest is very much alive.

Van looks out into the passing forest, letting Margaret's words roll around in her mind.

VAN  
Having a heartbeat doesn't mean  
you're alive.

Margaret takes in Van's profile for a moment with curious scrutiny, and silently returns her eyes to the road.

INT. NICK'S HOTEL ROOM 8 - MORNING

The door to Nick's room is open.

The sound of a car pulling up, the door opening and closing, then the car driving away is heard from outside.

Van's silhouette approaches the open door. She cautiously looks inside the dark room.

VAN  
(whispered)  
Nick?

There is no answer... She fumbles for the light switch and flicks it on -- Apart from the disheveled bed, the room seems fine. No sign of Nick.

Van looks around outside, then enters the room and closes the door behind her.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - MORNING

A deep rumble is emitted from the heavens above and an odd-looking coyote trots out from behind a cluster of boulders.

A sudden CRACK fills the air as a bolt of lightning lights up the sky.

Multi-colored autumn leaves fall from high above.

The strange coyote's limbs appear to elongate and bend at awkward angles, to the sickly sound of popping joints. It then rears up on its hind legs and takes several bipedal steps for balance...

INT. NICK'S HOTEL ROOM 8 - MORNING

Van sits on the bed wrapped in a toweling robe, her hair still damp from showering. She glares into the middle space, her mind a maelstrom of thought.



Van looks over to the bedside table where a small digital camera in a clear plastic baggie, sits atop an official-looking storage-file box.

Van picks up the baggie, gives the camera a cursory looking over and is about to set it back down, when something catches her eye...

A name is engraved on the camera's body: MADELINE DUNN...

Van quickly pulls the camera from the bag and switches it on. She hits the photo viewer button, bringing up the last photo taken--

Obviously a forest shot, but too blurry to identify clearly -- a circular smear of red, brown and yellow leaves falling... and something grey in the background.

Van clicks through to the next photo -- A deer standing in front of the lake. There is movement in the water behind the deer, causing ripples to emanate. The deer's head is a swish of brown as it turns toward whatever has created the ripples.

Van brings the camera closer to her face, for some extra scrutiny before skipping to the next and final photo -- Shot from the backseat of their car -- Madeline's parents in the front, Jackie's hand in Ryan's.

Van stares at the photo, blinking away welling tears.

She switches the camera off and places it back in its baggie and onto the side table.

Van picks up her satchel from the floor and digs inside. Her hands closes on something that gives her pause--

She pulls out Nick's gun...

Van takes the gun firmly in one hand, reaches down to retrieve the clip from her satchel with the other and inserts it into the butt of the gun.

She slowly racks the slide, chambering a bullet.

Van holds the gun in both hands as dark thoughts wash across her face.

A beat...

Suddenly a vibrating buzz is heard... close but muffled.

She eases the gun back into her satchel.

Van slides off the bed and crouches down onto the floor; the buzz is closer now...

She lays her head under the floor and looks under the bed...  
Bingo.

Van reaches under and grabs Nick's phone.

It buzzes in her hand; Van looks at the screen and reads--

**NO CALLER ID**

Van answers--

VAN  
Hello, this is Van Ide...

MALE VOICE (O.S.)  
Ahh, Nick spoke about you often.  
Nice to talk with a fellow ex-  
special agent.

Van frowns, thinking for a beat.

VAN  
Who is this?

MALE VOICE (O.S.)  
Van Ide, my name is Raymond Martin.

Van's eyes widen.

VAN  
Raymond? Do you know where Nick is?

A pregnant pause, followed by a deep sigh.

RAYMOND (O.S.)  
No, I don't.

Van takes a beat of thought.

RAYMOND (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
Ms Ide, I'm not sure how Nick found  
me, but... I was calling to tell  
him that I'm not getting involved.  
So, I'm gonna hang up now--

VAN  
No! Raymond, please. I need to  
speak with you.

RAYMOND (O.S.)  
I can't help you.

VAN  
Can't or won't?

RAYMOND (O.S.)  
Both.

Van begins to simmer.

VAN  
You think a private number's gonna  
stop me from finding you too?  
(beat)  
Please, Raymond...

Another deep sigh on the other end.

Van's eyes dart around, waiting for an answer...

INT. RAYMOND'S APARTMENT COMPLEX - CORRIDOR - DAY

Cheap, industrial-blue carpet lines the floors of the  
hallways inside this economy-grade domicile.

Van walks down the corridor, flanked by grimy, yellow walls.

She looks up at the door closest to her -- Number 114.

Van knocks on the door. The excited yapping of a small dog  
fills the space on the other side of the door.

Also heard is a grumpy male voice warning the dog to knock it  
off.

Van knocks again.

RAYMOND (O.S.)  
I'm coming. Give me a minute.

The unlatching of an unnecessary amount of locks is heard  
before the door slowly swings open to reveal a slightly  
disheveled black man... He wears thick-rimmed, black glasses  
and a well-worn, knitted, brown cardigan. RAYMOND exudes a  
pompous quality.

VAN  
Raymond?

Raymond's eyes reveal sharp intelligence as he gives Van a  
leering look up and down.

RAYMOND  
Van Ide... Nick was right about  
you.

He gives her a cheeky smile, then pulls the door open wide.

Van enters the apartment with a smirk.

INT. RAYMOND'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - DAY.

Raymond's apartment is practically empty, with a few pieces of furniture here and there in this otherwise blank space.

Van sits on a small, well-loved couch, that possibly doubles as a bed. Raymond shifts uncomfortably in a plastic seat across from her.

