

CORPSEWOOD MANOR

Written by

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Based on: The murders of Summerville Georgia - 1980

EXT. WOODS OF SUMMERVILLE, GEORGIA - VERY EARLY MORNING

A dense fog carpets a forest of dead standing trees - No birds. No insects. No crawling life beneath the bark. Only winter breath moving through the pines.

Far away, HOOVES strike wet earth. The sound grows. Faster. Panicked.

A BLACK HORSE bursts through the fog, wild-eyed, lathered, tearing up mud behind it. Something unseen has driven it past reason.

The animal circles as if trapped by an invisible fence. Its breath plumes white. It rears, screams, and collapses hard into the mud.

For a moment, only the horse breathing.

A dark tear of blood slides down its face. Closer we see the sockets where its eyes should be - Hollow.

CUT TO:

INT. DOWNTOWN ATLANTA BAR - NIGHT

Warm light. Christmas garland. Mistletoe. Expensive suits.

Controlled laughter. The civilized world dressed up and drunk.

A bartender slides a highball down the bar. DUSTIN WHEELAND (30s) catches it clean, tailored suit, Tom Ford glasses, smile sharp enough to be mistaken for confidence.

He throws it back and turns just as JENNY (27) crashes into him with a kiss. Her foot pops. She has the reckless beauty of someone who knows exactly when she is being watched and exactly when she does not care.

DUSTIN

Wow. I should have proposed months ago if that was the response.

Jenny shows him the engagement ring with theatrical pride.

JENNY

Your Jenny is ready to go home.

DUSTIN

Check, please.

He raises a finger to the bartender, but a WAVE OF LAW ASSOCIATES descends. Hands on shoulders. Slaps on the back.

The smell of cigars and bonus checks.

LAWYER #1

Dustin, my friend, partner before thirty. That is not luck. That is pathology.

LAWYER #2

Miller wants him.

DUSTIN

Mr. Miller can want me tomorrow.

LAWYER #3

No, no. Tonight you are loved by the institution.

They pull him away. Dustin looks back to Jenny. She watches, amused but faintly wary.

DUSTIN

Two minutes.

JENNY

You said that before law school.

Dustin lets himself be carried into the crowd.

INT. DOWNTOWN ATLANTA BAR - CORNER TABLE - CONTINUOUS

MR. MILLER (60s) founding partner, red-faced, silver-haired, dressed in a Santa jacket without the pants to match, sits in a booth surrounded by empty cocktail glasses and gnawed citrus rinds.

Dustin is deposited across from him. Two shot glasses are set between them: one clear, one yellow.

MR. MILLER

Dustin Wheeland. Sit down before I change my mind about liking you.

DUSTIN

Mr. Miller, thank you. Truly. I am honored by the confidence you have shown in me and I intend to--

MR. MILLER

Are you a wolf or a lamb?

Dustin smiles. Waits for the joke to reveal itself.

DUSTIN
In what jurisdiction?

Miller does not smile. He slides the yellow shot toward
Dustin.

MR. MILLER
A dying wolf lies by a river. Too
weak to move. A lamb passes. The
wolf says, would you be kind enough
to bring me water before I die?

Dustin glances toward the other lawyers. They watch with
bright, drunken eyes.

MR. MILLER (CONT'D)
The lamb says, I know what you are.
If I come closer, you will kill me.
The wolf says, I am old. I am
dying. What use would I have for
killing you?

Miller leans closer.

MR. MILLER (CONT'D)
The lamb thinks. The lamb believes
itself compassionate. The lamb
believes itself smart enough to see
danger. So it lets the wool soak in
the river and brings the wolf a
drink.

Miller slams his hand on the table. Dustin flinches despite
himself.

MR. MILLER (CONT'D)
The wolf bites the lamb through the
throat. As the lamb dies, it asks
why. The wolf says, age has made me
slow, but given me wisdom.

Miller raises the clear shot.

MR. MILLER (CONT'D)
There are two kinds of people.
Those with hidden agendas, and
those who trust people with hidden
agendas. I would rather drink with
the wolf.

The yellow shot waits.

DUSTIN
Then to wisdom.

Dustin picks up the yellow shot, clinks Miller, and drinks.
The table erupts. Law associates pound the booth, roaring.

DUSTIN (CONT'D)
What was that?

LAWYER #1
Guilty.

MR. MILLER
Welcome to the firm.

INT. DOWNTOWN ATLANTA BAR - MEN'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Faucet water pours into Dustin's mouth. He spits. Gags. Spits again.

He moves to the sink, wipes his tongue with a paper towel, then studies himself in the mirror. His teeth. His lips. The expensive glasses that did not help him see it coming.

He bares his teeth like checking for damage.

Jenny slips in behind him.

JENNY
Dusty?

DUSTIN
I drank piss in front of the partnership committee.

JENNY
Not your whole partnership committee. Some of them were at the bar.

DUSTIN
That is not landing the way you want it to.

She fights a smile. Dustin sees it and points at her through the mirror.

DUSTIN (CONT'D)
Do not laugh.

JENNY
I am containing multitudes.

He turns back, rinses again. Too hard. Too long.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Hey. Look at me.

He does not.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Tell me what you see?

Their private ritual. It lands in him.

DUSTIN
I see... a man who should have
joined a fraternity and learned the
flavor profile earlier.

JENNY
Again.

DUSTIN
I see a jury of one, and I am
losing her.

JENNY
Better.

She touches his face. He leans into it, embarrassed and grateful.

EXT. METROPOLITAN SIDEWALK - NIGHT

Dustin wrings water from his tie as he and Jenny step into the cold Atlanta night. The city is glass, traffic, wet pavement, and controlled light.

JENNY
Were you never in a fraternity?

DUSTIN
I was in the library studying my
ass off, because I was under the
impression that was how law worked.

JENNY
Poor baby.

DUSTIN
They got one over on me.

JENNY
That is what you are mad about?

DUSTIN

If I cannot tell when associates
are hazing me, how will I see it
coming from a client?

JENNY

Why would a client haze you?

DUSTIN

Trust is the baseline of my career.

JENNY

Then only trust people who love
you.

He gives her a look.

JENNY (CONT'D)

I am serious. If somebody who loves
you tells you it is time to go
home, you go home.

DUSTIN

Is this you telling me to go home?

JENNY

This is me telling you to brush
your teeth before you kiss me
again.

He smiles. The night softens.

DUSTIN

Speaking of home--

Jenny sees him preparing a speech.

JENNY

No.

DUSTIN

You do not know what I was going to
say.

JENNY

You breathed like a closing
argument. No.

INT. DUSTIN AND JENNY'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Their apartment is a small gallery with a bed hidden inside
it. Canvases stacked against walls. Horse studies in oil.

A torn painting of a white horse, repaired with clear tape, rests on an easel by the window.

Jenny enters first, already angry. Dustin follows with his damp tie in hand.

JENNY
You called him.

DUSTIN
I did not call him tonight.

JENNY
Dustin.

DUSTIN
I called him last week.

Jenny stops. Turns.

JENNY
Last week.

DUSTIN
I was going to surprise you.

JENNY
With my father?

DUSTIN
With Christmas. With family. With the idea that maybe we do not have to start our marriage by pretending half of your life does not exist.

JENNY
You do not get to call my father family because you bought a ring.

DUSTIN
I know that.

JENNY
Do you?

Dustin takes that. He looks toward the horse painting.

DUSTIN
I want his blessing.

JENNY
The only thing Harper ever blessed was bourbon.

DUSTIN
He is your father.

JENNY
That is a biological fact, not a
recommendation.

DUSTIN
You have not seen him in years.

JENNY
There is a reason.

DUSTIN
Then tell me the reason.

Jenny looks at the repaired horse painting. Her anger becomes something older.

JENNY
No.

DUSTIN
Jenny--

JENNY
You do this. You decide something
is broken and you come at it with
gifts and plans and those nice
hands.

DUSTIN
Nice hands?

JENNY
Do not flirt your way out of being
stupid.

DUSTIN
I am not trying to fix you.

JENNY
Then what are you trying to fix?

That lands. Dustin has no fast answer.

INT. DUSTIN AND JENNY'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - LATER

The fight has cooled into silence. Jenny sits on the couch in Dustin's shirt. Dustin sits on the floor near the easel, back against the wall.

DUSTIN
My dad's name was Mike.

Jenny looks over. This is new.

JENNY
Was?

DUSTIN
Mechanic. Blue collar. He would
come home smelling like oil, and no
matter how late it was, he would
open the door and say, hello the
house.

Jenny listens.

DUSTIN (CONT'D)
I would run out of bed. My mother
would tell him to shower before he
touched anything, and he would pick
me up anyway. Then he would read
until I fell asleep.

JENNY
What did he read?

Dustin almost smiles. Then cannot.

DUSTIN
I do not remember. That is the
thing. I remember the oil. I
remember the door. I remember his
shirt had MIKE stitched on it in
white thread. I do not remember the
book.

He swallows.

DUSTIN (CONT'D)
One day he went to work and did not
come back. My mother told me he was
working late. For a very long time.

Weeks. Months. In my head, he was always almost home.

JENNY
Jesus, Dusty.

DUSTIN
She said later she did not know how
to explain the unexplainable.

(MORE)

DUSTIN (CONT'D)

She thought she was giving me a childhood by keeping the truth outside the door.

Jenny gets down beside him.

DUSTIN (CONT'D)

I think I became a lawyer because somebody should have been able to answer a question.

JENNY

And Harper?

DUSTIN

As irrational as it sounds, asking your father for his blessing feels like... maybe hearing that door open. Just once.

Jenny studies him. Her face softens, but the fear remains.

