

BLIND DRIVE AHEAD

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LifePoint Productions LLC

EXT. MAIN STREET - JOHNSONVILLE - LATE AFTERNOON

Game day settles over Johnsonville. Storefronts close early.

A barber sweeps hair out the door beneath a hand-painted sign that reads GO WILDCATS.

At the diner, a waitress changes the special to WILDCAT BURGER COMBO.

The church marquee reads: PRAY FOR OUR BOYS. PLAYWITH HEART.

Children toss a football in the street until a pickup honks.

Nobody gets angry. It is Friday. Everybody understands.

INT. BURGER JOINT - LATE AFTERNOON

JOSH (17) sits in a booth with DOUG (18), TOBY (17), BRANDON (16), CANDICE (17), and JESSIE (16). The table is crowded with fries, playbooks, and the casual arrogance of teenagers who have not yet learned how quickly life can split in half.

TOBY

If we go to state, I'm requesting a parade. Not a little parade. A morally excessive parade.

JESSIE

You gonna ride on a float?

TOBY

I am the float.

Brandon studies the play sheet instead of eating. Josh notices.

JOSH

You planning on taking my job before dessert?

BRANDON

No. Just trying to understand why we check out of trips right when the safety shades outside.

DOUG

Listen to QB2 using whole sentences. Proud of you.

Brandon smiles. Josh gives him the play sheet.

JOSH
 Because if the safety shades
 outside, the middle opens. You do
 not stare at the receiver. You move
 him with your eyes.

BRANDON
 Right.

JOSH
 Game is mostly eyes. Where you put
 them, where you don't.

Candice catches that line. It will matter later.

CANDICE
 You should remember that off the
 field too.

JOSH
 I am being mentored by my
 girlfriend over French fries.

CANDICE
 And yet somehow you survive.

Doug watches the two of them, then leans toward Josh.

DOUG
 She sees you better than the scouts
 do.

JOSH
 Then she should offer a
 scholarship.

CANDICE
 It comes with conditions.

JOSH
 Terrifying.

EXT. BURGER JOINT - MOMENTS LATER

They spill outside. HENRY (10) and HENRY'S FATHER (30s) pass
 by, picking up takeout. Henry stops dead when he sees Josh.

HENRY
 Dad. Dad. That's him.

HENRY'S FATHER
 I see him. Don't tackle him in the
 parking lot.

Josh gives Henry a quick two-finger salute. Henry nearly levitates.

DOUG

You know he's gonna remember that for the next ten years.

JOSH

It was two fingers.

DOUG

Exactly. Heavy is the hand, QB1.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROAD - NIGHT

A scream of tires tears through the dark. Metal twists. Glass scatters across asphalt.

Red and blue light pulses over a lonely Georgia road. A FOOTBALL rolls out of the darkness, bumps against a shard of glass, and stops beside a tire.

HENRY'S FATHER

Henry! Henry, answer me!

The father's voice breaks into a sound no parent should ever make.

NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.)

Locals are in shock tonight after an alcohol-related crash involving a teenage driver took the life of a ten-year-old boy.

A deputy blocks the road. PARAMEDICS move fast. Somewhere nearby, unseen, a young man sobs like the world has ended.

CUT TO BLACK.

TITLE OVER BLACK: BLIND DRIVE AHEAD

FADE TO:

INT. JOHNSONVILLE HIGH SCHOOL - WEIGHT ROOM - AFTERNOON

A hand-painted sign reads: EYES UP. HEART RIGHT. The Wildcats finish a light pre-game lift. The room smells like rubber mats, sweat, and teenage ambition.

Brandon wipes down a bench twice, stalling near Josh and Doug. He wants to ask something and hates that wanting.

BRANDON

Josh, when you check out of a play, is it because of the corner or the safety?

TOBY

It is because he communes with the football angels.

JOSH

Mostly safety. Corner tells you what he thinks he can do. Safety tells you what he is afraid of.

BRANDON

So you are reading fear.

DOUG

Look at QB2 getting theological before kickoff.

JOSH

I am reading leverage.

DOUG

Same thing with better shoes.

COACH ROGERS enters and tosses Brandon a towel.

COACH ROGERS

Marquez is right. You do not stare at what you want. You read what can hurt you.

Josh nods, taking the lesson as football.

Candice, passing the open doorway with cheer gear, hears it as something larger.

EXT. JOHNSONVILLE CHURCH - PARKING LOT - LATE AFTERNOON

FAMILIES drift out after a short youth prayer gathering before the game. Henry carries a football almost as big as his chest. He watches older boys with awe.

YOUTH PASTOR CALEB (40s) enters.

YOUTH PASTOR CALEB

Remember, boys, talent is a gift. Character is what you give back.

Josh shakes hands with Caleb, polite and slightly impatient to get to the stadium.

CALEB

Sometimes the heaviest things are
the ones everybody calls blessings.

Josh smiles the way a young man smiles when an adult gets too close to the truth.

JOSH

We will be all right, Pastor Caleb.

Doug lingers behind with Henry, showing him how to place his fingers on the laces.

DOUG

Do not squeeze it like you are mad
at it. Hold it like you plan to
send it somewhere.

HENRY

Josh throws it harder.

DOUG

Josh throws everything hard. That
is why we pray for him.

Henry laughs. Josh sees them from across the lot and lets himself enjoy being admired.

INT. PETERSON HOUSE - DOUG'S ROOM - EVENING

Doug stuffs shoulder pads into his bag. His room is part football, part church camp, part teenage disaster. MARTHA PETERSON (40s) appears in the doorway with a laundry basket.

MARTHA

Your cleats smell like a dead
raccoon found faith and then lost
it.

DOUG

That raccoon gave his life for the
team.

She smiles, then sees him pause over a small Bible on the desk.

MARTHA

You nervous?

DOUG

For Josh more than me. Everybody keeps looking at him like he's the exit sign for this town.

MARTHA

And you?

DOUG

I'm the guy making sure the exit sign does not run into a linebacker.

Martha sets down the basket, touches his face.

MARTHA

You are not responsible for carrying another boy's future.

DOUG

No, ma'am. Just his passes.

She takes his hand. A small prayer.

MARTHA

Lord, keep his eyes clear, his feet steady, and his heart soft. Amen.

DOUG

Amen. And maybe let him catch everything thrown near him.

MARTHA

Do not negotiate with the Almighty over route-running.

INT. MARQUEZ HOUSE - JOSH'S ROOM - EVENING

Josh tapes his wrist with ritual precision. LINDA (40s) stands in the doorway. Behind her, the sound of SHERIFF MARQUEZ (50s) on the phone downstairs, still working.

LINDA

Your father is trying.

JOSH

Didn't say he wasn't.

LINDA

You did that thing where you don't say it so loud I can hear it from the hall.

Josh smiles despite himself.

LINDA (CONT'D)
You do not have to be perfect
tonight.

JOSH
Good. I was aiming for legendary.

LINDA
Joshua.

He looks at her. She crosses to him, straightens the tape on his wrist.

LINDA (CONT'D)
You are loved before the scoreboard
says anything.

JOSH
I know.

LINDA
Knowing and living like it are two
different things.

He nods, impatient with tenderness. Downstairs, Sheriff says into the phone: Yes, Mayor, I understand.

EXT. JOHNSONVILLE HIGH SCHOOL - FOOTBALL STADIUM - NIGHT

SUPER: Three weeks earlier.

Friday night in Johnsonville, Georgia.

The stadium glows like a revival tent. The WILDCATS band hammers out a fight song while the town pours into the stands.

Church elders, teachers, farmers, deputies, moms in team sweatshirts, little boys in oversized jerseys. The whole town has come to watch one boy carry their future.

Josh, QB1, stands at the tunnel entrance. Chest is tight.

Doug walks up beside.

DOUG
Scouts at twelve o'clock. Your mama
at nine. Candice at three.

Entire town everywhere else.

JOSH

Good. Means nobody's watching you drop passes.

DOUG

That mouth is gonna need prayer by halftime.

Josh smiles, but his eyes drift to the stands. Two COLLEGE SCOUTS lean over clipboards. Linda searches the entrance for her husband.

DOUG (CONT'D)

Hey.

Josh looks back.

DOUG (CONT'D)

Who are you when nobody's watching?

JOSH

A quarterback with no audience.

DOUG

I'm serious.

JOSH

Then I'm serious. I'm the guy who gets us to state.

DOUG

Just don't let them turn you into somebody you gotta keep pretending to be.

Josh hears it, decides not to.

COACH ROGERS (O.S.)

Wildcats!