A small Yorkshire Terrier cowers to the side of Raymond's chair and growls at the woman who now invades its territory.

Raymond reaches down to scratch it behind the ear.

RAYMOND

Calm down, Shiela.

The dog begrudgingly lays down with an irritated whine, head between its paws.

VAN

Interesting that you happen to live right where the current action is, Raymond.

Raymond bristles, turning his nose up slightly.

RAYMOND

Obviously I read about the little girl, Madeline Dunn. Seems to fit the M.O., doesn't it?

Van counts off the following on her fingers--

VAN

Vanishing while alone in the forest, zero evidence at the scene, and an out-of-the-ordinary investigation follows. Am I missing anything?

Raymond tilts his head from side-to-side with pursed lips, debating the answer in his head for a beat.

RAYMOND

I suppose the similarities in the victims themselves -- A curious synchronicity that I had identified was that *the missing*, as I call them, were all described by friends and family as having something... *uncommon* about them -- Eccentricities, extra-sensory perceptions, higher cognitive abilities or really, any number of psychological anomalies.

Raymond shakes his hands on either side of his head.

RAYMOND (CONT'D)

People with something... *interesting* going on upstairs seem to be the ones who most commonly go, what the Australian Aboriginal peoples might term, "*Walkabout*."

Van narrows her eyes.

VAN

How much of this is FBI aware of?

RAYMOND

Oh they know plenty, I'm sure. Thing is, they can't control it and the US government does *not* like to appear impotent.

Raymond scoffs.

Van slides forward to the edge of the couch and pauses to think.

VAN

What do you think is happening to these people?

Raymond slumps back into his chair.

RAYMOND

If you're looking for anything definitive, I have nothing to offer. Just facts, where the subsequent questions far outweigh answers.

VAN

You can't tell me you don't even have a theory, Raymond.

Raymond again shifts uncomfortably in his chair.

RAYMOND

Any *theory* you can think of, I guarantee, I've heard -- Serial killers, wild animals... and don't get me started on aliens and Sasquatch. I've heard them all, believe me.

Raymond leans forward, putting the weight onto his elbows and presses his hands together.

RAYMOND (CONT'D)

But, yes, I guess you could say I have a *theory*.

VAN

Okay...

RAYMOND

I *believe* the missing find themselves *trapped* in a space where the veil is thin. They have something special and I think whatever is taking them wants it too.

Van tilts her head in a questioning gesture.

RAYMOND (CONT'D)

The forest is *alive*. Native peoples revere *and* fear it, with good reason. It's an ancient and secretive force -- Home to entities with unknown, dark intentions.

Van narrows her eyes.

VAN

So these missing people... they, what? Fall *down the rabbit hole*?

A smug smile grows on Raymond's face.

RAYMOND

Not hole, the term is *window*. And isn't it interesting how many old stories reference this same idea?

Van takes a deep breath.

VAN

Okay, so what would cause a *window* to open?

Raymond, presses his hands together in front of his lips, clearly enjoying the sound of his own voice.

RAYMOND

Well I'm no geophysicist, but *my* theory is that it has to do with the increase of electromagnetic energy in the atmosphere, preceding dramatic changes in the weather.

Raymond shrugs. Van looks down at the floor in thought.

VAN

Do you think Madeline Dunn went through a *window*?

RAYMOND

Or was pulled through... I, myself, interviewed a young boy who, before *fortunately* responding to his father's calls, recalled being lead to a '*hole in the trees*', by '*a dog who walked like people.*'

Dread creeps into Van's face...

RAYMOND (CONT'D)

Now, he was all of three years old, so I don't know that he actually saw--

VAN

A coyote, maybe?

Raymond seems to recognize the look on Van's face and it disturbs him greatly. He stands abruptly.

RAYMOND

God *damnit*... What the *hell* am I doing? -- Always a sucker for a pretty face... Sorry, I can't. This is how it starts. It found you...

He glares at Van, pointing a finger at her.

RAYMOND (CONT'D)

It's calling to you, isn't it? That's what it does, it *tempts* you...

Van says nothing, yet her expression speaks volumes.

Raymond seems agitated and afraid, beginning to pace. Shiela, feeling the tension in the air, barks wildly at her master.

Van stands slowly.

RAYMOND (CONT'D)  
I tried to walk away before this thing *completely* destroyed my life... I warned Nick to do the same... and *now* I'm telling you.

Raymond points at Van sternly again.

RAYMOND (CONT'D)  
You need to leave right now, Van Ide.

Van gives him a blank stare.

VAN  
Raymond, how is it that you just happened to be in the same place now as this *window*?

Raymond looks down at the ground in shame.

VAN (CONT'D)  
You're still chasing this thing...

RAYMOND  
You say that like I have a choice.

Van tries her best to hide the shiver running down her spine.

VAN  
How do I find a window?

Raymond stares gravely up at Van.

RAYMOND  
Are you out of your damn mind?

Van has had enough. She turns to heads for the front door, when--

RAYMOND (CONT'D)  
Hey, Van Ide?

Van turns back to Raymond; he taps the side of his head three times.

An icy-cold dread washes over Van upon seeing this.



RAYMOND (CONT'D)

You don't come back from the trouble you're looking for... So I'm telling you one last time -- Leave this alone and walk away, or it will consume you.

Van stares back at the odd man and his dog for a beat. She then turns and exits the apartment.

A rumble of thunder is heard outside -- It unnerves Raymond and he pulls his cardigan in tight at the neck.