JENNY

Summerville is not a door you open because you need something on the other side.

DUSTIN

Then help me understand it.

JENNY

My mother disappeared there.

The room stills.

DUSTIN

I know she--

JENNY

No. You know the soft version. The one I can say at parties. She disappeared. Harper drank. People whispered. I left. That is not the same as knowing.

Jenny looks to the horse painting.

JENNY (CONT'D)

She taught me to paint horses. She said horses knew when people lied.

Said you could fool a person with a smile, but never a horse.

DUSTIN

Jenny--

JENNY

There was one. Snowflake. Born in the only real snow I ever saw in Georgia. Mama let me name her.

Harper kept her after everything else went bad.

DUSTIN

You want to see her.

JENNY

I want to know something survived.

Dustin takes her hand.

DUSTIN

If you say no, we stay.

Jenny looks at him. Wants to believe that.

JENNY

If we go, you listen to me when I say we leave.

DUSTIN

I will.

JENNY

No lawyer voice. Say it like you mean it.

DUSTIN

I will listen to you.

Jenny leans her forehead against his.

JENNY

Take your Jenny home, then.

EXT. ATLANTA APARTMENT - MORNING

Bleak winter morning. The city is washed in cold gray. A brand new red 1982 MERCEDES 380SL waits at the curb with a backseat full of wrapped gifts.

Dustin stands beside it with coffee, muffins, scarf, peacoat, and the pride of a man who thinks presentation is half the solution.

Jenny comes down in boots, jeans, and an oversized sweater, carrying a suitcase.

JENNY
You bought a car?

DUSTIN
Technically, I bought us a car.

JENNY
You bought a city car for a horse farm.

DUSTIN
It has an excellent suspension.

JENNY
It has leather that has never heard of mud.

She peers at the gifts.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Why are there presents?

DUSTIN
It is illegal not to bring presents on Christmas.

JENNY
You are very handsome when you are about to learn a lesson.

DUSTIN
What do you see?

JENNY
I see a man who should have bought a truck.

She takes the coffee and gets in.

INT./EXT. MERCEDES - HIGHWAY - DAY

The Mercedes glides south. Atlanta thins into exits, warehouses, fields, pine lines, gas stations, and wet December sky.

A Flock of Seagulls plays. Then static. Dustin taps the radio. It returns, a little warped.

DUSTIN
Brand new car.

JENNY
 Maybe it knows where we are going.

DUSTIN
 Cars do not know things.

JENNY
 City boy.

A billboard rises from the fog: JESUS SAVES in enormous red letters.

The radio slips into a traditional Christmas hymn. Organ.
 Choir. Tinny and old.

DUSTIN
 That is unsettlingly timed.

JENNY
 That means we are getting close.

He looks over. Jenny watches the fields. Her face has changed. Less Atlanta. More memory.

DUSTIN
 What do you see?

JENNY
 Too much.

She takes his hand off the automatic shifter and holds it.

JENNY (CONT'D)
 You do not need this anymore.

Automatic.

DUSTIN
 You do know most people in the city
 do not drive stick.

JENNY
 Most people in the city do not know
 how to leave a deer in a ditch
 either.

DUSTIN
 Why would that be a common skill?

JENNY
 You will see.

The road narrows.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

The pavement gives up and becomes dirt. The Mercedes jolts.

INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS

Gifts slide. Coffee splashes.

DUSTIN
Jesus, did something break?

JENNY
The illusion that you chose the
right car.

The radio crackles. Dustin reaches for it.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Focus on the road.

DUSTIN
It should not be doing that.

JENNY
Dustin--

A DOE leaps from the pines.

JENNY (CONT'D)
DUSTIN!

Dustin swerves. Impact. A sickening thud. The Mercedes slides and stops sideways in the wet dirt.

Silence. Then the radio finds a church station. A choir sings something ancient and merry.

DUSTIN
You okay?

Jenny nods, breathing hard. She gets out.

DUSTIN (CONT'D)
Where are you going?

JENNY
To move it.

EXT. SIDE OF COUNTRY ROAD - CONTINUOUS

The doe lies in the road, broken but alive. Its sides heave.

Its eyes shine black and wet.

Jenny grabs the rear legs.

DUSTIN
Jenny, do not touch that.

JENNY
We have to get it out of the road.

DUSTIN
Can we call someone?

JENNY
Someone comes around the bend,
swerves, lands in the ditch. Help
me.

Dustin steps out. His oxford sinks into mud.

DUSTIN
These are Italian.

JENNY
Then let them die with honor.

He grabs the front legs, fighting nausea. They drag. The doe
BELLOWS, horrible and human.

DUSTIN
Holy fuck!

Dustin staggers back. Jenny does not. Tears in her eyes, but
steady.

A SIREN WHOOPS. A muddy 1970s police truck pulls up. DEPUTY

STEVEN RAY (30s), local, broad, kind-eyed under a tired
badge, steps out.

STEVEN
Well I'll be damned.

Jenny stiffens behind Dustin.

STEVEN (CONT'D)
Firefly?

Dustin turns to her.

DUSTIN
Firefly?

JENNY
(Southern comes back))
Hey, Steven.

Steven's face opens with years of history. He hugs her before she can stop him. She allows it, barely.

STEVEN
Look at you. Thought Atlanta
swallowed you whole.

JENNY
Tried to. Choked on me.

STEVEN
That so?

His eyes find the ring. Then Dustin.

STEVEN (CONT'D)
And this must be the reason.

DUSTIN
Dustin Wheeland.

Dustin offers his hand. Steven shakes it with just enough pressure to explain the local order.

STEVEN
You always drive that fast on dirt,
Mr. Wheeland?

DUSTIN
I was not--

JENNY
He's new.

STEVEN
I see that.

Steven walks to the doe. His face hardens with practical mercy. He pulls his sidearm.

DUSTIN
Wait, what are you--

Steven fires once. The doe stops suffering.

Dustin looks away. Jenny does not.

STEVEN
You headed to Harper's?

JENNY
For Christmas.

STEVEN
He know that?

JENNY
He has been warned.

STEVEN
Huh.

A beat. Steven chooses his words.

STEVEN (CONT'D)
You know he sold the horses?

Jenny goes still.

JENNY
What?

STEVEN
Most of them. Maybe all. Man out in
the woods bought the lot.

JENNY
Who?

STEVEN
Schroeder. Dr. Elias Schroeder.

DUSTIN
Doctor of what?

STEVEN
Depends who you ask.

JENNY
Snowflake?

STEVEN
I heard one made it. Could be her.

DUSTIN
Where does this Schroeder live?

Steven looks at Dustin as if hearing a child ask where the
wolves sleep.

STEVEN
Place out past the dead pines.
Locals call it Corpsewood.

EXT. HARPER'S RANCH - DAY

The Mercedes pulls up a long muddy drive toward an old farmhouse and stable. Christmas lights hang from gutters, half-dead, blinking out of rhythm.

Empty pastures. Empty stalls. Old tack on warped rails. The place feels less abandoned than ashamed.

HARPER (early 60s), lean, weathered, pipe in hand, stands near the mailbox like he has been waiting for bad news and is irritated it came in a red Mercedes.

Dustin gets out, mud on his shoes, gift in hand.

DUSTIN

Mr. Harper? Dustin Wheeland. It is an honor to finally--

HARPER

You're late.

DUSTIN

For?

HARPER

Dinner.

JENNY

(Southern, involuntary))
It's not even two.

HARPER

Then you are early for disappointing me.

Jenny closes the car door. Father and daughter stare at each other across years.

JENNY

Hello, Daddy.

HARPER

Jenny.

No hug. No movement. Dustin stands between them with a wrapped gift like an idiot in a painting.

DUSTIN

We brought presents.

HARPER

You brought a convertible to a farm.

Harper turns and walks toward the house.

EXT. HARPER'S RANCH - STABLE AREA - LATER

Jenny walks the stable aisle. Her boots know the boards. Her hand touches stall doors as if greeting graves.

Dustin follows, quieter now.

DUSTIN

Jenny--

JENNY

Do not.

She stops at a stall. The name plate has been removed, but the darker rectangle remains. On a nail hangs an old HALTER, faded blue. Jenny takes it down like touching a relic.

JENNY (CONT'D)

This was hers.

DUSTIN

Snowflake?

Jenny nods. She finds a horseshoe on a shelf, wipes off dirt. The family name is engraved beneath the rust.

JENNY

She was born in snow. Real snow.

Not flurries. The whole place white. Mama said the land looked clean for once, so I should name the foal before it remembered the mud.

Jenny smiles despite herself.

JENNY (CONT'D)

I named her Snowflake because I was six and subtle.

DUSTIN

I think subtlety is overrated at six.

Jenny holds the halter to her chest.

JENNY

Mama laughed so hard she cried.

Dustin wants to touch her. Does not.

Outside the stable, near the tree line, several low MOUNDS sit beneath crude wooden markers.

DUSTIN
Are those graves?

JENNY
Horse graves.

DUSTIN
You bury them here?

JENNY
A horse belongs where it worked.

Harper appears in the stable entrance.

HARPER
That is right.

Jenny turns on him.

JENNY
Where is she?

HARPER
Jenny--

JENNY
Where is Snowflake?

HARPER
Gone.

JENNY
Sold.

HARPER
I said gone.

JENNY
To Schroeder?

Harper's face closes at the name.

HARPER
You heard what you needed to hear.

JENNY
I heard you sold Mama's horse to that place.

HARPER
Do not say what you do not
understand.

DUSTIN
Sir, maybe we can--

HARPER
You can stand there and keep quiet.

Dustin stiffens. Jenny sees it, too late.