Coach Rogers claps his hands.

COACH ROGERS (CONT'D)

Bring it in.

The team gathers. Josh and Doug join the huddle.

COACH ROGERS (CONT'D)

This field is dirt, chalk, grass, and sweat. That's all it is. What makes it matter is who you become on it. Who are we?

WILDCATS

Wildcats!

They explode through the tunnel.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - RECEPTION - NIGHT

DEPUTY BILLINGS (40s) enters carrying a cardboard box of new body cameras. Sheriff Marquez stares at it like it insulted his family.

DEPUTY BILLINGS

Mayor's office dropped off another dozen.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

We have eight deputies.

DEPUTY BILLINGS

Maybe he wants the cameras to wear cameras.

GERTRUDE (60s) does not laugh because she is already opening the forms.

GERTRUDE

Every serial number, every assignment, every policy acknowledgment.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

He wants paperwork on paper proving we have cameras to prove we did the work the paperwork kept us from doing.

GERTRUDE

That is government, Sheriff.

The phone rings. Gertrude answers, listens, covers the receiver.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

Mayor Luciano.

Peter looks at the radio. The announcer calls Josh's name. Peter takes the phone anyway.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

Sheriff Marquez.

INTERCUT - INT. MAYOR LUCIANO'S CAR - NIGHT

MAYOR LUCIANO (50s) rides toward the stadium, tie perfect, smile ready for voters.

MAYOR LUCIANO
Peter, I hope I'm not keeping you
from the game.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
Then stop keeping me from the game.

MAYOR LUCIANO
The town deserves modern
accountability.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
The town deserves deputies on
roads, not deputies signing forms
about roads.

MAYOR LUCIANO
Careful. Resistance to transparency
ages poorly.

Sheriff Marquez sees the old football photo on his desk.
Young Peter with a bright future and no idea how fast a body
can betray a dream.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
So does using a badge as a campaign
prop.

The line goes quiet. The rivalry hardens.

MAYOR LUCIANO
Enjoy the game if you make it.

Sheriff Marquez sits beneath a wall plaque: JOHNSONVILLE
COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE - LIFE SAVING AWARD.

A family photo of Peter, Linda, and young Josh sits beside a
dusty football from a past life. On the desk: body cameras,
policy forms, and a radio broadcasting the game.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
There he is, folks. Josh Marquez
takes the field with scouts in the
stands and a whole lot of
Johnsonville expectation on those
shoulders.

Peter glances at the radio. He wants to be there. He buries
it under paperwork.

GERTRUDE

Sheriff?

Gertude stands in the doorway with another file.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

If that's another body-camera form,
I'm calling it contraband.

GERTRUDE

Mayor Luciano wants every device
logged before Monday.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

Mayor Luciano wants a lot of
things.

GERTRUDE

Your boy wants you in those stands.

That lands. Peter keeps his eyes on the form.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

My boy knows duty doesn't clock out
because the band starts playing.

GERTRUDE

Your boy knows a lot of speeches.
Don't mean he doesn't need his
father.

Peter signs the form harder than necessary.

EXT. FOOTBALL FIELD - NIGHT

The opposing line crashes forward. Josh takes the snap. Doug
cuts across the middle.

JOSH

Blue barracuda! Hut!

Josh throws a perfect spiral. Doug catches it and gets
blindsided by a CORNERBACK. The hit echoes. Doug goes down
hard.

The crowd groans. Josh runs to him.

JOSH (CONT'D)

Doug. Talk to me.

Doug blinks, trying to make the lights stop doubling.

DOUG
Did we win Christmas?

A few players laugh with relief. Josh does not.

JOSH
You okay?

DOUG
Eyes ahead, QB. I'm good.

Coach Rogers studies Doug from the sideline. The clock is running. Scouts watch. Doug forces a grin and gets up.

COACH ROGERS
Peterson! You sure?

DOUG
Yes, sir.

Josh sees Doug sway. Sees the scouts. Sees the scoreboard. Makes the first wrong choice because it looks small.

JOSH
Let's finish it.

The Wildcats reset.

EXT. STADIUM STANDS - NIGHT

Candice watches Josh with more concern than adoration. Jessie and other cheerleaders yell beside her.

CANDICE
Come on, Josh.

In another section, MAYOR LUCIANO (50s) polished and calculating, hands a hot dog to MRS. LUCIANO. Their son ANDY (17) is nowhere nearby.

MRS. LUCIANO
This is apparently dinner now.

MAYOR LUCIANO
This is how a town tells you who matters. You learn their rituals before asking for their vote.

MRS. LUCIANO
And Andy?

MAYOR LUCIANO

Andy will survive one evening
without being the center of
attention.

INT. LUCIANO HOUSE - FOYER - NIGHT

The Luciano house is still half-unpacked. Campaign boxes sit beside family photos that have not found walls. Andy searches a box for car keys while Mayor Luciano adjusts his tie in the mirror.

MAYOR LUCIANO

You are coming to the game.

ANDY

I would rather be audited by monks.

MAYOR LUCIANO

The town needs to see us together.

ANDY

There it is. Us, the campaign
brochure.

Mayor Luciano turns, smile gone.

MAYOR LUCIANO

This town is giving me a chance to
do something meaningful.

ANDY

No. It is giving you a backdrop. I
am the kid in the backdrop who has
to look grateful.

MAYOR LUCIANO

You want people to stop judging you
by my name? Stop behaving like the
worst rumor attached to it.

Andy absorbs the hit, then hides the bruise under a smirk.

ANDY

Great father-son talk. Very
electable.

He pockets the keys and slips out the side door.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD / INT. PICKUP TRUCK - NIGHT

A pickup blasts down a two-lane road. MALCOLM (18) lean and hollow-eyed, drives too fast with one hand. Andy hangs out the passenger window, recording himself with his phone.

ANDY

Johnsonville, baby! Where the roads
are empty and the dreams are
smaller.

MALCOLM

You always talk like somebody's
subscribing.

ANDY

Somebody usually is.

Malcolm takes a drink from a bottle and tosses it out the window. It smashes near a road sign: BLIND DRIVE AHEAD.

ANDY (CONT'D)

So this is what people do here?
Drive and worship football?

MALCOLM

That's pretty much it.

ANDY

Your boy Josh out there becoming a
legend?

Malcolm's face closes.

MALCOLM

He's not my boy.

ANDY

Right. He's the one who got your
spot.

MALCOLM

The pills got my spot. Injury got
my spot. Everybody else just
watched.

A patrol car appears ahead. Deputy Billings clocks them at eighty-six.

INT. MARQUEZ HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Candice waits with Linda while Josh refuses to come downstairs. The house carries the static of men not speaking.

CANDICE

I don't know when to push and when to leave him alone.

LINDA

Neither does he.

CANDICE

He looks at me like I'm accusing him when I ask if he's okay.

LINDA

Because if he answers honestly, he has to stop being useful for a minute.

Candice absorbs that. She loves Josh, but love is beginning to require spine.

CANDICE

What do I do?

LINDA

Do not worship the version of him everybody else claps for.

That boy cannot save him.

Upstairs, a door closes. Josh has heard enough to know he was discussed and not enough to receive it.

EXT. FOOTBALL FIELD - NIGHT

The Wildcats huddle. Doug breathes hard, hiding it. Josh reads the defense. The whole town holds itself still.

JOSH

Eagle right. Carlos fake. Doug cross. Toby, pick up the blitz.

TOBY

Broadway baby.

JOSH

Focus.

The team breaks. The ball snaps. Josh drops back, dodges pressure, sees daylight, and runs. He dives across the line.

TOUCHDOWN. The stadium detonates.

Josh is swallowed by teammates. Doug reaches him last and taps his helmet against Josh's.

DOUG
Who are we when everybody's
watching?

JOSH
Winners.

Doug smiles, but something in his eyes is off.

EXT. SIDE OF ROAD - NIGHT

Deputy Billings tests Malcolm. Andy sits handcuffed on the curb, recording until Billings takes his phone.

ANDY
Pretty sure that's censorship.

DEPUTY BILLINGS
Pretty sure you're seventeen and
smell like a brewery.

Sheriff Marquez pulls up. Andy reads his badge.

ANDY
Marquez. As in quarterback Marquez?

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
As in Sheriff Marquez.

ANDY
Shouldn't you be at the game? Big
night for the prince.

Malcolm looks up. That arrow finds a target.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
Malcolm. Been a while.

MALCOLM
Not long enough, sir.

ANDY
My father's gonna love this. New
sheriff policy: arrest the mayor's
kid before the election.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
Policy is easy. Don't drive drunk.