INT. VAN'S CAR - DAY

As Van drives, her mind is miles away, processing. She digs around in her jacket pocket and pulls out the burner phone -- No messages. No calls.

Another phone rings, not the burner in her hand, but in the car with her somewhere.

Van checks her pockets -- No phone there. She looks over to her satchel sitting on the passenger seat, then digs her hand around inside.

The phone stops ringing, as she slowly pulls an object from her purse -- Nick's gun...

She stares at it for a beat, before shoving it back into the purse and digging deeper.

Van's hand finally closes around her phone, she unlocks the screen just as a voice message ALERT from GLENN FORESTER pops up.

She leaves it.

INT. VAN'S OFFICE - DAY

Van sits with her satchel on her lap -- She pulls out Nick's gun from within and carefully places it into the desk drawer with the taser, then closes it.

She downs the contents in the mug on her desk. She grimaces from the cold, slightly spoilt coffee.

Van picks up her personal phone from the desk and presses the home button -- The notification box on-screen alerts her to one new voicemail. Van plays the recorded message on speaker.

GLENN (O.S.)

Hi Van, this is Glenn Forester...  
Um, just checking in that you  
received my payment... Ah, look, my  
wife and I have decided to give it  
another try... We're doing some  
counseling and... you know...  
Anyway, I... I wanted to ask you to  
delete those, ah, photos... So, if  
you could do that as soon as  
possible, I... I think that would  
be best. Thanks.

Van gives an incredulous smirk and opens the photos app on her phone. She selects the ten-or-so photos of Mrs. Forester, then hits delete.

Her finger now hovers over the last item in the thumbnail list -- An image with a small white triangle in its center -- A VIDEO.

Van taps the video, it opens and begins to play...

ON SCREEN: The video that Van began filming from the car, in front of Nick's hotel room -- Difficult to see much through the rain and wipers.

Van squints, trying to focus...

ON SCREEN: The maid enters the frame and Van can be heard cursing then the picture swings wildly as Van throws her phone onto the passenger seat. When the phone comes to rest, Van can be seen exiting the car and slamming the driver's side door behind her.

Van is about to stop the video when--

ON SCREEN: A face enters the screen -- The old cowboy from the RV. He looks down into Van's car, straight down at her phone--

The entry door to Van's office suddenly opens and Van pauses the video.

JACKIE walks into view, holding Van's business card in her hands. MARGARET also steps into the office behind Jackie.

Van searches their faces.

VAN  
Something happened...

JACKIE

(voice breaking)

They called off the search. Said it was most likely an animal attack. Maybe a mountain lion...

VAN

Jackie, I'm so sorry.

Jackie looks demolished.

Margaret steps toward Van's desk.

MARGARET

In the last hundred years, only seventeen people have ever been confirmed attacked or killed by a mountain lion in this country and I see no evidence for that number increasing with this case.

Margaret steps closer to Van's desk.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

No, *the powers-that-be* want this to go away. I told Jackie that my dog, Pepper, and I will continue searching as long as she needs us...

(beat)

She had the impression that maybe you'd help too...

Van looks up into Jackie's pleading eyes, then back to Margaret.

VAN

Last time we spoke, you said people who went missing had to be *convinced* to return... What did you mean by that?

MARGARET

Last time we spoke, I got the impression you didn't think much of what I said... What changed?

Van looks back and forth between the two women standing before her.

VAN

Everything...

Margaret nods wearing a stern expression.

MARGARET

I believe the old stories are based on truth. If Madeline went into the trees, her connection to this world will soon fade.

Van stares off in thought...

VAN

Jackie, Madeline's camera... it was special to her?

Jackie's eyes begin to glass up--

JACKIE

Oh, Madeline was obsessed with it. She would walk around pretending to take photos with her little fingers before we got her that camera...

Jackie mimics the movement of taking a photo... CLICK...

Van's eyes widen at Jackie as though she had just been slapped...

Van slowly looks over at her personal cellphone that sits on her desk. She picks it up, unlocks it and returns to the video she had been previously watching.

JACKIE (CONT'D)

Van? What is it?

Van doesn't look up from the screen.

ON SCREEN: A smile grows on the old cowboy's face as his lazy eye seems to be following something off screen.

Van frowns and her lips part as she watches.

ON SCREEN: The old man taps, three times, on the driver's side window. When he speaks, the glass muffles the sound slightly--

OLD MAN

Y'all come on and join us now, y'hear?

ON SCREEN: The old man's smile widens to a grin, then continues to widen until the edges of his lips almost touch his ears. The teeth that are exposed are like those of a dog... Or a coyote. The old man then turns and walks off-screen.

Van quickly exits the photos app, breathing heavily and looks up to see the two women staring at her.

Van suddenly stands up, sending her chair flying back. She slides her jacket on and pulls open the desk drawer.

JACKIE

Van?

VAN

I have to go.

She opens the desk drawer and hesitates as her hand hovers above Nick's gun and the yellow-griped taser...

She finally chooses the gun and slides it into her satchel.

Margaret watches Van conceal the weapon and gives her a look of intent, holding up a hand to her.

MARGARET

Do you carry any protection from the... non-physical?

Van raises her eyebrows at Margaret.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

I'm quite serious. An amulet, good-luck charm... Anything meaningful that connects you to this world?

Van throws the strap of her satchel over her shoulder.

VAN

I'll be fine.

EXT. NICK'S HOTEL ROOM 8 - PARKING LOT - AFTERNOON

Rain falls lightly, giving everything in the area a wet sheen.