INT. HARPER'S FARMHOUSE - FOYER - LATE AFTERNOON

The inside of the farmhouse is warmer than the yard, but not kinder. Old pine floors. Family photographs turned slightly away from sunlight. A grandfather clock that ticks too loud.

Dustin carries bags and wrapped gifts inside. Jenny enters behind him with Snowflake's halter folded in both hands.

Harper sees it and looks away.

DUSTIN
Where would you like these?

HARPER
Back in the car would be my first
choice.

JENNY
Daddy.

HARPER
What? He asked.

Dustin tries to smile through it. He sets the gifts beside a dead Christmas tree still bundled with twine, never opened.

DUSTIN
We thought we would help decorate.

HARPER
House is decorated.

A single ceramic Santa sits on a shelf, facing the wall.

JENNY
Looks festive.

HARPER
Glad you approve.

The three stand in the stale air of a family that forgot how to occupy the same room.

DUSTIN
Sir, I know this is an imposition.

HARPER
You know that, do you?

DUSTIN
I know Jenny coming home is complicated.

HARPER
Complicated is a carburetor on a cold morning. This is something else.

JENNY
He is trying, Daddy.

HARPER
That is what concerns me.

INT. JENNY'S CHILDHOOD BEDROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

A small bedroom preserved without tenderness. Horse ribbons pinned to cork board. A faded poster of a white stallion.

Dust on a vanity. One wall is covered by old paint smudges where a child wiped brushes instead of cleaning them.

Jenny stands in the doorway like she expects the room to accuse her.

Dustin enters with her suitcase.

DUSTIN
This is sweet.

Jenny gives him a look.

DUSTIN (CONT'D)
Wrong word.

JENNY
It is a museum where the curator hates the subject.

She walks to the cork board. Touches an old blue ribbon:
SECOND PLACE - CHATTOOGA COUNTY 4-H.

DUSTIN
Second place?

JENNY
Snowflake threw me into a creek
before the final turn.

DUSTIN
And still second.

JENNY
She felt bad after.

DUSTIN
The horse felt bad.

JENNY
She would not look me in the eye
for two days.

Dustin smiles. Jenny does not. She picks up a small jar of dried paint, twists it, fails to open it.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Mama used to sit right there and
mix colors on paper plates. Harper
said she wasted paint. She said
wasting paint was how a color
learned what it wanted to be.

DUSTIN
That sounds like her.

JENNY
You do not know what she sounds
like. Not cruel. True.

DUSTIN
No. I do not.

Jenny's anger softens because he did not argue.

JENNY
She would have liked you.

DUSTIN
Because I am charming?

JENNY
Because you are easy to draw. Big
eyes. Nervous hands. Too much
mouth.

DUSTIN
My mother said the same thing
without the drawing part.

Jenny looks at him.

JENNY
What do you see?

DUSTIN
I see a girl who got out.

JENNY
That all?

DUSTIN
I see a woman afraid that coming
back makes leaving mean less.

Jenny looks away before he can see how hard that lands.

JENNY
Do not get good at me right now.

INT. HARPER'S FARMHOUSE - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Harper stands outside the bedroom door, unseen. He has heard enough to wound him and not enough to heal him.

He moves down the hall, passing a framed photograph of Caroline. He does not look at it.

INT. HARPER'S FARMHOUSE - DINING ROOM - EVENING

Dinner is boiled greens, cornbread, ham, coffee, and resentment. Dustin sits too straight. Jenny pushes food around her plate. Harper eats like chewing is work.

DUSTIN
This is excellent, sir.

HARPER
It is ham.

DUSTIN
Well prepared ham.

HARPER
Pig did most of it.

Jenny nearly laughs. Dustin sees it and takes the tiny victory.

DUSTIN
Jenny tells me you raised thirteen horses.

HARPER
Fourteen.

JENNY
Thirteen after Bluebell.

HARPER
Fourteen if you count the ones buried proper.

The room tightens.

DUSTIN
Bluebell was the one you sold before Jenny left?

HARPER
You writing a book?

DUSTIN
No, sir.

HARPER
Then quit collecting chapters.

Jenny puts down her fork.

JENNY
You do not get to be ugly because he is asking what I am too scared to.

HARPER
You were never scared to ask anything.

JENNY
I asked where Mama was every morning for six months.

Harper stops eating.

JENNY (CONT'D)
You remember what you said?

HARPER
Jenny.

JENNY

You said, eat your breakfast.

Silence. Dustin watches two people bleed without touching.

DUSTIN

Maybe tonight is not the--

HARPER

There it is.

DUSTIN

Sir?

HARPER

The nice-man voice. Smooths things over so nobody has to smell what is under the rug.

DUSTIN

I am trying not to make this worse.

HARPER

Then you should have stayed where she put you.

JENNY

Stop it.

HARPER

He brought you here, did he not?

JENNY

I got in the car.

HARPER

Because he made it pretty.

Dustin stiffens again. Harper notices because Harper knows exactly where to put the knife.

HARPER (CONT'D)

Men like him do not force a door.

They polish the knob and call it kindness.

INT. HARPER'S FARMHOUSE - KITCHEN - LATER

Jenny rinses dishes too hard. Dustin dries. Through the doorway, Harper sits in the living room with the television on mute and a glass in hand.

DUSTIN
I am sorry.

JENNY
For which part?

DUSTIN
Pick one. I will be thorough.

She almost smiles. Does not give it to him.

JENNY
You see what happens here? People start saying things they should have said years ago, and the house gets fed.

DUSTIN
The house?

JENNY
This one. Any one. I do not know.

He sets down a plate.

DUSTIN
I can still get us a room in town.

JENNY
There is one motel, and it smells like cigarettes and wet carpet.

DUSTIN
I can survive wet carpet.

JENNY
You gagged at a deer.

DUSTIN
That deer had a theatrical quality.

Jenny finally smiles. Small. Tired.

JENNY
Do not talk to Schroeder.

Dustin does not answer fast enough.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Dusty.

DUSTIN
If Snowflake is alive--

JENNY

She is not worth you walking into
something you do not understand.

DUSTIN

She is worth asking a question.

JENNY

You do not know what questions cost
here.

INT. HARPER'S FARMHOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Dustin brings Harper one of the wrapped gifts. Jenny stands
in the archway, already regretting the entire gesture.

DUSTIN

Sir, we brought you something.

HARPER

No.

DUSTIN

You have not opened it.

HARPER

I know what a trap looks like with
paper on it.

JENNY

It is a gift, Daddy.

HARPER

From him.

Dustin keeps the smile in place.

DUSTIN

It is a bottle of single malt.

Jenny said you used to like--

HARPER

Jenny should not be telling
strangers what I like.

JENNY

He is not a stranger.

HARPER

He is to me.

DUSTIN

Then let me become less of one.

Harper looks up. For half a second, he almost respects the spine in that.

HARPER

You want less stranger? Tell me what scares her.

Dustin glances at Jenny. She has gone still.

DUSTIN

That is not my place.

HARPER

Convenient.

DUSTIN

Respectful.

HARPER

You do not know the difference yet.

Harper takes the gift, sets it unopened on the coffee table.

HARPER (CONT'D)

You will sleep in the study. She will sleep upstairs.

DUSTIN

We are engaged.

HARPER

Not in my house.

JENNY

Your house got a little holy since

I left.

HARPER

No. Just smaller.

INT. HARPER'S STUDY - NIGHT

Dustin inflates an air mattress with a small electric pump.

It WHINES against the quiet house.

The study is full of ledgers, tax receipts, old veterinary bills, framed hunting photographs, and a map of the county with thumbtack scars.

Dustin examines the map. One corner is folded over. Beneath it, faint pencil: CORPSEWOOD RD. The line has been scratched out.

He hears a soft knock.

Jenny slips in wearing an old robe over her clothes. Her hair is damp from a shower. She looks younger in this room, and that frightens him.

JENNY

The air mattress sounds like a dying goat.

DUSTIN

I chose the deluxe model.

JENNY

City boy.

She sits on the desk. He moves to her. They kiss. It deepens with need, apology, fear.

Jenny pulls him closer. Dustin responds, then stops.

JENNY (CONT'D)

What?

DUSTIN

Your father is downstairs.

JENNY

He is not the Holy Spirit.

DUSTIN

I am trying to show respect.

JENNY

To the man who called you a stranger?

DUSTIN

To the idea that I am marrying his daughter.

JENNY

You are marrying me.

DUSTIN

I know.

JENNY

Do you?

Her words echo Harper's question. Dustin hates that.

DUSTIN
What do you see?

Jenny studies him. Tender, frustrated.

JENNY
I see a man trying so hard to be
good that he is about to stop being
kind.

That lands deeper than she expected. He kisses her forehead.

DUSTIN
I will fix tomorrow.

JENNY
There is that word.

DUSTIN
I will improve tomorrow.

JENNY
Lawyer.

A floorboard CREAKS in the hall. Jenny pulls away. Harper's shadow passes under the door.

HARPER (O.S.)
Coffee is on.

JENNY
It is ten o'clock at night.

HARPER (O.S.)
Did not ask what time it was.

INT. HARPER'S FARMHOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Coffee percolates violently. Harper pours two cups, one for himself, one for Dustin. It looks thick enough to patch a roof.

Dustin sits across from him. Jenny remains in the doorway, refusing to leave them alone but knowing this is not hers to control.

HARPER
Drink.

Dustin does. Nearly dies. Covers it badly.

DUSTIN
That has character.

HARPER
That has coffee in it. You want
character, go to church.

Harper drinks without flinching.

HARPER (CONT'D)
You ever work with your hands?

DUSTIN
I type aggressively.

HARPER

That a no?

DUSTIN
That is a no.

HARPER
Ever bury anything bigger than a
dog?