ANDY
Or what? You miss another
touchdown?

Peter's jaw tightens. Billings notices.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
All choices have consequences, son.

ANDY
Good. I'll make sure yours do.

EXT. STADIUM PARKING LOT - NIGHT

The game is over. Kids swarm. Horns honk. Josh emerges with his gear bag and the game ball. Candice kisses him on the cheek.

CANDICE
Proud of you.

JOSH
You say that like you're surprised.

CANDICE
I say that like I know what it
costs you.

Josh dodges the intimacy with a smile. He spots Doug near an old S-10 truck.

JOSH
Doug!

Doug turns too fast, steadies himself on the door.

JOSH (CONT'D)
You good to drive?

DOUG
I'm good.

JOSH
You don't look good.

DOUG
That is hurtful. Accurate, but
hurtful.

Josh steps closer, serious.

JOSH
I'll take you home.

DOUG

And leave my truck here to be
vandalized by Mick and Rick? I have
standards.

Before Josh can answer, Henry bolts across the parking lot
wearing Josh's number. His father chases after him.

HENRY'S FATHER

Henry! Stop!

A car rolls toward Henry. Josh lifts a hand. The car stops.

Henry reaches him, breathless.

HENRY

That run was awesome! I want to be
just like you when I grow up.

Josh softens. He tosses Henry the game ball.

JOSH

Then rule number one. Keep your
eyes up next time.

HENRY

Yes, sir!

Henry beams. His father mouths thank you and leads him away.

Josh turns back. Doug is already getting into the truck.

JOSH

Text me when you get home!

DOUG

Yes, Mom.

Doug drives off. Josh watches longer than he admits.

INT. DOUG'S TRUCK - NIGHT

Doug drives the country road. His head hurts. Stadium lights
still flash behind his eyes. His phone BUZZES in the cup
holder.

ON SCREEN: MOM - Sorry I missed it, baby. You home yet?

Doug smiles, guilty. He reaches for the phone.

DOUG

Almost, Ma.

He looks down to type.

His truck drifts across the yellow line.

HEADLIGHTS. A HORN. Doug looks up.

SMASH TO WHITE.

INT. MARQUEZ HOUSE - JOSH'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Josh stares at his phone. No text from Doug. His room is a museum of football: trophies, clippings, recruiting letters, framed photos of him and Doug through the years.

A police siren wails faintly in the distance. Josh looks toward the window.

INT. PETERSON HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING

Martha Peterson sits at the kitchen table with Doug's phone in a clear evidence bag. Sheriff Marquez stands across from her, hat in hand. He looks too large for the room and too small for the task.

MARTHA

I texted him.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

Martha--

MARTHA

I asked if he made it home. That is what mothers do. We ask if they made it home.

Peter cannot correct grief. He can only stand in it, and he is not good at that yet.

MARTHA (CONT'D)

Did he suffer?

The official answer and the merciful answer fight in Peter's throat.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

It was fast.

She nods. Not comforted. Just given something to hold.

MARTHA

Tell Josh he was proud of him.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

I will.

MARTHA

No. Tell him. Boys hear praise from everybody and truth from almost nobody. Tell him Doug was proud of who he was when nobody clapped.

INT. MARQUEZ HOUSE - MORNING

Peter enters. Josh is at the kitchen island in yesterday's clothes. Linda stands by the sink. No one slept.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

Son--

JOSH

Don't say it like that.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

Doug's gone.

Josh stares. The words bounce off the armor, then enter through every crack at once.

JOSH

No. He was supposed to text.

LINDA

Josh...

JOSH

He was supposed to text me.

Josh stands too fast. The stool falls. He goes outside before either parent can touch him.

Red and blue lights. Doug's S-10 on its side. Deputy Billings looks away from the wreckage. Sheriff Marquez arrives, already knowing something is wrong.

DEPUTY BILLINGS

Pete...

Peter sees Doug's helmet decal in the wreck. He stops walking.

INT. JOHNSONVILLE CHURCH - FELLOWSHIP HALL - DAY

After the funeral, casseroles line folding tables. People speak softly as if volume itself could disrespect the dead.

Josh stands with a paper plate he will never eat from.

Across the room, Martha Peterson receives one hug after another until compassion itself seems exhausting.

TOBY

I hate this room.

JESSIE

It is just the fellowship hall.

TOBY

No. It used to be. Now it is the room where everybody brings chicken and looks at you like you are supposed to know what to do with your face.

Brandon holds a cup of water, trapped between wanting to help and fearing he has no right.

BRANDON

Should we say something to Mrs. Peterson?

JOSH

What?

BRANDON

I do not know. Anything.

JOSH

Then do not say anything.

The sharpness makes Brandon step back. Candice catches it.

CANDICE

He was trying to be decent.

JOSH

Decent does not fix dead.

That lands too hard. Josh knows it. He cannot take it back.

INT. JOHNSONVILLE CHURCH - SMALL CLASSROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Josh escapes into a classroom used for Sunday school. Paper sheep and crayon crosses line the wall. Doug finds him only in memory: two boys at twelve, laughing during vacation

Bible school, getting shushed by Martha.

Present Josh grips the back of a tiny chair until his knuckles pale.

Martha appears in the doorway. Josh stiffens, ready for accusation. She offers none.

MARTHA

He loved you, Josh.

JOSH

I should have made him let me drive.

MARTHA

Maybe. Maybe Coach should have sat him. Maybe I should have left work early. Grief will hand out jobs to everybody if we let it.

Josh cannot look at her.

MARTHA (CONT'D)

You do not have to know what to do with this today.

JOSH

Everybody keeps telling me to move forward.

MARTHA

Forward is not the same as away.

She leaves him with that. He is not ready to understand it.

A closed casket beneath a large photograph of Doug in his Wildcats uniform. The church is full. Every pew carries grief.

Josh sits between Linda and Candice, dry-eyed and rigid.

Sheriff Marquez sits at the aisle, close but emotionally far away.

Coach Rogers steps to the pulpit. He opens a Bible with hands that tremble.

COACH ROGERS

Doug Peterson was not a perfect young man. He was late to practice twice, once because he stopped to help Mrs. Avery change a tire and once because he claimed the Lord led him to pancakes.

A soft, painful laugh moves through the room.

COACH ROGERS (CONT'D)
 He loved his mother. He loved this team. He loved the Lord without making the rest of us feel like we were failing at it.

Doug's Mother, MARTHA PETERSON, 50s, closes her eyes.

COACH ROGERS (CONT'D)
 Doug used to quote Philippians. One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead. I asked him once why that verse. He said,

Coach, if God's holding tomorrow, I don't have to hold yesterday so tight.

Josh stares at the casket. He hears only: reach forward.

Keep moving. Do not break.

COACH ROGERS (CONT'D)
 Today we don't rush past grief. We bring it before God. We remember our boy.

Candice reaches for Josh's hand. He lets her take it but does not squeeze back.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL CAFETERIA - DAY

The lunchroom is quieter than a cafeteria should be. Doug's empty chair at the football table remains open. Nobody sits there. Toby sets a tray down, sees the chair, and tries to joke.

TOBY
 I vote we retire the chair. Hang it from the rafters.

No one laughs. Toby looks smaller without laughter to hide inside.

JESSIE
 Toby.

TOBY
 Yeah. Sorry.

Brandon approaches with his tray, uncertain where to sit.

Josh sees him, then looks away. Brandon sits at the far end like a substitute in life too.

CANDICE

You can sit here, Brandon.

Brandon looks to Josh first. Josh gives no permission.

Candice slides her bag, making space anyway.

CANDICE (CONT'D)

I wasn't asking him.

Brandon sits. Josh eats nothing.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL - CHEMISTRY CLASS - DAY

A substitute struggles to take attendance while grief rearranges the room. Doug's empty seat sits between Josh and Carlos like a physical object.

Carlos has not moved into the seat. He stands near the back, unsure where not to offend.

SUBSTITUTE

Carlos Montgomery?

CARLOS

Here.

SUBSTITUTE

There is an open seat up front.

Every football player looks at Doug's chair. Carlos looks too.

CARLOS

I am good back here.

Josh hears the respect and still resents him for existing.

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL - FRONT STEPS - AFTER SCHOOL

Candice catches up with Brandon, who carries two playbooks and tries to disappear behind both.

CANDICE

You do that a lot.

BRANDON

Carry books?

CANDICE

Wait for permission to take up
space.

Brandon looks embarrassed because she is right.

BRANDON

Josh has enough going on.

CANDICE

That does not mean you vanish so he
can feel bigger.