Van's excessive speed into the parking lot slows suddenly as she spots the first black car... When she sees the second, third and fourth cars, her heart sinks.

Several men in dark blue rain jackets, with the yellow letters "FBI" on the back, walk in and out of Nick Chambers' hotel room.

Van slowly rolls toward them and pulls up in a parking spot outside the hotel. The FBI agents pause momentarily to observe Van. One of them shouts something toward one of the open car doors.

A tall, red-haired man, early 40s, in a black suit steps out of the car. His federal agent badge hangs on the front of his belt. This is SPECIAL AGENT LUCAS. He is on the phone, but ends the conversation as he sees Van.

Van takes a moment to think... She leans over to the passenger seat and grabs her satchel.

Van exits her car, throwing the satchel strap over her shoulder.

She and Lucas walk toward each other.

VAN

Lucas.

Lucas gives a brief sigh and gives a half smile.

AGENT LUCAS

Van... it's good to see you.

(beat)

I ah... assume you're here looking for Nick?

Van nods slowly, sensing something off...

VAN

Is he inside?

She nods her head toward the motel room.

Lucas shakes his head.

AGENT LUCAS

No. Can we talk?

Van frowns, tense with concern.

VAN

Sure... Inside maybe? I'm kinda chilly.

Van feigns a shiver as she folds her arms.

Lucas looks around to his fellow agents, busy at their work, then back at Van.

AGENT LUCAS

Come on.

Lucas heads back toward the motel room and Van follows.

When they reach room number eight, Lucas holds his hands up to the other agents.

AGENT LUCAS (CONT'D)  
Team, I'm gonna need a minute  
inside.

The agents heading toward the room stop in their tracks. Two from inside vacate the room.

AGENT LUCAS (CONT'D)  
Thanks, guys.

Agent Lucas leads Van inside.

INT. NICK'S HOTEL ROOM 8 - AFTERNOON

Upon entering Van immediately spots Madeline's camera, still in the clear baggie, sitting atop the white box on the nightstand.

AGENT LUCAS  
Van, how are you?

Van folds her arms.

VAN  
Been a rough few days.

He gives an understanding nod.

AGENT LUCAS  
Did Chambers mention anything about  
what he was working on?

VAN  
Only that he was looking for the  
missing little girl. He didn't go  
into details.

AGENT LUCAS  
Look, Van... Nick was in bad shape.  
I mean you saw it yourself, or you  
wouldn't have called me.

A growing sense of dread is evident on her face...

VAN  
Lucas, where's Nick?

Lucas takes in a deep breath and exhales...

AGENT LUCAS  
Okay... Van, we found Nick's body  
early this morning...  
(MORE)

AGENT LUCAS (CONT'D)

It was suicide. He shot himself in the head.

Van is frozen in wide-eyed shock. A beat of silence goes by.

VAN

No. Impossible. Nick did *not* kill himself, Lucas. You and I both know that.

Lucas stiffens.

AGENT LUCAS

I'm sorry, Van. I'm just giving you the facts here. It's fairly clear-cut -- Nick believed in all these conspiracy theories and went crazy trying to prove them. That's it.

Van fumes, staring daggers at Agent Lucas. Hot tears fill her eyes.

VAN

That's fucking bullshit...

Agent Lucas scratches his forehead with a thumbnail, as he sighs with closed eyes.

AGENT LUCAS

Van, I'm saying this as a friend --  
*Just walk away and let this go.*

Van nods, seething, but manages to calm herself. She sits on the side of the bed, satchel on her lap. She wipes tears from her eyes.

VAN

Can you give me a moment, Lucas?

Lucas shakes his head.

AGENT LUCAS

I'm sorry, Va--

VAN

Please...

Van's buries her head in her hands.

Lucas looks down at the broken woman and sighs.

AGENT LUCAS

I... I'll give you a couple of minutes, okay?



Van nods, wiping more tears with her palms.

Lucas exits.

EXT. NICK'S HOTEL ROOM 8 - PARKING LOT - AFTERNOON

Agent Lucas closes the door behind him and checks his watch, when--

Van suddenly opens the door and pushes past Lucas, marching away in a huff.

VAN

Hope you sleep well tonight, Lucas.

AGENT LUCAS

Van...

Van furiously passes the FBI agents, who all look at each other, smirking with eyebrows raised.

She jumps back into her car and fires up the engine.

Agent Lucas walks out into the parking lot, glaring.

Van pulls out of her parking spot aggressively and drives away in the same manner.

EXT. FOREST TRAILHEAD - PARKING LOT - DUSK

Rain falls, thunder rumbles and thick fog begins to swirl around the bases of the trees.

A beat of silence... Then a coyote crests the small rise at the beginning of the trail and heads into the carpark.

The sound of a car approaching is heard and headlights light up the parking lot, they shine on the coyote.

INT. VAN'S CAR - TRAILHEAD PARKING LOT - DUSK

Van looks through her rain-dappled windshield as the coyote calmly turns and trots off back through the trail entrance.

She reaches over to her glove compartment, retrieves a flashlight, then places her satchel on her lap and stares out into the rainy darkness.

Van frowns, determined. She pulls the hood from her jacket up over her head and exits the car.

EXT. FOREST TRAILHEAD - PARKING LOT - DUSK

Van throws her satchel strap over her head and closes the car door.

She scans her surroundings -- She is alone. She takes a deep breath, slides her hands into her jacket pockets and looks up into the trees.

VAN

I'm here!

She listens... only the easing rain can be heard.

VAN (CONT'D)

I'm coming for Madeline!