DUSTIN
No.

HARPER
Ever hold a living thing down
because mercy had to be done and it
would not understand you were
helping?

Dustin says nothing. Jenny watches her father, horrified by
the specificity.

HARPER (CONT'D)
This place is full of things you
cannot argue with.

DUSTIN
I am not trying to argue with the
place.

HARPER
You are arguing with me. Place is
older.

DUSTIN
Then tell me what I am missing.

Harper looks at Jenny. The truth comes close. He swallows it.

HARPER
No.

DUSTIN
Why?

HARPER
Because you would mistake knowing for understanding.
Dustin leans forward, dignity fraying.

DUSTIN
Mr. Harper, I love your daughter. I am asking you for your blessing because I believe a marriage should begin with honesty and family, even damaged family. I am here because I am willing to do the difficult thing.

Harper takes that in. His eyes flick to Jenny, then back.

HARPER
The difficult thing would have been listening when she told you not to come.

Dustin is silent.

HARPER (CONT'D)
You do not have my blessing.

Jenny closes her eyes. Dustin keeps very still.

HARPER (CONT'D)
You want to earn something? Take her back before this place remembers her.

INT. JENNY'S CHILDHOOD BEDROOM - LATER

Jenny sits on the bed, still dressed. She hears Dustin moving below. The house creaks like it is settling around old secrets.

She opens the drawer of the nightstand. Inside: a child's paintbrush wrapped in cloth. She unwraps it.

The bristles are hardened with old white paint.

A memory hits, almost visible: Caroline's hand guiding

Jenny's smaller hand across a canvas. Horse shapes. Snow outside the window. Laughter.

Jenny presses the brush to her palm until it hurts.

INT. HARPER'S FARMHOUSE - KITCHEN - EVENING

The kitchen is old wood, yellowed wallpaper, coffee burned down to tar. A height chart on the doorframe marks Jenny at different ages. One mark, CAROLINE'S handwriting, has been scratched at by time.

Christmas decorations sit in a box on the counter, never put up.

Dustin attempts domestic diplomacy, setting down gifts.

Harper drinks coffee. Jenny stands near the sink, arms folded.

DUSTIN

Mr. Harper, I understand this is difficult.

HARPER

Do you?

DUSTIN

I understand I am coming into a family history that predates me, but I love your daughter.

HARPER

Men say that when they want something.

DUSTIN

I want to marry her.

HARPER

Same sentence.

JENNY

Daddy.

HARPER

Do you know what color her eyes are?

Dustin looks at Jenny. The question is easy until it is not.

DUSTIN

They are--

HARPER

Not the word you use when the sun hits them. Not what they look like in a restaurant. What color are they when she is scared?

DUSTIN

Sir--

HARPER

You do not know her well enough to ask me for anything.

Dustin absorbs that as a physical blow.

JENNY

You do not get to judge what he knows.

HARPER

I do when he comes into my kitchen wanting my blessing like it is a loan application.

DUSTIN

I am trying to do this properly.

HARPER

Properly?

Harper stands. He is not large, but the room changes shape around him.

HARPER (CONT'D)

Proper was asking her before you called me. Proper was listening when she told you not to come.

Proper was leaving that car in

Atlanta where it belonged.

DUSTIN

With respect, sir--

HARPER

You do not have my blessing.

Silence.

HARPER (CONT'D)

And if you are half as smart as your shoes, you will take her back before dark.

Dustin's face hardens. Jenny sees pride lock into place.

24. **INT. HARPER'S FARMHOUSE - STUDY - NIGHT** 24.

Dustin sits alone on an air mattress in Harper's study, surrounded by old farm ledgers, hunting magazines, and dust.

His suit jacket hangs over a chair. His muddy shoes sit beneath it.

He removes the photograph he found earlier: young Jenny, Caroline in a blue paint-spattered dress, and newborn Snowflake.

He studies Caroline. The horse. Jenny's child face.

Jenny appears in the doorway.

JENNY

You are doing that thing.

DUSTIN

What thing?

JENNY

The thing where your face turns into paperwork.

She sits beside him. Sees the photograph.

JENNY (CONT'D)

Where did you get that?

DUSTIN

Kitchen drawer. I am sorry. I should have asked.

Jenny takes it. Her thumb touches Caroline's dress.

JENNY

She got paint on everything. Daddy used to say she could stain the weather if she tried.

DUSTIN

What do you see?

Jenny almost smiles at him using her question on her.

JENNY

I see my mother before she became a
story people told wrong.

Dustin lets that sit.

DUSTIN

I can make this right.

JENNY

No.

DUSTIN

If Snowflake is alive--

JENNY

No.

DUSTIN

Jenny, I can talk to Schroeder.

JENNY

You are not hearing me.

DUSTIN

I am hearing that everyone in this
town is terrified of an old man and
nobody will say why.

JENNY

That is a reason to leave, not
investigate.

DUSTIN

Or it is a reason somebody should
ask a direct question.

Jenny stands, anger and fear tangled.

JENNY

You promised you would listen.

DUSTIN

I am.

JENNY

No. You are waiting for your turn
to be right.

That hurts because it is true.

EXT. HARPER'S RANCH - STABLE - LATE NIGHT

Harper stands alone in the stable. He holds a bottle of bourbon unopened. Snowflake's empty stall before him.

He touches the old wood where the missing name plate used to be.

HARPER

Damn you.

Not clear who he means.

From the tree line: distant HOOVES.

Harper freezes. The bottle trembles in his hand.

Again. Hooves. Slow. Waiting.

Harper backs away from the stall, face hollowed by fear he refuses to name.

INT. HARPER'S FARMHOUSE - STUDY - LATER

Jenny sleeps in the guest room down the hall. Dustin sits awake, dressed again, photograph in hand.

He hears Harper downstairs. A cabinet. A glass. Silence.

Dustin checks the hallway. Then the photograph. Then his own reflection in the dark window.

He puts the photograph in his inside coat pocket.

INT. HARPER'S FARMHOUSE - FOYER - CONTINUOUS

Dustin eases toward the front door.

Jenny's voice stops him from the stair landing.

JENNY

Where are you going?

He turns. Caught.

DUSTIN

Into town.

JENNY

No.

DUSTIN
Just to clear my head.

JENNY
You do not clear your head in a
town you do not know after dark.

DUSTIN
I need air.

JENNY
You need to win.

He has no answer.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Dusty. Please.

DUSTIN
I will be back in an hour.

JENNY
That is not listening.

He opens the door.

DUSTIN
I love you.

JENNY
Then act like it.

Dustin leaves. Jenny stands in the dark doorway, scared in a way she cannot explain.

EXT. HARPER'S RANCH - NIGHT

Dustin walks toward the Mercedes. The house behind him glows with weak yellow light. The stable sits in darkness.

From far off in the woods, something like a horse exhales.

Dustin looks toward the sound.

Nothing but trees.

He gets in the Mercedes and drives toward town, taillights swallowed by fog.

INT. LOCAL BAR - NIGHT

A low ceiling. Wood paneling the color of old tobacco.

Christmas garland droops over mounted deer heads. A neon beer sign flickers against a framed print of Jesus praying over a football team.

Dustin enters in his suit and city coat. Every conversation loses a gear.

A jukebox plays a country Christmas song too slow to be cheerful.

Dustin crosses to the bar. Mud clings to the hem of his pants.

DUSTIN
Manhattan, please.

The BARTENDER, gray beard, suspenders, looks at him like Dustin asked for a passport.

BARTENDER
A what?

DUSTIN
Bourbon, sweet vermouth, bitters.
Cherry if you have one.

The bartender stares.

BARTENDER
We got beer.

Dustin tries to smile.

DUSTIN
Then I will have whatever beer is
least likely to punish me tomorrow.

A few MEN at a corner table laugh under their breath.

The bartender sets down a bottle. No glass.

BARTENDER
Six dollars.

Dustin offers a credit card.

The bartender doesn't take it.

BARTENDER (CONT'D)
Six dollars.

Dustin fishes cash from his wallet. He feels the room studying his hands, his coat, his glasses.

He takes the beer and turns.

On the far wall: a bulletin board of hunting flyers, church notices, missing dogs, and old missing-persons sheets faded by cigarette smoke.

Dustin sees a photograph.

He steps closer.

It is the same photograph from Harper's drawer: young Jenny, Caroline in the blue paint-spattered dress, newborn Snowflake folded in the straw.

The paper reads: CAROLINE MAYFIELD - MISSING SINCE DECEMBER

Dustin removes the photograph from his coat and compares them.

Same picture. Same smile. Same blue dress.

Behind him, someone speaks.

ROLLAND (O.S.)

You ought not hold a dead woman's picture in a bar unless you plan to buy her a drink.

Dustin turns.

ROLLAND HAYES, late thirties, handsome in a rough-cut way, stands with a pool cue in one hand and a cigarette tucked behind his ear. He is relaxed enough to be dangerous.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)

You are either lost, selling insurance, or marrying Jenny.

DUSTIN

Which one gets me out of here alive?

Rolland smiles. He likes that.

ROLLAND

Depends who you ask.

INT. LOCAL BAR - CONTINUOUS

Rolland slides onto a stool beside Dustin and signals the bartender for two more beers without asking.

ROLLAND
Rolland Hayes.

DUSTIN
Dustin Wheeland.

They shake. Rolland's grip is warm and hard. Dustin tries not to react.

ROLLAND
Wheeland. That is a lawyer name if I ever heard one.

DUSTIN
It has kept me employed.

ROLLAND
No doubt. You come down here to sue the mud?

Dustin glances at the missing poster.

DUSTIN
I came with Jenny.

Rolland's smile thins at the name.