BRANDON

I do not want his spot.

CANDICE

Good. Then do not act like
breathing near it is a crime.

Brandon smiles despite himself. For the first time, someone
has named his problem without mocking it.

Henry and two younger boys play catch with a worn football.

Henry barks Josh's cadence wrong but with absolute
conviction.

HENRY

Blue barracuda! Blue armadillo!
Hut!

He throws a wobbly pass that hits the ground. He sees Josh
across campus and straightens, embarrassed. Josh notices but
cannot summon the hero smile. Henry deflates a little.

Candice sees the whole exchange from the cafeteria window.

Doug's locker is covered in white paper, flowers, prayer
cards, and marker messages. Students approach, write, cry,
leave.

Henry stands on tiptoe and tapes up a crayon drawing: Josh
throwing to Doug under stadium lights. Above them: WILDCATS
FOREVER.

Josh approaches with Candice. He reads message after message.
His marker hovers over the paper.

CANDICE

You don't have to write something
perfect.

JOSH
I don't do public grief.

CANDICE
No. You do public strength.

Josh caps the marker and walks away.

CANDICE (CONT'D)
Josh.

JOSH
I'm fine.

CANDICE
No. You're rehearsed.

He does not turn back.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

A teacher drones at the board. Doug's empty desk sits like a wound. Josh stares at it.

Malcolm sits behind him, back in school on thin tolerance and thinner patience.

MALCOLM
Heard your dad had a busy night.

Josh does not respond.

MALCOLM (CONT'D)
You know. Me. Andy. Billings.
Roadside circus.

Josh's jaw tightens.

JOSH
Stop.

MALCOLM
Funny thing about timing. Your dad
finally left the office. Just not
for you.

Josh turns.

MALCOLM (CONT'D)
If he'd been at the game, maybe he
sees Doug. Maybe he drives him
home. Maybe that desk isn't empty.

JOSH
You don't know that.

MALCOLM
Neither do you. That's the part
that eats.

Josh gets up and walks out. The teacher calls after him.
Malcolm watches the poison work.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - DAY

Sheriff Marquez logs body cameras. Josh enters without knocking.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
You're supposed to be in school.

JOSH
You were there.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
Where?

JOSH
With Malcolm. Andy. The night Doug
died.

Peter sets down the camera.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
That was police business.

JOSH
Was Doug police business too?

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
Josh.

JOSH
If you were at the game, you
would've seen him. I saw him and I
still let him go, but you weren't
even there.

That confession slips out before Josh can stop it.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
Son, listen. When something like
this happens, the mind starts
making a case.

(MORE)

SHERIFF MARQUEZ (CONT'D)
 It wants evidence, blame, a
 verdict. That doesn't mean it's
 telling the truth.

JOSH
 You always do that.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
 Do what?

JOSH
 Turn pain into a lesson.

Peter has no answer.

JOSH (CONT'D)
 I didn't need a sheriff that night.
 I needed my father in the stands.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
 And I needed my son alive. There
 was a drunk driver on the road.

JOSH
 Doug was on the road.

Josh leaves. Peter stands in the silence he cannot instruct
 away.

INT. MARQUEZ KITCHEN - NIGHT

Linda washes a dish that is already clean. Peter enters,
 drained.

LINDA
 He came to see you.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
 He came to sentence me.

LINDA
 No. He came bleeding. You gave him
 procedure.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
 Procedure keeps people alive.

LINDA
 Not in this house.

Peter leans against the counter.

LINDA (CONT'D)
 You two keep calling it focus.
 Neither one of you can look at what
 hurts.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
 I don't know how to fix him.

LINDA
 Good. Stop trying to fix him.
 Sit with him.

EXT. FOOTBALL PRACTICE FIELD - DAY

The Wildcats run routes. Carlos, the new receiver, quick and grounded, lines up where Doug used to.

Josh takes the snap. Carlos breaks clean. For a second, Josh sees Doug instead. He hesitates. The pass sails wide.

COACH ROGERS
 Again!

Another snap. Carlos gets open. Josh throws too hard. Carlos barely touches it.

CARLOS
 I'm right here, QB.

JOSH
 Then catch it.

CARLOS
 Hard to catch a ball thrown at a
 memory.

The field goes quiet.

JOSH
 What'd you say?

CARLOS
 I said I'm not trying to be him.

JOSH
 Good. Because you're not.

CARLOS
 Then stop throwing at a ghost.

Josh shoves him. Carlos shoves back. Teammates separate them.

COACH ROGERS
Enough! Both of you, sideline.

JOSH
Coach--

COACH ROGERS
Sideline!

Josh storms off. Carlos follows, controlled but hurt.

CARLOS
I showed up to help this team.
Not get punished for being alive.
Josh looks away because it is true.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Sheriff Marquez studies accident photos from Doug's crash.
He sees the phone, the road, the distance, the awful math of one glance.
Gertrude enters with coffee.

GERTRUDE
You're staring at that like it's gonna confess.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
Kids need to see it.

GERTRUDE
Kids need a lot of things. Scared ain't always the same as taught.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
One drink, one text, one stupid moment. I can stop another mother from sitting where Martha sat.

GERTRUDE
Or you can make her son a prop before the dirt's settled.

Peter looks at her, stung.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
That's not what I'm doing.

GERTRUDE

Then make sure that's true.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - STORAGE ROOM - NIGHT

Peter digs through dusty boxes of old public-safety materials. Gertrude holds a flashlight. Deputy Billings reads titles from VHS tapes like ancient curses.

DEPUTY BILLINGS

Teen Wheels, Deadly Deals. That one has a cartoon skeleton on a skateboard.

GERTRUDE

Educational cinema was a cry for help.

Peter finds a locked training case: a blue-handled inert pistol and dummy rounds used for academy demonstrations. He studies it.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

No.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

You do not know what I am thinking.

GERTRUDE

I have worked for three sheriffs, two mayors, and one judge who thought a ponytail was evidence of gang activity. I know bad ideas in their infancy.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

They laughed at the last assembly Snipes held. Two weeks later a junior wrapped his car around an oak.

GERTRUDE

Fear can get attention. It does not always get wisdom.

Peter closes the case anyway.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

Attention will do for a start.

INT. MARQUEZ HOUSE - KITCHEN - LATER

Peter sets index cards on the table. Linda dries a dish, reading them upside down.

LINDA
You wrote Doug's name on three cards.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
They need to know this is real.

LINDA
They know. They buried him.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
They are still texting in the parking lot. Still racing home.

Still acting like death is something that happens to other families.

LINDA
And Josh?

Peter does not answer quickly enough.

LINDA (CONT'D)
This is not an assembly. This is you trying to talk to our son through a microphone.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
If he would talk to me at the table, I would not need one.

LINDA
He needs a father at the table, not a sheriff on a stage.

INT. PRINCIPAL SNIPES' OFFICE - DAY

PRINCIPAL BERNIE SNIPES, 60s, institutional nostalgia in a tie, displays old Wildcats trophies behind his desk. Mayor Luciano sits nearby, all polish and patience.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
A school assembly. Straight talk. Distracted driving, impairment, choices. They need to feel the weight.

PRINCIPAL SNIPES

I like it. We've been reactive too long.

MAYOR LUCIANO

As long as it is appropriate, Sheriff. Parents are sensitive right now.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

Parents should be sensitive. Their kids are driving weapons.

Mayor Luciano smiles gently.

MAYOR LUCIANO

Words matter. Optics matter more.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

I'm not running for anything, Mayor.

MAYOR LUCIANO

Everyone is running for something.

INT. MARQUEZ BEDROOM - NIGHT

Peter lays index cards on the bed. Linda watches from the doorway.

LINDA

Don't do this because you're afraid to talk to him.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

This isn't about Josh.

LINDA

Then why haven't you said one sentence without looking at his picture?

Peter looks at the framed photo of young Josh holding a football.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

If somebody had scared me straight at his age--

LINDA

You don't want to save those kids. You want to scare our son into being okay.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
And if fear keeps him alive?

LINDA
Fear is not the same as faith,
Peter.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL AUDITORIUM - DAY

Hundreds of students pour in. Josh sits with Candice, Toby, Jessie. Brandon sits nearby with a playbook half-hidden in his backpack. Andy and Malcolm sit in back like hecklers waiting for a stage.

Principal Snipes introduces Sheriff Marquez. A dusty driver safety VHS starts. The footage looks ancient. Students laugh. A student makes a joke. Another records.

Sheriff stands off to the side, face tightening as the room turns the lesson into entertainment.

STUDENT
This dude looks like my grandpa's
insurance commercial!