Silence.

VAN (CONT'D)

You hear me?!

A BOOM of thunder from above and Van begins marching toward the trail entrance.

VAN (CONT'D)

Yeah, you hear me...

A resolute determination grows with each step.

EXT. FOREST LAKE - NIGHT

The rain falls in drizzles and gently breaks the surface of the lake. Moonlight peeks through an opening in the clouds and illuminates patches of the forest floor.

The beam from Van's flashlight bounces along the trail as she makes her way towards the lake.

She reaches the water's edge, shining the light out over the water; it is eerily quiet.

The rain finally subsides, yet rumbles of thunder and brief flashes of lightning continue.

Van pulls the hood back from her head and surveys the immediate area. All is still. All is silent. A chill runs down her spine as she feels eyes on her.

VAN

I know you're watching! So come on,  
let's get this--

Movement suddenly behind her, Van whips around with her flashlight pointed in the direction of the noise.

She carefully pulls the gun from her satchel and aims it down her flashlight's beam of light.

Movement, too fast to get a good look, as something ducks behind a large tree.

Van's breathing becomes shallow, not wanting to make any sound as she listens.

She then swallows hard before stepping into the forest, towards the commotion.

VAN (CONT'D)

Come on! I'm ready!

A faint sound pulls her up and Van becomes quiet as possible, tilting her head to listen--

A baby crying... The crying begins to transition into the horrific wailing of coyote calls.

Van positions her flashlight beneath the butt of the gun, wrist over wrist -- A trained technique. She continues walking the trail, following the noise.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - NIGHT

Silence gradually engulfs the world like the vacuum of space.

Van makes her way, cautiously along the path towards the open circle of trees. The clearing is dully illuminated with some sickly, crimson glow.

Strands of her hair stand on end -- The electricity in the air is practically humming...

She makes it to the circle of trees to find a black-eyed coyote in the center of the clearing. It licks its chops.

The wind picks up, blowing the tree branches above, though no sound is heard, until--

A silent, thunderous bolt of lightning flashes somewhere directly above the canopy of trees. The coyote's body creaks as it rises onto its hind legs.

The wind begins to blow harder, sending dead leaves and pine-needles soaring... A maelstrom of colors; red, yellow, orange and brown spin around and around within the center of the clearing.

The vortex of leaves turns even faster and begins to rise off the ground.

Van's heart races.

The vortex begins to tilt upward, until it is spinning ninety degrees off the ground, the circle now facing Van and the bipedal coyote.

Only Van's awed breathing can be heard...

A faint, dull-red glow emanates from the center of the vortex and the coyote gestures with its head for Van to enter.

Van steps cautiously forward through the long grass toward the vortex. She turns off the flashlight, dropping it into her satchel and slides the gun into the back of her jeans.

As she approaches the vortex, the coyote steps in front of her, baring its teeth -- Van stops in her tracks.

She defensively holds up a hand at the coyote, while her other hand hovers around the butt of the gun in her pants.

The coyote sniffs at Van's wrist and she follows its black, soulless gaze down to her leather bracelet. It lets out a guttural growl...

Van very begrudgingly removes it, as tears well in her eyes.

She thrusts the bracelet out in front of the coyote's snout, glaring daggers at the bipedal beast.

Van lets the bracelet drop in the grass between them; in response, the coyote suddenly leaps through the center of the vortex, disappearing from sight.

Van looks down at her bracelet in the grass and takes a beat to contemplate her next moves...

She takes a deep breath, closes her eyes and steps through the center of the vortex -- Her form is instantly swallowed up into nothing...

EXT. VORTEX WORLD - MOUNTAIN BASE - NIGHT?

The landscape is a desert wasteland of red rocks and sand. A pale red glow from an unseen source gives just enough light to see. A humid, stifling wind hits Van's face and causes her eyes to water.

Gravity in this world is overbearing and heavy -- Van's every step is a battle, lifting her head is a struggle, yet she manages and looks ahead of her--

Large dark boulders jut out around the base of a mountain. A small, white, box-like structure sits nestled within the rock.

The bipedal coyote is watching her... It turns and starts heading toward the white box.

Van pushes through the intense heaviness and step-by-step, follows the coyote. She holds the wing of her jacket in front of her face to keep the hot sand from blowing into her eyes.

As Van approaches, the white box-like structure takes shape -- It's the old cowboy's RV; fused within a cluster of boulders, as though it had grown there like a fungus. An orange light glows from within.

Van eases her hand around to the back of her jeans, as she cautiously walks towards the RV, its door ajar...

She pulls the gun and holds it out in front of her.

OLD MAN (O.S.)  
Step into my parlor, darlin'.

Van steps up to the open RV door.

Van inhales deeply and conceals the gun back into her jacket pocket, keeping her hand inside.

She enters the RV.

INT. RV CAVE - NIGHT

The interior of the RV is deceptively spacious. Boulders interrupt the smooth flow of walls periodically, as though the two were competing for the same space.

The only objects in the room are a small wooden table and two wooden chairs. The old cowboy sits in one chair, the other left open, presumably for Van.

There is an ethereal quality inside this space -- Everything fluctuates like heat waves on a desert horizon.

As Van steps inside, she is instantly hit with a profound, heavy dizziness. It makes her want to lay down and sleep, but she fights through it.

OLD MAN

Feels somewhat peculiar through the  
looking-glass, don't it? Hours flow  
like minutes here.

The old man gestures to the open seat across from himself.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)

Please, sit yerself down 'for ye  
fall down, darlin'. Ye'll get used  
to it, in time...