ROLLAND
Firefly is home.

DUSTIN
People keep calling her that.

ROLLAND
People remember what people do. You set one football field on fire and suddenly folks get colorful.

DUSTIN
She set a football field on fire?

ROLLAND
Allegedly.

Rolland drinks. Watches Dustin over the bottle.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)
How is she?

DUSTIN
She is Jenny.

ROLLAND
That does not answer a damn thing.

DUSTIN
It answers enough.

Rolland lets that sit. Respect flickers through his amusement.

ROLLAND
She still paints?

DUSTIN
Every chance she gets.

ROLLAND
Good. Her mama could make a horse
look like it was thinking about
something it would never tell you.

Dustin looks back to the poster.

DUSTIN
What happened to her?

The bar seems to listen again.

Rolland's eyes drift to the bartender, then to the corner table. He lowers his voice.

ROLLAND
Depends who you ask.

DUSTIN
I am asking you.

ROLLAND
Then ask softer.

Dustin takes that in.

DUSTIN
Please.

Rolland nods, satisfied by the small surrender.

ROLLAND
Folks say Caroline ran off. Folks
say Harper gave her reason.

Folks say she went walking where a woman ought not walk and got swallowed by the trees.

DUSTIN
And what do you say?

ROLLAND
I say Summerville likes the story
that asks the least of it.

Dustin studies him. This is the first honest thing anyone has
said all night.

DUSTIN
Harper sold Jenny's horses.

Rolland exhales smoke he has not lit yet.

ROLLAND
I heard.

DUSTIN
To Dr. Schroeder.

Rolland's eyes sharpen, then soften.

ROLLAND
Now there is a name best left in
somebody else's mouth.

31. **INT. LOCAL BAR - MOMENTS LATER**

31.

A LOCAL in a John Deere cap leans over from the next stool.

LOCAL
Rolland.

Rolland doesn't look at him.

ROLLAND
What?

LOCAL
Don't take him up there.

The bar goes still.

Rolland turns slowly.

ROLLAND
Did anybody ask you to earn your
teeth tonight, Leon?

Leon drops his eyes and returns to his drink.

Dustin clocks the exchange.

DUSTIN
Up where?

Rolland smiles like nothing happened.

ROLLAND
Corpsewood.

DUSTIN
That is what people call it?

ROLLAND
That is what it is called when folks are being polite.

DUSTIN
And when they are not?

ROLLAND
They do not talk about it.

Rolland leans closer.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)
Elias Schroeder bought all kinds of
things over the years.

Horses. Books. Paint. Wine barrels. Strange chemicals from
strange companies. Old German money pays for strange habits.

DUSTIN
You think he has money?

ROLLAND
I think the devil does not live
broke.

He says it lightly, but the resentment is not light.

DUSTIN
Jenny wants Snowflake back.

ROLLAND
Snowflake.

The name lands. Even Rolland recognizes it.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)
That one was Caroline's.

DUSTIN
Then I need to speak to Schroeder.

Rolland laughs once.

ROLLAND

No, you need to go back to Harper's, put that girl in your red car, and drive until the roads have streetlights again.

DUSTIN

I do not scare easily.

ROLLAND

That is because you have lived easy.

Dustin stiffens.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)

Relax, city. I am not insulting you. I am diagnosing you.

Dustin drinks, wounded enough to prove he isn't.

DUSTIN

Take me to him.

ROLLAND

No.

DUSTIN

I will pay you.

Rolland smiles.

ROLLAND

There he is.

DUSTIN

I am serious.

ROLLAND

So am I. Money is not the price of that road.

DUSTIN

Then what is?

Rolland studies him. Finds the exact place to press.

ROLLAND

Can you go back to Jenny empty-handed? Tell Harper he was right about you? Tell that old man you meant well, but meaning well is all you brought?

Dustin looks away.

Rolland has him.

DUSTIN
Take me to Corpsewood.

Rolland finishes his beer.

ROLLAND
Finish yours first. It gets cold
where we are going.

EXT. LOCAL BAR - NIGHT

Dustin and Rolland step into the wet cold. The town is strung with Christmas lights, but the colors feel feverish against the fog.

Dustin looks toward his Mercedes parked under a dying streetlamp.

ROLLAND
That thing got heat?

DUSTIN
It has everything.

ROLLAND
Everything but sense.

They cross to the car.

A church bell rings somewhere though the hour is wrong.

Dustin pauses.

DUSTIN
Is there a church nearby?

Rolland listens. The bell rings again, low and slow.

ROLLAND
Plenty of churches.

DUSTIN
That did not answer the question.

ROLLAND
You are learning.

They get in.

INT. MERCEDES - MOVING - NIGHT

The Mercedes glides through the sleeping town. Rolland reclines in the passenger seat, boots muddy on Dustin's floor mat.

Dustin notices.

Says nothing.

ROLLAND
Do not take the highway.

DUSTIN
I know where the highway is.

ROLLAND
That is why I told you not to take it.

Rolland points.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)
Left after the Nativity with the busted Joseph.

Dustin turns.

The radio crackles. A Christmas hymn bleeds through static, then a preacher's voice.

PREACHER (V.O.)
--and the eyes of the wicked shall be opened only to behold the pit--

Dustin snaps the radio off.

ROLLAND
Don't like church?

DUSTIN
I do not like broken radios.

ROLLAND
Same thing down here some nights.

They pass a roadside JESUS billboard. The painted eyes seem too white in the headlights.

Dustin looks away.

EXT. BACK ROAD - NIGHT

The Mercedes turns from pavement onto dirt. Its tires slide.

Mud spatters the polished body.

The world shrinks to headlights, fog, and dead trees.

INT. MERCEDES - MOVING - NIGHT

Dustin grips the wheel tighter.

DUSTIN

How far?

ROLLAND

Far enough you ought to have pissed
before we left.

DUSTIN

Is every answer down here designed
to make the questioner feel stupid?

ROLLAND

Only when it works.

The road dips. The car scrapes hard.

Dustin winces.

DUSTIN

Jesus.

ROLLAND

He is on the billboards. He is not
under your chassis.

Rolland laughs.

Dustin tries not to.

For a moment, they might be friends.

Then something moves beside the car.

Large. Black. Almost a horse, but too low in the neck.

Dustin jerks the wheel.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)

Don't--

The Mercedes fishtails.

EXT. BACK ROAD - CONTINUOUS

The Mercedes slides sideways, clips a stump hidden in weeds, and drops hard into a muddy ditch.

The engine dies.

Silence.

Fog presses against the windows.

INT. MERCEDES - CONTINUOUS

Dustin breathes hard.

Rolland sits still, strangely calm.

DUSTIN
Did you see that?

ROLLAND
See what?

DUSTIN
Something crossed the road.

ROLLAND
Road's still there.

Dustin turns the key. Nothing.

Again. Nothing.

DUSTIN
You have got to be kidding me.

Rolland opens his door.

DUSTIN (CONT'D)
Where are you going?

ROLLAND
Same place. Just less comfortable
now.

DUSTIN
We are walking?

ROLLAND
Unless you can sue the car into
starting.

EXT. BACK ROAD - NIGHT

Dustin climbs from the ditch, ruining his shoes in mud. He looks at the Mercedes: beautiful, useless, angled like a wounded animal.

Rolland lights his cigarette at last.

DUSTIN
I should call Jenny.

He checks his phone. No signal.

ROLLAND
You can call God out here and get a busy tone.

DUSTIN
How far is the manor?

Rolland points into the trees.

ROLLAND
Close enough to feel stupid turning back.

Dustin looks at the car. Then the road behind them. Then the woods.

The smart thing is obvious.

He follows Rolland.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

They walk through dead trees. Fog moves at knee level. The ground sucks at Dustin's shoes.

Rolland moves easily.

Dustin does not.

DUSTIN
Why do you go there?

ROLLAND
Who says I do?

DUSTIN
Everyone.

ROLLAND
Then why ask?

Dustin steps over a fallen branch.

DUSTIN
What does he pay you for?

Rolland stops.

Dustin almost bumps into him.

ROLLAND

Careful now.

DUSTIN
I did not mean--

ROLLAND
Yes you did. You just did not mean
to say it where I could hear it.

Rolland starts walking again.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)
He buys feed. Wine barrels. Tools.
Sometimes a horse goes bad and
needs burying. Sometimes old men
need young backs.

DUSTIN
Burying horses?

ROLLAND
Country is full of holes,
counselor. Some got names. Some
don't.

A distant HORSE EXHALES.

Dustin stops.

DUSTIN
There.

Rolland keeps walking.

ROLLAND
Wind.

DUSTIN
That was not wind.

ROLLAND
Then why ask me?

EXT. CORPSEWOOD GATE - NIGHT

A rusted iron gate appears between stone posts. Vines twist through the bars like black veins.

Beyond: a road rising through dead trees.

A small sign hangs crooked.

PRIVATE PROPERTY.

Below it, scratched into the metal by some older hand:

CORPSEWOOD.

Dustin hesitates.

DUSTIN

That sign does not invite
confidence.

ROLLAND

It is not meant to.

Rolland pushes the gate. It opens without a sound.

That silence is worse than a creak.

EXT. CORPSEWOOD GROUNDS - NIGHT

They climb the drive.

The manor emerges slowly through fog: brick, steep-roofed, cathedral-like, beautiful in a diseased way. Windows glow amber. Smoke rises from a chimney though the air smells wet and cold.

It looks too large for the hill.

Dustin stops.

DUSTIN

People live here?

ROLLAND

Depends what you mean by people.

Dustin looks at him.

Rolland gives a casual smile.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)

That was a joke.

A DOG barks once somewhere behind the house. Then another dog answers from much closer.