More laughter. Josh sinks lower. Candice watches Peter panic under the noise.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
Turn it off.

The video stops. Lights come up. Sheriff throws his index cards into the trash.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ (CONT'D)
Doug Peterson died because of one
distracted moment.

Silence. Josh looks up sharply.

Sheriff places a black training pistol on the table. A gasp moves through the room.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ (CONT'D)
This is a training weapon. It
cannot fire. These are dummy
rounds. They cannot fire. But I
want you to understand what you
load into your life before you ever
turn a key.

He holds up one dummy round.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ (CONT'D)

One beer.

He places it into a training magazine.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ (CONT'D)

One text you think cannot wait.

Another round.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ (CONT'D)

One friend grabbing the music. One glance down. One angry thought you refuse to surrender.

Another. Another. Another. The room is quiet now.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ (CONT'D)

A car is not evil. A weapon is not evil. But in careless hands, under impaired judgment, with a distracted mind, either one can destroy a life.

Josh's face reddens. Doug's mother, seated in back at Snipes' invitation, goes still.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ (CONT'D)

Doug was one of you. And if this town keeps pretending good kids do not make fatal choices, he will not be the last.

Andy records. Malcolm watches Josh instead of the stage.

Martha Peterson quietly stands and leaves. Josh sees her go.

JOSH

(under his breath)

What are you doing?

Sheriff sees Josh too late. The room is silent, but the damage is done.

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL PARKING LOT - DAY

Coach Rogers confronts Sheriff near the cruiser.

COACH ROGERS

Pete, what on earth was that?

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

The first time they listened all morning.

COACH ROGERS

They listened because you scared them. Martha walked out because you used her boy.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

I said the truth.

COACH ROGERS

A true thing can still be wrong in how you carry it.

Sheriff looks toward the school.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

I'm trying to keep another kid from dying.

COACH ROGERS

No. You're trying to keep Josh from dying. Say that and we can talk like men.

Sheriff cannot say it.

INT. SCHOOL BOARD ROOM - EVENING

A special meeting. Parents fill folding chairs. Mayor Luciano stands at the side like a man reluctant to be seen enjoying the storm. Sheriff Marquez sits at the table with Principal Snipes. Linda sits in the back, arms crossed.

PARENT ONE

My daughter came home crying because a sheriff brought a gun to school.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

A training weapon. Inert.

Cleared through--

PARENT TWO

You said a dead boy's name while loading bullets. Do you understand what that looked like?

Peter looks toward Martha Peterson, seated alone. She does not look at him.

MAYOR LUCIANO
No one questions Sheriff

Marquez's concern for safety. The question is judgment.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
The question is whether our kids
are dying while adults worry about
optics.

MAYOR LUCIANO
And whether adults can tell the
difference between leadership and
fear.

Linda lowers her eyes. That one is too close to the truth.

EXT. SCHOOL BOARD BUILDING - NIGHT

Peter exits into camera flashes from local news. Josh waits near the truck, having seen enough.

JOSH
You got your stage again.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
Not now.

JOSH
That's what everybody keeps saying.
Not now. Then when?

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
When you can talk without swinging.

JOSH
I learned from you. You just swing
with a badge.

Josh walks away. Peter lets him. Another failure disguised as restraint.

Mayor Luciano watches Andy's video on a laptop. Andy stands across from him, trying not to look pleased.

MAYOR LUCIANO
You recorded this yourself?

ANDY
Public safety. Civic duty.

Whatever you call it when you need votes.

MAYOR LUCIANO

Do not confuse my work with your
appetite for chaos.

ANDY

You moved me here for your work.
I'm just learning the family
business.

That lands. The mayor closes the laptop.

MAYOR LUCIANO

Sheriff Marquez made a serious
error in judgment. Try to
understand the difference between
opportunity and entertainment.

ANDY

You first.

INT. MARQUEZ HOUSE - NIGHT

The local news plays footage of Sheriff's assembly. Peter
turns it off. Josh stands near the stairs.

JOSH

Doug's mom was there.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

I didn't know she would--

JOSH

You didn't look. That's different.

LINDA

Josh.

JOSH

No, he wanted a lesson. He got one.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

I was trying to save lives.

JOSH

You couldn't save Doug, so now
everybody gets to watch you try
again?

The words hit like a slap. Josh regrets them and refuses to
show it. He goes upstairs.

Linda looks at Peter.

LINDA

You wanted those kids scared for five minutes. Our son has been scared since the funeral and you still haven't asked him why.

EXT. FOOTBALL FIELD - NIGHT

A game under wet lights. The Wildcats trail late. Josh looks haunted. Carlos lines up wide.

COACH ROGERS

Eyes up, Marquez!

Snap. Josh drops back. Carlos breaks open. Josh sees Doug instead. He freezes. Sack.

Next play. Josh forces a throw. Interception dropped by luck. The crowd murmurs.

Third play. Josh scrambles and gets blindsided, fumbling.

The opponent recovers.

Coach Rogers calls timeout. Josh runs over, breathing hard.

COACH ROGERS (CONT'D)

What are you seeing?

JOSH

I'm good.

COACH ROGERS

That wasn't the question.

JOSH

Don't pull me.

COACH ROGERS

Brandon!

Brandon freezes with his helmet in hand.

JOSH

He's not ready.

COACH ROGERS

Neither are you.

Brandon runs in, terrified. Josh watches from the sideline as his identity leaves without him.

BRANDON

Blue fifty-seven! Cross on I! Hut!

The snap. Brandon fakes to Toby, sees Carlos deep, and throws. The ball hangs forever.

Carlos catches it in the end zone. TOUCHDOWN.

The stadium erupts. Brandon is swallowed by teammates.

Carlos points up, then toward Doug's number painted on a helmet sticker.

Josh claps once. Then again. Then stops. Henry cheers in the stands, confused that Josh is not on the field.

INT. LOCKER ROOM - AFTER GAME - NIGHT

Celebration ricochets off tile and metal lockers. The Wildcats are going to state, but the sound has a wrong shape because Josh is not in the center of it.

Brandon sits at his locker, still in pads, staring at his hands like they belong to someone else. Carlos drops beside him.

CARLOS

You did not die.

BRANDON

Felt possible.

CARLOS

You threw the ball. I caught the ball. Nobody died. That is what we call a positive development.

Brandon laughs once, shaky. Across the room, Josh pulls tape from his wrist with surgical violence.

TOBY

Josh--

JOSH

Not now.

Coach Rogers enters. The room quiets.

COACH ROGERS

Winning can lie to you just as easy as losing. So hear me. We are going to state because

Brandon was ready, Carlos was ready, and the rest of you did your jobs.

Josh looks up. The words are true and they burn.

COACH ROGERS (CONT'D)

We are not going to state because
grief made us special.

Grief does not make you holy. It makes you honest or it makes you hard. Choose.

No one cheers. This is not that kind of speech.

INT. DINER - MORNING

The morning after Brandon wins the game, the diner buzzes with the wrong kind of praise. A waitress refills coffee beneath a newspaper headline: WILDCATS STATE BOUND.

At one table, two boosters talk loud enough for the room to hear. Josh sits three booths away with Linda, trying to disappear inside a glass of orange juice.

BOOSTER ONE

That Brandon kid looked calm. Real calm.

BOOSTER TWO

Sometimes a team needs fresh blood.

Linda looks toward Josh. His jaw tightens, but his face stays polite. Performance, even here.

LINDA

We can go.

JOSH

Why? Breakfast illegal now?

LINDA

You do not have to pretend that did not hurt.

JOSH

Everybody has opinions. Does not make them facts.

Henry enters with his father, still carrying the game ball.

He spots Josh and starts toward him, then notices Josh's face and slows.

HENRY
Hey, Josh.

JOSH
Hey, buddy.

HENRY
My dad says Brandon did a real
quarterback thing.

Henry means it as praise for the team. Josh hears
replacement.

JOSH
Your dad is right.

The answer is kind enough. The effort behind it is enormous.

HENRY
Are you still gonna play at state?

Josh cannot answer. Linda steps in gently.

LINDA
The coaches are still figuring
everything out.

Henry nods, accepts adult vagueness, and runs to a booth.

Josh watches him go.

LINDA (CONT'D)
He loves you.

JOSH
That is the problem.

Josh exits alone. Henry waits with his father near their car,
holding the game ball. Henry almost runs over, then senses
something and stops.

HENRY
Good game, Josh.

Josh tries to smile. It arrives broken.

JOSH
Thanks, buddy.

HENRY
Brandon did good too.