Van obliges, her muscles feel like jelly. She stumbles  
towards the chair and collapses into it, letting her satchel  
drop to the floor.

She rests her elbow on the table to hold herself upright, the  
other hand still firmly planted in her jacket pocket.

VAN

Who... Who are you?

The old man ponders this for a beat.

OLD MAN

Ain't no *you*, only *we*.

Van's heavy eyes do their best at widening, as she attempts  
to get a better look at him.

VAN

I can't...

Van's head dips, feeling full of sand.

OLD MAN

Hmm, you might just feel a tad more  
consolidated if'n you ingest a tiny  
morsel on this side, I reckon.

The Old Man reaches down under the table and retrieves a  
bronze tray containing some bread, a few berries and a bronze  
goblet of wine. He gently places it onto the table, sliding  
it over to Van.

A horrible odor assaults Van's nostrils and she recoils.

VAN

What's that... smell?

OLD MAN

Hmm? No need to concern yourself  
with that, darlin'. Just partake in  
a little grub.

Van stares intently at the tray of food and drink -- Almost definitely the source of the smell.

The tray of seemingly delicious treats wavers in a haze and all of a sudden it doesn't look much like food anymore--

It looks like a cup of blood and a pile of raw meat... skin... a complete, folded dermal layer of a human man...

It takes all of Van's strength to swing her arm at the tray, crying out in anguish as she sends the horrid, bloody offering to the floor.

She can barely hold herself up, huffing and puffing in exhaustion.

The Old Man bristles as he looks down at the mess.

He wipes his mustache with his thumb and forefinger, then reaches across the small table and taps a fingertip onto Van's forehead, three times.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)

Yer a rare *spark*, darlin'.

Van attempts to swat his hand away, but her arm feels like lead and the Old Man easily avoids it.

VAN

Why... Why do you... take them?

The Old Man gives this a beat of careful thought as he slowly sinks back into his chair, studying Van.

OLD MAN

Does a spider merely feed on the flies caught in his web? No. The fly becomes *of* the spider. Through a joining, with those that carry a *spark*, we are granted shape and form within *your realm*.

The Old Man stands and steps around the table to Van -- With each step, the Old Man seems to grow in size and intimidation. He pants excitedly like an animal.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)

See, there was a time, when we were dwellers of *your realm*...

Van glares up at him from her sinking head, breathing hard.

VAN

Where... is... Madeline? I'm...  
taking... her home.

The Old Man smiles, showing his ragged, broken teeth.

OLD MAN

Naw, don't think so. See, yer stuck  
in our web now... But that ain't a  
bad thing darlin' -- Dreams come  
true here, in exchange for a  
little... something of yerself, of  
course.

The Old Man chuckles as he firmly presses his palm into Van's  
forehead.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)

Ohhh... and don't ye indeed have  
something truly special for us?  
How's about a little taste?

Van's head begins to vibrate violently, a blur of movement  
under the Old Man's palm. His jaw slackens and eyes glaze  
over. A line of black drool drips from the corner of his  
mouth in a long strand.

Van begins pulling the gun from her jacket pocket. It seems  
to weigh fifty times what it used to, yet she's gradually  
able to lift it.

The Old Man's movements are swift, unaffected by the  
unnatural gravity of this dimension -- He scoops up Van's  
wrist and throws it down to the table; the gun springing free  
and clattering to the floor.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)

What is it ye hoped to achieve  
here, darlin'?

Van once again glares up at the creepy, old cowboy.

VAN

I'm taking... Madeline...

The Old Man looks around the room cautiously, his eyes  
independent of one-another.

A trickle of blood rolls down from each of Van's nostrils.

OLD MAN

Well? Go on then.

He chuckles to himself again.



Van squeezes her eyes shut and opens them, staring around the room...

VAN  
Madeline! Come... with me... back  
to... Mom and Dad.

A wavering haze begins to form around Old Man's head... Van's sharp eyes spot it instantly as she struggles to keep her head up.

VAN (CONT'D)  
Madel--

Within the haze, a head replaces Old Man's own -- The black-eyed coyote...

VAN (CONT'D)  
...line.

The old Cowboy shakes his canine head and the haze disappears -- His old, wrinkled face returned.

The Old Man's eyes are wide with glee...

OLD MAN  
Well now... Yer spark shines  
bright, don't it, darlin'? Helps ye  
see the best o' both worlds, mmm  
hmm.

The Old Man turns his head slightly from side-to-side, so each independent eye can regard her.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)  
What is it ye really wants? Hmm?

Old Man shuffles back suddenly and shoots Van a coy smile...

Van's head bobs up and down as she battles the weight, then her eyes grow wider as she sees--

From behind Old Man's frame a small figure slowly steps out... A little boy of about 3 years old... Shyly, he looks at the ground as he walks toward Van...

Van's eyes instantly fill with tears as a profound recognition hits her -- The gravity of this world pales in comparison to what has just hit her emotionally...

The boy slowly looks up at Van--

LITTLE BOY  
Mommy?...

Van's mouth hangs open, her lips turning down. Her hands cover her mouth as tears stream down her face. The dam is about to burst...

The Old Man smiles down at Van.

OLD MAN

Now ye can be together forever --  
No more pain. All that came before  
was but a bad dream.

Van cries out as she reaches for the little boy, she breaks down in sobs as she cups his little cheeks in her trembling hands.

VAN

(sotto voce)  
Henry...