Dustin turns. Sees nothing.

When he turns back, Rolland is already halfway to the front steps.

EXT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - FRONT STEPS - NIGHT

The front doors are tall, black, and carved with vines, eyes, and horses if one looks too long.

Rolland knocks once.

The sound seems to travel through the whole house.

DUSTIN

You are not coming in?

ROLLAND

Not dressed for dinner.

DUSTIN

I thought you were introducing me.

ROLLAND

I have.

Dustin turns to him.

DUSTIN

Rolland.

Rolland's smile drops. For a second, Dustin sees the transaction underneath.

ROLLAND

You wanted to prove something. Do not get shy at the door.

The door opens before Dustin can answer.

DR. ELIAS SCHROEDER stands in warm interior light.

Ancient but not frail. Hair dyed a bruised violet. Hands stained with paint. Dentures too white, too large, too eager.

A velvet smoking jacket hangs off him like borrowed royalty.

SCHROEDER
Mr. Wheeland.

Dustin freezes.

DUSTIN
I do not believe we have met.

Schroeder smiles.

SCHROEDER
Not properly.

Rolland tips an invisible hat and descends the steps into fog.

DUSTIN
Rolland?

Rolland does not look back.

Schroeder opens the door wider.

SCHROEDER
Come in from the cold, my boy. It
has already tasted you.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - FOYER - NIGHT

Dustin steps inside.

The foyer is a cathedral of shadows. Stained glass. Animal heads. Religious icons. Velvet drapes. A chandelier made of antlers. Paintings stacked against walls like waiting witnesses.

Schroeder studies the cut on Dustin's forehead.

SCHROEDER
A beautiful face should not be left
unattended.

DUSTIN
I am fine.

SCHROEDER
No one who says that is ever fine.

Schroeder lifts a handkerchief and dabs Dustin's cut before Dustin can refuse.

Dustin smells wine, oil paint, old roses, something medicinal.

Schroeder produces a Polaroid camera from a side table.

DUSTIN

What is that for?

SCHROEDER

Memory is a liar. Pictures are less ambitious.

FLASH.

The Polaroid spits out.

Dustin blinks against the light.

Schroeder watches the image develop with private pleasure.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)

There you are.

DUSTIN

Dr. Schroeder, I am sorry to arrive unannounced. I came about a horse.

SCHROEDER

Many men do.

Dustin is not sure how to respond.

Schroeder looks down at Dustin's mud-caked shoes.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)

But first, the shoes.

DUSTIN

Excuse me?

SCHROEDER

The house is old. It remembers what is tracked into it.

Dustin hesitates.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)

A small courtesy.

Dustin removes his shoes. Wet socks on cold floor.

Schroeder gathers the shoes himself.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
You will thank me. No man thinks
clearly with wet leather lying to
his feet.

He sets the shoes beside a side door and closes it.

A lock CLICKS.

Maybe.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - HALLWAY - NIGHT

Schroeder leads Dustin through the hall.

Every room they pass contains art. Horses in fields. Men in
chairs. Women in blue, red, black. Portraits covered in
sheets. Portraits turned toward walls.

Dustin tries to keep his lawyer face.

DUSTIN
You have an extraordinary home.

SCHROEDER
One does not have a home. One
becomes its explanation.

DUSTIN
I am sorry?

SCHROEDER
You will be.

Schroeder laughs softly, as if the line amused him only after
he said it.

They pass a painting of a young man in a suit. The painted
eyes seem wet.

Dustin looks away.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
Do you paint, Mr. Wheeland?

DUSTIN
No. Jenny does.

SCHROEDER
Ah. Firefly.

Dustin stops.

DUSTIN
You know Jenny?

SCHROEDER
I know of many things the town no
longer touches directly.

He keeps walking.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

A long table set for two. Candles. Silver. Dark red wine in crystal. A roast sits untouched under a silver lid.

The room is elegant and too warm.

Schroeder pours wine.

DUSTIN
No, thank you. I should keep my
head clear.

SCHROEDER
The clear head is terribly
overrated. It sees only what fear
permits.

He sets the glass before Dustin.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
Drink. Then ask for your horse.

Dustin looks at the wine. Then the door behind him. Then
Schroeder.

He drinks.

The wine is rich, bitter, almost metallic.

Schroeder smiles as if hearing a distant note.

DUSTIN
Snowflake. She belonged to Jenny's
mother.

SCHROEDER
No living creature belongs to the
dead.

DUSTIN
Jenny would disagree.

SCHROEDER

Good. A woman should disagree when
a man speaks too neatly.

Dustin sets down the glass.

DUSTIN

I would like to buy the horse back.

SCHROEDER

Money makes men lazy in their
requests.

DUSTIN

Then what would make me less lazy?

Schroeder's eyes brighten.

SCHROEDER

A hunt.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - DINING ROOM - LATER

The wine bottle is lower now. Dustin has loosened his tie.
His socks steam faintly by the fire.

Schroeder carves nothing. Eats almost nothing. Watches
everything.

SCHROEDER

There is a buck in my wood that has
forgotten death applies to him.
Old, black antlers, clever feet. He
mocks my property.

DUSTIN

You want me to help you kill a
deer.

SCHROEDER

I want you to help restore order.

DUSTIN

And if I do?

SCHROEDER

You may take Snowflake home to your
Firefly.

Dustin hears the old nickname. Doesn't like it in Schroeder's
mouth.

DUSTIN
Why would you agree to that?

SCHROEDER
Because you came all this way in the wrong shoes.
Dustin almost laughs.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
Because you love her badly, and
that is more interesting than
loving well.

Dustin's smile dies.

DUSTIN
You do not know anything about me.

SCHROEDER
Of course not. That is why I am
listening.

Silence.

A faint whisper in the wall.

Dustin turns.

DUSTIN
Did you hear that?

SCHROEDER
Old houses complain. New men take
it personally.

Schroeder raises his glass.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
To dawn.

Dustin looks at the wine.

He drinks.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - FOYER - NIGHT

Later. Dustin moves unsteadily to the foyer and lifts the
receiver of an old telephone.

No dial tone.

Static.

He taps the cradle. Static deepens into a whisper.

JENNY'S VOICE (V.O.)

Dusty?

Dustin stiffens.

DUSTIN

Jenny?

Only static.

Then something like breathing through plaster.

VOICE (V.O.)

Shoes.

Dustin hangs up.

He goes to the side door where Schroeder placed his shoes.

Locked.

DUSTIN

Dr. Schroeder?

No answer.

He tries the knob again.

Nothing.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - FOYER - CONTINUOUS

The front door stands at the end of the foyer.

Schroeder appears at the foot of the stairs as if he has been there for some time.

SCHROEDER

Do you require something?

DUSTIN

My shoes.

SCHROEDER

Drying.

DUSTIN

I need to call Jenny.

SCHROEDER

The storm has swallowed the line.

DUSTIN
There is no storm.

Schroeder opens the front door.

Fog presses white against the threshold.

SCHROEDER
If you wish to leave, my boy, walk.

Dustin looks out.

Mud. Cold. Bare feet. Dead woods. Wrecked car somewhere beyond. Rolland gone. Pride watching.

Schroeder waits without pressure.

That is the pressure.

Dustin steps back from the door.

DUSTIN
I will stay until morning.

SCHROEDER
Yes.

Schroeder closes the door gently.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
Most men do.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - GUEST ROOM - NIGHT

A guest room with a narrow bed, faded wallpaper, a wash basin, and a painting turned toward the wall.

Dustin sits on the bed, trying to sober up.

He takes Jenny's photograph from his coat and sets it on the bedside table.

DUSTIN
One night. One hunt. One horse.

He lies down.

The house ticks.

Pipes knock.

A voice whispers from behind the wall.

CAROLINE (V.O.)

Go home.

Dustin opens his eyes.

DUSTIN

Hello?

Another voice. Male. Farther away.

MALE VOICE (V.O.)

Don't drink.

A child's voice giggles once, then sobs.

CHILD VOICE (V.O.)

He painted my hands wrong.

Dustin sits up.

The painting turned to the wall now faces the bed.

It shows a woman with no eyes.

Dustin stares.

The woman's painted mouth looks wet.

WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

Look away.

He does.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - HALLWAY - NIGHT

Dustin steps into the hall with the photograph, barefoot, moving carefully.

The house is dark except for gaslight flickering in sconces.

Whispers move inside the walls. Not words now. A crowd dreaming badly.

DUSTIN

Dr. Schroeder?

No answer.

He follows the sound of someone crying.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - PORTRAIT HALL - NIGHT

A long corridor lined with portraits.

Men. Women. Children. Some formal. Some naked from the shoulders up. Some painted only halfway. Some covered by black cloth.

The crying stops when Dustin enters.

At the far end: a veiled canvas on an easel.

A hammer rests on a small table beside it.

Dustin moves down the hall.

Every painted eye seems awake.

He passes a portrait of a man in work clothes. The man's painted lips are parted like he died mid-sentence.

WORKMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

My boots.

Dustin stops.

DUSTIN

What?

WORKMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

Where are my boots?

Dustin backs into a side table.

Something sharp on the floor drives into his foot.

He falls against the wall, clamping a hand over his mouth.

A nail sticks from the sole of his foot.

Blood beads, then runs between floorboards.

The house inhales.

The portraits turn half an inch toward him.

A painted eye blinks.

Another portrait sheds a tear of red paint.

The voices rise.

VOICES (V.O.)

Blood. Blood. Blood. Blood.

Dustin yanks the nail free.

He crawls away, leaving dark spots behind him.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - CROSS HALL - NIGHT

Dustin limps through a crossing hall, clutching his foot.

JENNY'S VOICE (V.O.)