The innocent sentence lands exactly where Josh is bruised.

JOSH
Yeah. He did.

Henry nods, proud to have said the right thing. Josh gets into his Jeep and shuts the door harder than necessary.

Celebration. Brandon is lifted by teammates. Coach Rogers smiles, but his eyes search for Josh.

Josh sits at his locker, already half-undressed, invisible in the middle of noise.

TOBY
Bro, we're going to state!

JOSH
Yeah.

TOBY
You good?

JOSH
Why does everybody keep asking me that?

Toby backs off with a joke that dies before it arrives.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY

Andy and Malcolm corner Brandon near the lockers. Andy records. Malcolm leans close.

ANDY
QB1 now. Look at you. Does Josh know you stole his life?

BRANDON
Move.

MALCOLM
Hear that? Leadership.

Andy bumps Brandon, trying to provoke him. Brandon shoves back. A teacher rounds the corner.

Candice, watching from the far end, lifts her phone. She has recorded enough.

INT. COACH ROGERS' OFFICE - DAY

Candice shows Coach Rogers and Principal Snipes the video.

CANDICE
Brandon didn't start it.

PRINCIPAL SNIPES
This is a disciplinary matter.

CANDICE
Then discipline the right people.

Coach studies her. He sees the steel.

COACH ROGERS
Thank you, Candice.

CANDICE
Don't thank me. Protect him.

EXT. BRANDON'S DRIVEWAY - EVENING

Brandon practices footwork alone, playbook open on the hood of a car. Josh approaches. Brandon stiffens.

BRANDON
If Coach sent you--

JOSH
He didn't.

BRANDON
Then what?

JOSH
You should start at state.

Brandon studies him, suspicious.

BRANDON
Are you giving this to me, or
throwing it away?

JOSH
I don't know.

Honest. It surprises both of them.

JOSH (CONT'D)
I don't know if I ever wanted
football or just wanted to be what
everybody needed.

BRANDON
Then who are you without it?

Josh has no answer.

JOSH
 Maybe leadership isn't keeping the
 ball. Maybe it's knowing when to
 hand it off.

Brandon nods slowly. Not forgiveness exactly. Respect
 beginning.

INT. MARQUEZ KITCHEN - NIGHT

Peter sits with an old game photo: young Peter in Wildcats
 gear, arm in a sling. Linda places tea in front of him.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
 I had scouts once.

LINDA
 I know.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
 Everybody said I was getting out.
 Then one hit. Shoulder never came
 back right. I stayed.

I served. I built a good life.

LINDA
 But?

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
 But when Josh started winning, I
 could breathe easier. Like maybe

God didn't waste what I lost.

Like maybe it was all pointing to him.

LINDA
 Our son is not your answered prayer
 for an old wound.

Peter closes his eyes.

LINDA (CONT'D)
 He cannot carry his life and yours
 too.

EXT. FOOTBALL FIELD - NIGHT

The stadium is empty. Josh sits on the fifty-yard line.

Sheriff Marquez approaches slowly, no badge on his chest, jacket folded over his arm.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
Mind if I sit?

JOSH
Free country. For now.

Peter sits beside him.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
I was wrong at that assembly.

Josh looks at him. No lecture follows.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ (CONT'D)
The message was true. My heart was wrong. I used Doug because I was scared for you.

JOSH
I blamed you because if it wasn't somebody's fault, then it was just gone.

Peter nods. Tears threaten but do not fall.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
I can arrest half this county, but I can't command grief to leave my own house.

Josh finally looks at him fully.

JOSH
I don't know who I am anymore.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
Then maybe we ask the One who does.

The prayer is awkward. Peter stumbles. Josh barely speaks.

But both bow their heads, together, on the field that has taken too much meaning from them.

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL - PRACTICE FIELD - DUSK

Brandon runs the offense during a state-practice walkthrough.

His voice cracks on the cadence. A few players glance at Josh on the sideline.

BRANDON
Blue fifty-seven. Blue fifty--

TOBY
You gotta say it like the ball owes
you money.

Some players laugh. Brandon blushes. Coach blows the whistle.

COACH ROGERS
Again. And this time, nobody
rescues him with comedy.

Brandon takes a breath and tries again.

BRANDON
Blue fifty-seven! Set!

The play works. Not spectacularly. Honestly. Josh watches
Carlos catch the pass and tuck the ball away.

Coach walks over to Josh.

COACH ROGERS
Hard watching somebody else run
your huddle.

JOSH
It is not my huddle.

COACH ROGERS
That is the right answer. Not sure
you believe it yet.

JOSH
You want me to cheer louder?

COACH ROGERS
I want you to stop treating
humility like a punishment.

Josh looks away. Coach softens but does not retreat.

COACH ROGERS (CONT'D)
A leader who cannot stand behind
another man without shrinking is
still just a boy guarding a throne.

The whistle blows again. Brandon's cadence is stronger this
time.

INT. MALCOLM'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Malcolm sits in the blue light of an old laptop. On screen: a highlight video from two years ago. Malcolm, healthy, explosive, wearing the Wildcats jersey, outrunning everyone.

The video comments are old: BEAST. NEXT LEVEL. FUTURE D1.

Malcolm watches himself become someone he cannot get back.

A prescription bottle sits empty near the keyboard. He turns it over with one finger. Shame and longing pass through him before he can turn them into cruelty.

Andy appears in the doorway without knocking.

ANDY

Wow. Watching game film of yourself. That's either inspiring or deeply sad.

Malcolm slams the laptop shut.

MALCOLM

What do you want?

ANDY

Party after state qualifier.

Toby's place. You coming?

MALCOLM

Why?

ANDY

Because every kingdom needs a fall, and I am bored.

Malcolm looks at the closed laptop. At the empty bottle. At the place where his future used to be.

MALCOLM

Yeah. I'm coming.

EXT. TOBY'S HOUSE - BACK PORCH - NIGHT

Before the drinking challenge, Toby tries to keep the party light. Rick and Mick have organized a ridiculous cornhole tournament using old helmet stickers as prizes. For a moment, the kids almost feel young again.

RICK
Official rule. If you step past the
line, your soul belongs to the
Wildcats booster club.

MICK
And they will make you sell raffle
tickets until Jesus returns.

Toby laughs too loudly. Jessie pulls him aside.

JESSIE
You're doing the thing.

TOBY
What thing?

JESSIE
Making noise so nobody hears you
hurt.

Toby's grin flickers.

TOBY
Everybody's got a thing now, huh?

JESSIE
Yeah. Maybe we should stop
pretending they're cute.

INT. TOBY'S HOUSE - HALLWAY - LATER

Josh ducks away from the noise and finds a hallway lined with Toby's family photos. In one frame, Toby and Doug are twelve, covered in mud, grinning. Josh touches the frame.

Candice finds him.

CANDICE
We can leave.

JOSH
I just got here.

CANDICE
That is not an answer.

JOSH
Everybody keeps waiting for me to
break. Maybe I'm tired of giving
them something to watch.

CANDICE
Then stop performing for them.

JOSH
You make it sound easy.

CANDICE
No. I make it sound necessary.

Malcolm appears at the end of the hall, having heard enough to choose the sharpest blade.

A party spills from a farmhouse porch into the yard. Music, laughter, red cups, parked trucks. Not glamorous. Careless.

Teenagers trying not to feel anything too deeply.

Josh arrives with Candice. He holds up car keys.

JOSH
Designated driver. See?

Responsible citizen.

CANDICE
I'm proud of responsible citizen.
I'm watching responsible citizen.

JOSH
That sounds less proud.

CANDICE
It's both.

Carlos approaches. The air tightens.

JOSH
Carlos.

CARLOS
QB.

JOSH
I was wrong. You weren't trying to replace him. I was trying to keep him from being gone.

CARLOS
I forgive you. But don't do that to the next person who tries to help.

JOSH
Fair.

They shake. A real step forward.

INT. TOBY'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Brandon receives congratulations from teammates. He blushes, uncomfortable, but stands taller than he used to. Josh sees it. Tries to smile.

Malcolm appears beside Josh with a cup.

MALCOLM
That's gotta sting.

JOSH
Not tonight.

MALCOLM
No? Backup gets the team. Carlos gets Doug's route. Candice gets your keys. Your dad gets the evening news. What do you get?

JOSH
You done?

MALCOLM
You used to be the guy nobody questioned. Now everybody's checking if you're okay like you're a cracked helmet.

Andy steps onto a chair, phone in hand.

ANDY
Ladies and gentlemen,

Johnsonville royalty has entered the building. But is the king still the king?