Van pulls the boy into her, hugging him tightly -- For a moment, Van's battle with the overwhelming gravity seems like a memory, as she lifts Henry in her embrace.

She then sets him down and holds him out at arms length to get a good look at him.

The little boy smiles up at her... and when Van sees it, her smile instantly fades--

Van watches in increasing horror as hazy mirage washes over the boys face... His eyes become black pools of emptiness.

Van cries out and suddenly lets go of the boy, crumbling to the floor in a sobbing heap...

The dam bursts and she screams into her hands... Years of pent up emotion pour out of her in a primal torrents over the next few beats.

Van slowly looks up at the Old Man, glaring sharp daggers of hatred at him.

VAN (CONT'D)

You... Fucking monster...

The little boy reaches out to Van then suddenly vanishes before her eyes.

VAN (CONT'D)

How... Fucking... Dare you...

The Old Man frowns down at Van, shaking his head.

OLD MAN

We give ye what yer heart desires,  
darlin'... Why don't ye take it?

The Old Man's lips part in a thin smile.

Van's head drops... Her tears hit the floor as she squeezes her eyes shut, barely holding back the excruciating emotion.

VAN

That's... not... real...

She shoots her eyes back up at the Old Man, but he is nowhere to be seen...

Another figure now sits in the chair on the other side of the wooden table -- A blond-haired little girl, with down syndrome -- ALICE.

ALICE

You don't ever have to feel that  
pain again. We can take it from  
you.

Van stares defiantly up at Alice. She breaths heavily, clenches her jaw and with great strain gets up to one knee -- Blood, sweat and tears literally cover her face...

VAN

That pain... is mine.... It's...  
how... I... remember.

Van reaches into her satchel that now rests on the ground in front of her...

VAN (CONT'D)

Madeline...

Another form now sits in Alice's place; the Old Lady who earlier visited Van's front door, brings her hands down to SLAM the table-top, her face now warped and ghastly...

She cackles, SLAMMING the table again and cracking the wood.

The Old Lady's form undulates and morphs into a series of random people: male, female, old, young...

Van watches in terrified awe, her breathing getting faster.

Finally, a creature of true horror now sits in the chair -- Its form is gaunt, black and scaled. Its skin like a tree after a forest fire -- A transitional form... or perhaps its TRUE form...

The dark Old Man-thing's body vibrates, snaps and suddenly a face emerges from its torso -- A little girl -- Madeline.

Running on empty, Van grits her teeth as she retrieves Madeline's camera from inside her satchel and holds it in the air...

VAN (CONT'D)

Madeline!... I have... your...  
camera!

MADELINE

My camera?

Madeline steps out from within the dark, Old Man-thing's body; like two forms separating from the same space.

The Old Man-thing simply observes everything with its black eyes, head curiously tilted to the side.

Madeline calmly pads over to Van on bare feet and closes her hands around her prized possession.

MADELINE (CONT'D)

My ca... Cammmmm.... Caaaaa...

The little girl ultimately makes a few squealing honks of pleasure.

A faint smile of warmth breaks on Van's face as she watches the little girl hold her camera tightly to her chest.

VAN

Let's... go... home...

A deep guttural moan is heard from behind them...

Van turns around to see the dark, Old Man-thing -- Now enormous and bent over, too big to stand upright in this room. His spindly arms and legs are balled up in the corner of the room, resembling a spider bracing itself.

Van stands with a grunt, places herself in front of Madeline and holds the girl firmly behind her.

She begins to back up toward the door, ushering the little girl along with her.

VAN (CONT'D)

We're... leaving...

With a terrifying speed, the dark Old Man-thing suddenly crab-crawls up onto the ceiling and across the room toward them.

It reaches down and snatches Van's head in its now-massive hand. Van struggles in the thing's grip, but to no avail.

The Old Man-thing stretches its neck to lean in toward Van's head. Its mouth opens. Wider... until its several feet open.

Van's head begins to vibrate rapidly in the Old Man-thing's giant hand.

CLICK -- A FLASH OF WHITE LIGHT. The dark Old Man-thing suddenly drops Van and she collapses to the floor.

Van's eyes immediately fix on the gun, a few feet away from her now. Van begins to inch toward it...

CLICK -- ANOTHER FLASH. The Old Man-thing's jaw snaps shut as it sees Madeline snapping photos.

Madeline lets out an ear-piercing screech as she snaps another photo.

The giant black hand begins to close in on the young girl...

Van looks back to Madeline, then tries to reach the gun once more... It's too far--

Crying out in excruciating effort, Van swivels her body and rolls back to her knees, placing herself between the girl and the dark creature.

She hugs an arm around Madeline and braces for impact, sheltering her the best she can.

The Old Man-thing swipes down at Van and the girl, when--

The coyote suddenly bounds in through the door and snaps a mouthful of Van's jacket. It instantly backs up toward the door, violently dragging Van and Madeline with it.

As Van and Madeline are pulled back over the threshold, Van catches a glimpse of the dark Old Man-thing smiling eerily at her--

BOOM! A FLASH of overwhelming white light and a CRASH of thunder...

EXT. FOREST LAKE - DAWN

SPLASH!

The white light dissipates...

Van finds herself underwater. She's stunned, dazed... Which way is the surface?

She sees light and begins swimming up towards it.

A huge gasp of air as her head breaches the lake's surface. She takes in several deep breaths, coughing out water as she looks around behind her -- She spots the lake's edge and hiking trail beyond.

Van begins to swim for it, then stops... She hears something... Banging... Maybe faint cries...