Dusty?

He freezes.

DUSTIN

Jenny?

JENNY'S VOICE (V.O.)

I'm in here.

A door at the end of the hall stands open a crack. Warm light spills out.

JENNY'S VOICE (V.O.)

Please.

Dustin moves toward it.

CAROLINE (V.O.)

That is not my daughter.

He stops.

The warm light under the door turns red.

Something inside shifts. Wet and large.

JENNY'S VOICE (V.O.)

Don't you love me?

Dustin backs away.

The door SLAMS shut by itself.

Silence.

Then from farther down the hall, Caroline's true voice:

CAROLINE (V.O.)

This way.

Dustin, against every sensible instinct, follows.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - SERVICE STAIRS - NIGHT

Dustin descends narrow service stairs.

The wallpaper gives way to old brick. Moisture beads on the walls. Purple light pulses faintly from below.

Music drifts upward: a Christmas hymn slowed until it sounds underwater.

Dustin's foot leaves blood on every other step.

A whisper follows each mark.

VOICES (V.O.)
Name. Name. Name.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - ULTRA VIOLET ROOM - NIGHT

Dustin reaches the bottom.

The room opens impossibly large beneath the house.

Purple-pink light. Velvet walls. Candles. Wine glasses.

Canvases arranged like altars. A harp in the corner. Medical trays beneath silk cloths.

Masked figures stand in slow tableaux: bodies posed like paintings, not quite living, not quite dead. Some breathe.

Some do not.

A gramophone plays GOD REST YE MERRY GENTLEMEN at the wrong speed.

Schroeder stands among them in a dark robe, conducting nothing with one paint-stained hand.

He does not seem surprised to see Dustin.

SCHROEDER
There you are.

Dustin tries to speak. Can't.

Schroeder crosses to a canvas and dips two fingers into wet red paint.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
Do you know why men fear art, Mr.
Wheeland?

Dustin backs up.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
Because a good likeness does not
flatter. It accuses.

A masked WOMAN turns toward Dustin. Her mask is a horse skull
lacquered white.

Behind her, in the shadows, a woman in a blue paint-spattered
dress watches him.

Caroline.

Dustin recognizes her from the photograph.

DUSTIN
Caroline?

Her eyes are alive. Terrified. Focused.

CAROLINE
He paints what he cannot keep.

Schroeder smiles, not at Dustin. At the air around Dustin.

SCHROEDER
Careful which dead women you
answer. Some of them miss being
touched.

The masked figures begin to hum.

Dustin turns to run.

The stairs are gone.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - GUEST ROOM - DAWN

Dustin jolts awake in bed.

Gray dawn at the window.

He gasps. Checks his foot.

No wound.

No blood.

He sits up too fast and nearly vomits.

His eyes itch violently. His teeth ache as if he has been
grinding them all night.

On the bedside table: Jenny's photograph.

Beside it: the Polaroid Schroeder took of Dustin in the foyer.

Dustin does not remember bringing it here.

A knock.

Schroeder's voice through the door, cheerful and soft.

SCHROEDER (O.S.)
Morning, my boy. The buck will not
kill himself.

Dustin looks at the turned painting.

It is turned to the wall again.

From inside it, barely audible:

WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)
Not the buck.

Dustin stares at the door, sick and pale.

56. **EXT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - FRONT DRIVE - DAWN**

56.

Gray dawn presses against the house like wet cloth.

Dustin stands on the front drive in borrowed boots too large for him, his suit ruffled beneath a waxed hunting coat

Schroeder has draped over his shoulders.

His eyes are red. He rubs them with the heel of his hand.

Schroeder emerges carrying a rifle case and a thermos. In daylight, he looks older and somehow less real.

SCHROEDER
You look as if the house did not
let you sleep.

DUSTIN
Your house makes noise.

SCHROEDER
All houses speak. Most men are
merely rude enough not to answer.

Schroeder opens the rifle case. Inside: an old hunting rifle, cleaned with religious care.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
Have you ever killed anything, Mr.
Wheeland?

DUSTIN
No.

SCHROEDER
Then today you will learn whether
mercy has a sound.

Dustin looks toward the woods. Fog hangs between the trees.

A horse exhales somewhere beyond the property.

Dustin turns.

Nothing.

DUSTIN
Is Snowflake in the stable?

SCHROEDER
Snowflake is where she needs to be
until you earn her.

Schroeder closes the rifle case.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
Come. The buck will have heard us
worrying.

INT./EXT. SCHROEDER'S JEEP - MOVING - DAWN

An old manual Jeep rattles down a narrow dirt road behind the manor.

Schroeder drives with elegant precision, one hand on the wheel, the other shifting gears like playing an instrument.

Dustin grips the side handle. His face turns pale with each rut.

DUSTIN
This road cannot possibly be legal.

SCHROEDER
Legality is a city superstition.

Dustin looks at the gearshift.

DUSTIN
Jenny drives stick. I never
learned.

SCHROEDER
Then she knows at least one thing
your hands do not.

Dustin does not like how that lands.

Schroeder pours coffee from the thermos into a tin cup and
offers it while driving.

DUSTIN
No, thank you.

SCHROEDER
Good. You are learning suspicion.

A beat.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
Too late, but still.

Dustin's eyes water. He removes his glasses and wipes them.

The woods smear into shapes without them.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
Tell me about your father.

Dustin stiffens.

DUSTIN
There is not much to tell.

SCHROEDER
Dead men occupy more rooms than
living ones. They are impossible
tenants.

Dustin puts his glasses back on.

DUSTIN
He died when I was a kid.

SCHROEDER
And yet here you are, asking
another old man to bless you.

Dustin looks at him.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
Forgive me. The wine makes some men
honest. It makes others visible.

EXT. HUNTING TRAIL - DAWN

The Jeep stops where the road gives up.

Schroeder steps out with the rifle. Dustin follows, unsteady.

The fog is thicker here. It moves through the trees in slow
sheets.

Schroeder hands Dustin the rifle.

DUSTIN
I thought you were shooting.

SCHROEDER
The bargain was not that you watch
courage happen near you.

Dustin takes the rifle.

His hands do not know where to belong on it.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
Simple. Breathe. Aim. Do not argue
with the trigger once you have
asked it a question.

They enter the trees.

EXT. DEAD WOODS - DAWN

Dustin and Schroeder move through dead standing timber. The
land is wet and strangely silent.

No birds.

No insects.

Only their breath.

Schroeder walks ahead with impossible ease.

DUSTIN
How did you know Jenny's nickname?

SCHROEDER
Small towns preserve names better
than graves.

DUSTIN
Did you know Caroline?

Schroeder stops.

For the first time, amusement drains from him.

SCHROEDER
Everyone believes they knew
Caroline.

DUSTIN
That is not an answer.

SCHROEDER
Most answers are only smaller
rooms.

He continues.

Dustin follows.

The fog thickens between them.

DUSTIN
Dr. Schroeder?

No answer.

Schroeder is gone.

EXT. DEAD WOODS - CONTINUOUS

Dustin turns in a slow circle.

Every direction is the same: trees, fog, wet earth.

He clutches the rifle.

DUSTIN
Dr. Schroeder?

A whisper from the trees.

MALE VOICE (V.O.)
Run.

Dustin turns.

Another voice.

WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)
Shoot.

A child's voice, close to his ear.

CHILD VOICE (V.O.)
He keeps the eyes.

Dustin spins and raises the rifle at nothing.

DUSTIN
Stop.

The fog moves.

A dark silhouette stands between the trees.

Antlers. Or branches.

Breath steaming.

JENNY'S VOICE (V.O.)
Do it, Dusty.

Dustin aims.

CAROLINE (V.O.)
No.

The silhouette turns as if to flee.

Dustin fires.

The shot cracks the woods open.

EXT. DEAD WOODS - MOMENTS LATER

Dustin runs toward the fallen shape, stumbling through mud.

The animal thrashes in the fog.

Not a buck.

A white horse.

Snowflake.

Dustin stops so hard he nearly falls.

The rifle slips in his hands.

Snowflake lies on her side, chest heaving, white coat already darkening around the wound.

Her eye rolls toward him.

Dustin cannot breathe.

DUSTIN
No. No, no, no--

Schroeder emerges from the fog behind him.

SCHROEDER
There she is.

Dustin turns on him.

DUSTIN
You said buck.

SCHROEDER
I said there was something in my
wood that had forgotten death
applied to it.

Snowflake screams. A raw, tearing sound.

Dustin flinches as if struck.

DUSTIN
Help her.

SCHROEDER
I am.

Schroeder nods to the rifle.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
Finish what you asked the trigger
to begin.

DUSTIN
No.

SCHROEDER
Mercy is rarely clean enough for
good men.

Snowflake kicks weakly. Mud spatters Dustin's borrowed boots.

Dustin's eyes burn. His vision blooms white at the edges.

DUSTIN
Jenny will--

SCHROEDER
Yes.

A beat.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
That is why it matters.

Dustin raises the rifle, shaking.

Snowflake looks at him.

CAROLINE (V.O.)
I'm sorry, baby.

Dustin fires.

Silence swallows the shot.

EXT. CORPSEWOOD GROUNDS - LATER

The Jeep crawls back toward the manor.

Snowflake's body drags behind on a chain, leaving a dark trench through mud and dead leaves.

Dustin sits in the passenger seat, hollowed out.

His glasses are smeared. His eyes leak red at the corners.

Schroeder drives as if returning from church.

SCHROEDER
First deaths are very noisy inside
the body. Later, one learns where
to put the sound.

Dustin says nothing.

The manor appears ahead.

Rolland's truck waits near the side of the house.