CANDICE
Andy, sit down.

ANDY
Tequila pong says he still has an arm.

A crowd forms. Malcolm looks at Josh like a challenge.

MALCOLM
You spent your whole life being better than me. Prove it.

Candice steps between them.

CANDICE

Josh. You don't have to win this.

That is the sentence. The one he cannot tolerate. He sees Brandon watching, Carlos, Andy filming, Malcolm smiling, Candice pleading.

JOSH

It's a game.

CANDICE

No. It's not.

Josh takes the cup.

INT. TOBY'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - NIGHT

During the party, Josh locks himself in the bathroom and grips the sink. Through the door, laughter and music thump like a second heartbeat.

He splashes water on his face. In the mirror he sees stadium lights, Doug on the ground, Brandon throwing, Henry asking if he will play state.

A text from Candice appears: We can leave. No shame.

Josh types: I am fine. He stares at the words, then deletes them. Types nothing.

A knock.

MALCOLM (O.S.)

You praying in there or hiding?

JOSH

Occupied.

MALCOLM (O.S.)

Yeah. By every person who used to think you were special.

Josh opens the door. Malcolm smiles like he has been invited.

MALCOLM (CONT'D)

There he is.

JOSH

You got something to say, say it.

MALCOLM
I already did. You just needed a
mirror first.

Josh steps past him, choosing the room, the noise, the challenge. The last exit closes behind him.

INT. TOBY'S HOUSE - LATER

Josh wins. The wrong kind of victory. The crowd cheers. Andy films. Malcolm laughs, but there is something dead behind it.

Candice stands apart, scared now. Josh is visibly drunk, though still trying to perform control.

TOBY
Police! Somebody said cops!

The party fractures. Kids scatter.

CANDICE
Keys.

JOSH
I'm good.

CANDICE
Keys, Josh.

JOSH
I said I'm fine.

CANDICE
That's the lie that got you here.

Josh pulls the keys away from her.

JOSH
I'm Josh Marquez.

CANDICE
That does not make you sober.

He exits. Candice runs after him.

EXT. TOBY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Josh gets into his Jeep. Candice grabs the door before he closes it.

CANDICE
If you drive, I'm calling your dad.

JOSH
Then call him.

He shuts the door and backs out. Candice stands in the dust, shaking. Then she pulls out her phone and calls.

CANDICE
Sheriff Marquez? It's Josh. He's driving. He's drunk.

INT. HENRY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Henry practices Josh's cadence in the living room with the game ball tucked under his arm.

HENRY
Blue barracuda! Blue... fifty... chicken! Hut!

His father laughs from the doorway.

HENRY'S FATHER
That play gonna win state?

HENRY
It's secret.

HENRY'S FATHER
Secret plays need ice cream?

HENRY
Vanilla.

HENRY'S FATHER
Bold choice.

Henry grabs the football and follows him out.

INT. JOSH'S JEEP - NIGHT

Josh drives too fast. His breathing is ragged. Music low, then loud, then off. His phone BUZZES: CANDICE CALLING.

He rejects it. It BUZZES again. His eyes flick down.

In the rearview, distant red and blue lights appear.

Sheriff's cruiser.

JOSH
No, no, no.

He speeds up. He passes the road sign: BLIND DRIVE AHEAD.

INT. HENRY'S FATHER'S CAR - NIGHT

Henry sits in the passenger seat, football in his lap. His father looks both ways, then eases onto the road.

HENRY

Do you think Josh remembers me?

HENRY'S FATHER

Hard to forget a kid who runs into traffic for an autograph.

HENRY

I didn't run into traffic.

HENRY'S FATHER

You ran near traffic.

HENRY

Different rule.

Headlights bloom too fast from the side.

INT. JOSH'S JEEP - NIGHT

Josh looks from the mirror to the phone to the road.

Henry's car appears.

Josh slams the brakes.

WHITEOUT.

The sound of impact. Then silence.

The football rolls through broken glass and stops beside Josh's tire.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

Sheriff Marquez arrives moments later. He runs toward the wreck. For one second he is only a father.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

Josh!

Josh is alive, bloodied, dazed, trapped by the airbag. Then Peter hears Henry's father screaming.

HENRY'S FATHER

Henry! No, no, no!

Peter turns. Sees the child's football. Sees the other car.

Understands.

The badge and the father collide inside him.

INT. HOSPITAL CHAPEL - NIGHT

Linda sits alone in the tiny chapel. A vending machine hums outside. Sheriff enters and stops at the back, unsure if he is allowed near his own wife in this grief.

LINDA

When he was born, you counted his fingers three times.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

I remember.

LINDA

You said no boy of ours would ever be alone in trouble.

Peter sits beside her, destroyed.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

I have to process him.

LINDA

I know.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

I do not know how to be his father and the sheriff tomorrow.

LINDA

Then be honest enough to be both badly and keep showing up.

They sit before a plain wooden cross. No easy answer descends. Only presence.

INT. MAYOR LUCIANO'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Mayor Luciano watches raw phone footage from the party. Andy stands in the corner, pale in a way his father has never seen.

MAYOR LUCIANO
Tell me exactly what happened.

ANDY
It was just a game.

MAYOR LUCIANO
A boy is dead. Do not use the word
just in this room.

Andy flinches. The mayor lowers the phone. Politics has not prepared him for his son looking like a child.

ANDY
I did not make him drive.

MAYOR LUCIANO
No. But you helped build the room
where pride looked like courage.

Andy looks down. For once, he has no performance ready.

ANDY
What are you going to do?

The mayor looks at the paused image of Josh drinking while teenagers cheer.

MAYOR LUCIANO
For once, I am going to wait until
I know whether I want justice or a
headline.

Candice stands across the street from Henry's house, unable to approach. On the porch: a small pair of cleats, a

Wildcats flag, and silence.

Brandon walks up beside her.

BRANDON
You called.

CANDICE
Too late.

BRANDON
You called.

CANDICE
I keep hearing him say he was fine.

BRANDON
That was his lie. Not yours.

Candice nods, but forgiveness of self will not come cheaply.
Josh wakes. Linda sits beside him, destroyed but present.
Sheriff stands by the window, still in uniform, eyes hollow.

JOSH
Who was it?

No one answers.

JOSH (CONT'D)
Dad.

Sheriff turns. This is the hardest duty of his life.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
Henry.

Josh does not understand at first. Then he does.

JOSH
No.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
He died at the scene.

Josh remembers Henry in the parking lot. I want to be just like you.

JOSH
I gave him the ball.

Linda breaks. Josh begins to sob, but it is not enough and will never be enough.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - HOLDING AREA - DAY

Josh, bruised, sits across from Sheriff Marquez and Deputy Billings. No special room. No protection from process.

DEPUTY BILLINGS
Josh, you understand your rights as
I read them to you?

JOSH
Yes, sir.

Billings hesitates, hating every second of this. Sheriff does not intervene.

JOSH (CONT'D)
I was drinking. I drove. I saw the
lights and panicked. I killed him.

Sheriff's face tightens, but he lets the truth stand.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
Write it down exactly as he said
it.

Josh looks at his father. Not rescued. Not abandoned. Held
inside consequence.

INT. JOHNSONVILLE CHURCH - SANCTUARY - NIGHT

The vigil has ended, but people remain in the pews as if
leaving would make grief official. Candles flicker beneath
photos of Doug and Henry.

Coach Rogers sits alone. Brandon approaches with his state
playbook tucked under one arm.

BRANDON
Coach, are we still playing?

Coach looks toward the photos.

COACH ROGERS
I do not know yet.

BRANDON
If we do not, people will say

Henry died because of football.

COACH ROGERS
People are going to say a lot
because silence scares them.

BRANDON
What do we say?

Coach takes the playbook from him and closes it.

COACH ROGERS
Maybe for one night we do not say
anything. Maybe for one night we
let God hear us without turning it
into strategy.

INT. JOHNSONVILLE CHURCH - FELLOWSHIP HALL - SAME NIGHT

Martha Peterson pours coffee beside Linda. Two mothers divided by different losses and joined by the same room.

LINDA

I do not know what to say to

Henry's father.

MARTHA

There may not be a sentence for that.

LINDA

I keep wanting to defend my son and condemn him in the same breath.

MARTHA

That is motherhood after harm.

Love keeps reaching for the child. Truth keeps reaching for the wound.

Linda grips the coffee cup until it trembles.

LINDA

Do you hate him?

Martha answers with the care of someone refusing a simple lie.

MARTHA

Some mornings I hate the road.

Some mornings I hate the phone.