She swivels her body in the water to face the direction of the noise -- About a hundred feet deeper into the lake, the corner of a structure is slowly sinking.

Van powers through the cold water toward the structure. The closer she gets, the more the structure takes shape -- It is the Old Man's RV. The back end of the RV is the only section, so far, not submerged.

As Van closes in on the sinking RV, the banging and crying become louder -- They are the cries and screams of a young girl...

The RV's sinking back end rolls forward, the back window now faces Van -- In the window of the RV, Madeline pounds her hand on the glass. She is beside herself with panic as the water rises up to her ears inside.

VAN

Madeline!

Air shoots up sending spray into the air, followed by a rush of bubbles as the back end of the RV is finally swallowed by the lake.

Van takes a deep breath and dives down to follow the rapidly sinking RV.

INT. FOREST LAKE - UNDERWATER - DAWN

Van pulls herself through the water with all her might, chasing the open door of the RV as it sinks like a rock. Bubbles trail from the opening as her fingers reach to grab hold...

She just misses, then pulls through the water again and finally grabs the edge of the door.

With skillful underwater maneuvering, Van drags herself through the RV doorway. The RV continues to sink into the black void of the deep lake...

EXT. FOREST LAKE - DAWN

The surface of the lake is relatively calm. The first light from the sun begins to light up the sky. This gorgeous vista is calm, serene.

A beat.

SPLASH! Van pops up, holding Madeline in her arms. They both cough, splutter and gasp for air.

Madeline thrashes around, freaking out and screaming, as Van treads water trying to hold her up.

Van turns the little girl, pulls her in tight and presses her cheek against Madeline's face.

VAN  
Madeline, it's okay, baby. Calm  
down, you're okay.

Madeline is in a mad panic and continues her thrashing.

VAN (CONT'D)  
Shhh, Madeline, you're okay.

Van dips below the surface. She is exhausted, trying to hold up the terrified little girl and keep herself afloat.

Madeline kicks away from Van, throwing her arms around wildly and sinking beneath the surface.

Van is breathing hard, she dives under and Madeline is pushed up above the water's surface, splashing wildly.

INT. FOREST LAKE - UNDERWATER - DAWN

Van furiously treads water below the surface, her arms straining to hold the girl up, with every last ounce of her strength.

Van's lungs heave, desperate for air, her eyes bulging...

Her lung spasms begin to slow... A blank acceptance washes over Van's face...

SPLASH! A burly arm suddenly seizes Madeline's arm and reefs her upward...

EXT. FOREST LAKE - DAWN

Van breaches the surface once again, choking and heaving as air finally fills her lungs.

She looks over to Madeline, who is now clinging for dear-life around a bewildered August's shoulders.

August does not appear to even acknowledge Van, yet simply begins swimming back towards the shore with the young girl.

Madeline turns her head, locking eyes with Van as she is carried away by the big man.

Van stares back at Madeline in a daze, as she treads water and catches her breath.

EXT. FOREST TRAIL HEAD - PARKING LOT - MORNING

Madeline and August sit in the back of an ambulance wrapped in blankets as EMTs check them over.

August looks over to the little girl, a smile grows on his face.

Several cars suddenly pull into the parking lot, one in particular screeching to a halt -- The Dunns.

Jackie and Ryan bolt over to the ambulance in near-hysterics and take Madeline in their arms; Madeline rocks back and forth as happy tears roll down her face.

Jackie turns to August and is about to speak when she is interrupted by Agent Lucas' appearance--

AGENT LUCAS

Mister and Misses Dunn, I'm so happy you've been reunited with your daughter. When she's ready, the FBI will need to ask her some questions. Now, where is Van Ide?

August and the Dunns look at one another.

AGENT LUCAS (CONT'D)

No one?

Silence.

Agent Lucas narrows his eyes, then immediately walks over to Van's empty SUV and peers inside. Seeing nothing of interest, he looks around at the surrounding forest.



EXT. RURAL STRETCH OF ROAD - NIGHT

The full moon seems larger than usual, throwing a strangely-hued glow on this long stretch of open road and the blanket of snow on the surrounding open fields.

Headlights pop up on the horizon -- Van's red SUV casually drives down this straight stretch of road.

A shadowy four-legged figure suddenly shoots across the road behind Van's car...

INT. VAN'S CAR - RURAL STRETCH OF ROAD - NIGHT

Van drives with one hand on the wheel. She smiles, calm and serene.

Van looks down and places a hand on her swollen, pregnant belly, rubbing it in circles.

She looks into the rear-view mirror -- No one is behind her.

All is well in the world...

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - DAWN

A stiff wind blows through the trees, causing a handful of the remaining brown leaves to float down and land on the fresh layer of snow on the ground.

The sound of a sniffing dog following a scent is heard, followed by footsteps crunching through the snow.

MARGARET (O.S.)

Good girl, Pepper. Get after it.

Pepper follows her nose into the center of the clearing, wagging her tail wildly and pulling Margaret behind her.

Pepper stops suddenly and digs her nose into the snow, then uses her paws to excitedly dig.

MADELINE

Wha'choo got? Hmm? What is it?

Lemme at it now.

Margaret pushes Pepper out of the way, bends down and brushes away the snowy earth where Pepper was digging.

Margaret pauses for a beat at what she sees...

She bends down and retrieves an object from the ground --  
VAN'S LEATHER BRACELET, with the silver loop, rests in  
Margaret's hand.

Margaret looks gravely down at the bracelet, before turning  
her gaze at the trees around her.

The forest grows eerily quiet.

FADE OUT.