Some mornings I hate every adult who saw a warning and called it normal. I pray before I decide what to do with Josh.

LINDA

And what does God say?

MARTHA

Not to confuse forgiveness with pretending.

A vigil for Henry. The church is full, but the town is not united. Some whisper blame. Some cry. Some stare at Sheriff.

Some cannot look at Linda.

Martha Peterson sits beside Linda. Two mothers joined by losses no one should share.

LINDA
I don't know how to ask for
forgiveness.

MARTHA
Then don't start there.

Linda looks at her.

MARTHA (CONT'D)
Forgiveness is not pretending it
didn't happen.

Linda absorbs that.

MARTHA (CONT'D)
I pray for your boy. I do. I also
pray he tells the truth every day
for the rest of his life.

Across the church, Coach Rogers looks at the Wildcats. Their
state banners hang in the fellowship hall like accusations.

EXT. FOOTBALL FIELD - DAY

The Wildcats gather without Josh. Brandon holds the football.
Coach Rogers faces them.

COACH ROGERS
We kept saying win it for Doug.

Maybe we should've asked how to live after him.

The boys listen. No slogan. No chant.

COACH ROGERS (CONT'D)
Football is a good game. It is a
terrible god.

Brandon lowers his head. Carlos does the same. Toby wipes his
eyes, no joke available.

INT. COURTROOM - SENTENCING - DAY

The courtroom is packed. Not spectacle now. Consequence.

Josh stands in jail clothes. Henry's father rises with a
folded paper that trembles in his hand.

HENRY'S FATHER
My son kept that football beside
his bed.

(MORE)

HENRY'S FATHER (CONT'D)

He told people Josh Marquez gave it to him because Josh saw something special in him. I do not know what to do with that.

Josh cannot look away. This is part of the sentence too.

HENRY'S FATHER (CONT'D)

I want to hate you. Some days I do. But hate does not put my boy at the breakfast table. So I will tell you what I need. I need you to remember his name every morning you wake up.

Josh nods, tears falling.

JOSH

I will, sir.

The judge turns to Josh.

JUDGE

Do you wish to make a statement?

JOSH

There is nothing I can say that gives him back. I was drunk. I drove. I killed Henry. I am guilty. I am sorry. And I know sorry is not enough.

Linda weeps silently. Sheriff sits upright, accepting every word as truth and punishment.

INT. COURTHOUSE HALLWAY - DAY

After sentencing, the hallway divides into islands of grief.

Reporters whisper near the exit. Deputies keep space around

Josh. Linda stands with Sheriff, both hollowed out.

Candice approaches Josh before the deputies take him away.

She has rehearsed a hundred speeches and brought none of them.

CANDICE

I called.

JOSH

I know.

CANDICE
I need you to know I called.

JOSH
You tried to save him from me.

That truth almost drops her. Josh swallows.

JOSH (CONT'D)
Do not carry what I did.

CANDICE
I do not know how to put it down.

JOSH
Then tell the truth every time it
comes back. That is what they keep
telling me to do.

A deputy gently signals time. Candice steps back. No hug. No romantic absolution. Just two young people standing on opposite sides of consequence.

CANDICE
I did love you.

JOSH
I know. I was too proud to let it
help.

He is led away. Candice stays upright until he turns the corner. Then Jessie catches her before she falls.

Josh stands before the judge. Linda and Sheriff sit behind him. Henry's father sits across the aisle, hollowed out.

JUDGE
How do you plead?

Josh looks at Henry's father, then at the judge.

JOSH
Guilty, Your Honor.

Sheriff closes his eyes. Linda takes his hand. Grace does not erase the sentence.

INT. PRISON LIBRARY - DAY - YEARS LATER

Josh shelves donated books with careful hands. A younger inmate, RAY, watches him mark a worn Bible with a pencil stub.

RAY
You the football guy?

JOSH
Was.

RAY
People in here love a was. Makes
them feel less lonely.

JOSH
You need something?

RAY
Chaplain says you help with
letters.

Ray slides over a blank sheet. Josh sees the first line: Dear Mom. Nothing else.

RAY (CONT'D)
I do not know how to start.

Josh sits across from him.

JOSH
Start with what you are done lying
about.

Ray looks at him, suspicious of the cost.

RAY
That how you started?

JOSH
Eventually.

INT. PRISON CELL - NIGHT

Josh lies awake. On the wall: no football posters, no clippings, only a small paper cross and a handwritten note:

HENRY DANIELS - TELL THE TRUTH.

He closes his eyes, but sleep does not excuse him from memory.

Josh sits in a circle of inmates beneath fluorescent lights.

A volunteer chaplain asks each man to say one true thing.

Josh keeps his eyes down.

CHAPLAIN

Josh?

JOSH

I keep trying to make remorse
useful so I can feel less selfish
about it.

The chaplain waits. Josh breathes.

JOSH (CONT'D)

I killed a boy who trusted the
version of me I was trying to
protect.

INT. PRISON VISITATION ROOM - DAY

Sheriff sits across from Josh. Years have carved both of them
down to something more honest.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

Martha Peterson wrote me.

JOSH

Why?

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

She asked if you would speak at the
school outreach next month.

Josh almost laughs from shock.

JOSH

Why would she ask that?

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

Because forgiveness is not
pretending it didn't happen. And
silence is not repentance.

Josh looks away.

JOSH

I don't deserve to stand in that
school.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

No. You don't. That may be why you
should.

EXT. JOHNSONVILLE HIGH SCHOOL - DAY - SIX YEARS LATER

A prison transport van pulls up. Josh, now 24, steps out in restraints. Older, thinner, quieter. He carries grief without performing it.

Sheriff Marquez, older too, waits near the entrance. He may no longer wear the badge, or perhaps he wears it differently now. Either way, he is not the same man.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

You ready?

JOSH

No.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ

Good. Means you know where you are.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY

Josh walks past Doug's old locker. The memorial paper is long gone, but a small sticker remains inside a display nearby: PHILIPPIANS 3:13.

He stops at another case. Henry's photo. The game ball, scuffed and sealed behind glass.

Josh almost cannot breathe.

Sheriff holds out a Wildcats helmet. Doug's old number and

Josh's old number are both marked inside.

JOSH

I kept calling it pressure because
I didn't want to call it pride.

Sheriff nods. No lesson. Just witness.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL - CLASSROOM - DAY - SIX YEARS LATER

Before the assembly, Josh waits in an empty classroom with

Sheriff and a prison officer. The desks are smaller than he remembers. On the wall, student essays answer the prompt:

WHO DO YOU LOOK UP TO?

Josh reads one: My brother, because he always drives me to practice.

JOSH
I forgot how young they are.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
You were young.

JOSH
Not young enough for that to be an
excuse.

Sheriff accepts the correction. Years ago he would have
softened it. Now he lets truth stand.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
No. Not an excuse.

Josh looks at his father.

JOSH
When I get up there, do not let me
make it sound noble.

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
I will not.

JOSH
I mean it. If I start turning it
into a lesson--

SHERIFF MARQUEZ
I know that sin.

They share a sad, honest smile. The officer opens the door.

The auditorium waits.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL AUDITORIUM - DAY

Students fill the seats, restless and whispering. The room
echoes the assembly years earlier. Principal Snipes, older
and smaller somehow, introduces Josh and steps away.

Josh stands at the microphone in restraints. He waits until
the room settles. It takes time. He does not command them.

He earns the silence by refusing to rush.

JOSH
I used to sit where you sit.

The room quiets.

JOSH (CONT'D)

I had the jersey. The girl. The scouts. The town. A father trying to reach me. Friends trying to help me. And a little boy who wanted to be like me.

A few students glance toward Henry's father seated in the back. Candice, older now, sits near the aisle. Brandon, now helping coach youth players, stands by the wall. Carlos is beside him.

JOSH (CONT'D)

I killed that boy because one night I cared more about proving I was fine than admitting I was broken.

No one moves.

JOSH (CONT'D)

Prison did not save me. Football did not save me. Being admired did not save me. Grace found me when I finally stopped defending myself.

He looks at the students, then at his father.

JOSH (CONT'D)

What you refuse to surrender will eventually take the wheel.

Silence. Not applause. Something heavier.

EXT. JOHNSONVILLE HIGH SCHOOL - FOOTBALL FIELD - DAY

Josh is led back toward the transport van. Outside, younger kids practice on the field. A boy drops a football. Another kid picks it up and hands it back.

Sheriff watches Josh walk. Linda joins him, taking his hand.

Josh pauses before stepping into the van. He looks once toward the field. Not free. But no longer blind.

FADE OUT.

THE END