EXT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - SIDE YARD - MORNING

Rolland stands beside the truck smoking, a tarp already laid out, hooks and rope arranged in the bed.

Too prepared.

Dustin notices.

ROLLAND
Hell of a morning.

Dustin climbs from the Jeep and staggers toward him.

DUSTIN
Did you know?

Rolland looks at Snowflake. Then at Dustin.

ROLLAND
I know a horse is heavy and sun
gets higher.

DUSTIN
Did you know?

Schroeder steps between them gently.

SCHROEDER
Mr. Hayes handles what remains. You
handle what remains of yourself.

Rolland flicks his cigarette into the mud.

ROLLAND
Best go wash up, city.

Dustin looks from Rolland to the tarp, to the hooks, to
Snowflake's open eye.

The eye seems to look through him.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - BATHROOM - MORNING

Dustin scrubs horse blood from his hands.

The water runs pink.

He splashes his face. Looks in the mirror.

His eyes are worse now. Blood-threaded. Wet.

He removes his glasses.

The bathroom blurs.

But in the mirror, a portrait reflected from the hallway
behind him is perfectly sharp.

A painted eye watches.

Dustin turns.

Nothing but hallway.

He turns back.

The painted eye in the mirror is still watching.

DUSTIN
What is happening to me?

From inside the wall, many voices answer at once.

VOICES (V.O.)
Us.

Dustin backs away from the sink.

A woman's voice, Caroline's, cuts through.

CAROLINE (V.O.)
Blue.

Dustin listens.

CAROLINE (V.O.)
Find the blue.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - WARDROBE ROOM - MORNING

Dustin follows Caroline's voice to a narrow room behind a warped door.

Inside: wardrobes. Trunks. Garment bags. Clothes from different decades hang in dense rows.

Men's suits. Work shirts. Dresses. Children's coats. Gloves.

Hats. Shoes.

So many shoes.

Dustin stares at them.

A work boot drops from a shelf by itself.

WORKMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)
Mine.

Dustin pushes through the clothes.

His hand finds blue fabric.

He pulls out a paint-spattered blue dress.

Caroline's dress.

He takes Jenny's photograph from his pocket and holds it beside the dress.

Same color. Same paint.

Dustin's breath goes shallow.

DUSTIN

Caroline.

The room whispers her name back through a dozen mouths.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - STORAGE HALL - MOMENTS LATER

Dustin moves deeper, carrying the blue dress.

His vision pulses. The house stretches when he blinks.

At the end of the hall, a door stands open.

Inside, a red safety bulb glows.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - POLAROID ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Dustin enters.

The walls are covered with Polaroids clipped to strings.

Faces. Bodies. Hands. Eyes. Men in work clothes. Women in church dresses. A boy with a chipped tooth. A traveling salesman beside a suitcase. An old woman asleep or dead.

Beside each cluster: a canvas.

Some portraits are complete.

Some slashed.

Some turned around.

Some only eyes.

Dustin moves through the room, horrified.

He finds Caroline's Polaroid.

Caroline in the blue dress, younger than the missing poster, looking directly into the camera. Terrified, but refusing to look away.

Beside it: her portrait.

Her painted eyes are alive.

Dustin steps closer.

CAROLINE'S PORTRAIT

Jenny?

Dustin nearly drops the dress.

DUSTIN

I'm not--

The portrait's eyes focus with effort.

CAROLINE'S PORTRAIT

He brought you.

DUSTIN

Who?

The answer comes from behind him.

SCHROEDER (O.S.)

No one is brought anywhere they
have not already begun to go.

Dustin turns.

Schroeder stands in the doorway.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - POLAROID ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Dustin backs away.

DUSTIN

What is this?

SCHROEDER

Study.

DUSTIN

These are people.

SCHROEDER

Were.

Dustin looks at Caroline's portrait.

DUSTIN

You killed Jenny's mother.

Schroeder tilts his head.

SCHROEDER

You say killed because the
alternative would require more
imagination.

Dustin clutches the dress like proof in court.

DUSTIN
I'm leaving.

SCHROEDER
With no shoes? No car? No horse? No
blessing?

Dustin moves for the door.

Schroeder does not block him.

That is worse.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
Before you go, you should see where
you are in the work.

Dustin does not want to look.

He looks.

Schroeder lifts a black cloth from a canvas near the far
wall.

Dustin's unfinished portrait.

His face half-rendered. His posture elegant, wrong. One eye
blank. The other painted in exquisite, wet detail.

Dustin stares at his own painted eye.

His real eye begins to bleed.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
A portrait is not a likeness, Mr.
Wheeland. It is an address.

Dustin bolts.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - HALLWAYS - MORNING

Dustin runs.

The blue dress trails from his fist.

Doors repeat. The same table appears three times. The same
dead flowers. The same horse skull under glass.

He turns left and finds the portrait hall.

Turns right and finds the portrait hall.

He works with practiced efficiency.

Dustin sees inside the horse.

Not organs.

A human arm, folded wrong.

A jawbone wired with gold dental work.

A hand with a wedding ring.

Dustin makes a sound he does not recognize as his own.

Rolland looks up.

ROLLAND

You were supposed to be washing up.

EXT. BURIAL FIELD - CONTINUOUS

Dustin backs away.

DUSTIN

What did you do?

Rolland stands, knife in hand.

ROLLAND

Me? I am cleaning up after rich people. Same as everybody else.

DUSTIN

Those are bodies.

ROLLAND

Pieces.

Dustin turns to run.

Rolland catches him and drives him into the mud.

The beating is sudden, ugly, efficient.

Dustin tries to fight, but Rolland is stronger and sober and knows how to hurt someone without tiring.

A boot to the ribs.

A fist to the ear.

Dustin's glasses snap beneath them.

Rolland hauls him up by the collar.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)
 You got no idea how much work it
 takes to keep folks comfortable
 with what they don't know.

He throws Dustin against a marker.

The marker reads: SNOWFLAKE.

Dustin looks at it, dazed.

DUSTIN
 Jenny...

ROLLAND
 Don't say her name like that. You
 lost the right this morning.

EXT. BURIAL FIELD - LATER

Dustin lies in mud, breathing through pain.

Rolland sits on a stump, smoking, knife across his knee.

Snowflake's opened body steams in the cold.

ROLLAND
 First one I helped bury, I thought
 it was just a man. Drifter, maybe.
 Bad teeth. Wrong place. Old Doc
 said the horse had gone bad and
 needed filling before the ground
 took her.

Dustin spits blood.

DUSTIN
 Filling?

ROLLAND
 Dead horse is a big suitcase if you
 got the stomach.

Dustin gags.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)
 Nobody asks questions when you bury
 a horse in the country.

Horse dies, you dig. Folks might even take their hat off.

Rolland looks toward the manor.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)
Doc says sometimes the work don't
take. Body goes sour. Soul sticks
in the walls. I don't know. I don't
care. I haul. I dig. I get paid.

DUSTIN
You knew about Caroline.

Rolland's face changes.

ROLLAND
I knew Caroline went up there. I
knew Harper stayed home. I knew
this town swallowed the easy story
because it tasted better than the
truth.

DUSTIN
And Jenny?

Rolland leans in.

ROLLAND
Jenny got out.

A beat.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)
Some of us didn't.

EXT. BURIAL FIELD - CONTINUOUS

Dustin struggles to sit up.

DUSTIN
Why help him?

Rolland laughs without humor.

ROLLAND
Because men like him always got
money somewhere. Old money.

War money. Devil money. And I been carrying his rot long
enough to earn what's mine.

DUSTIN
He will kill you.

ROLLAND

Maybe. But he needs hands until then.

Rolland kneels beside Dustin.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)

You? He don't need your hands.

He taps Dustin's bloody face with the flat of the knife.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)

He needs the pretty house behind your eyes.

Dustin swings weakly.

Rolland catches his wrist and squeezes until Dustin gasps.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)

Save it. You'll need strength to disappoint her again.

Rolland stands and whistles toward the manor.

Two DOGS bark from somewhere unseen.

ROLLAND (CONT'D)

Come on. Doc hates when the meat gets cold.

He drags Dustin toward the house.

INT. HARPER'S RANCH - KITCHEN - MORNING

Jenny sits at the kitchen table, untouched coffee in front of her.

Dustin never came back.

Harper stands at the sink, looking out toward the gray fields.

JENNY

Say something.

HARPER

About what?

JENNY

Do not do that.

He does not turn.

JENNY (CONT'D)
He went after Snowflake.

Harper closes his eyes.

HARPER
Then he is a damn fool.

Jenny rises.

JENNY
No. You don't get to call him that
like it lets you off. Where would
Rolland take him?

Harper says nothing.

Jenny crosses to him.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Daddy.

The word hurts them both.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Where?

Harper opens his mouth.

Nothing comes.

A truck pulls up outside.

EXT. HARPER'S RANCH - FRONT YARD - MORNING

Jenny storms out as Deputy Steven climbs from his muddy
police truck.

STEVEN
Jenny--

JENNY
Have you seen Dustin?

Steven glances at Harper behind her.

STEVEN
Rolland was at the bar last night.

JENNY
With Dustin?

Steven hesitates.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Where did they go?

STEVEN
I don't know for sure.

JENNY
Then guess like somebody's life
depends on it.

Steven looks toward the woods.

STEVEN
Somebody said they left toward the
old Schroeder place.

Jenny's face hardens.

Harper steps onto the porch.

HARPER
No.

Jenny turns on him.

JENNY
Now you can speak.

INT. HARPER'S BARN - MOMENTS LATER

Jenny moves through the barn with purpose, searching shelves.

Harper follows.

Steven hangs back at the doors, ashamed of his own caution.

HARPER
You are not going there.

JENNY
Watch me.

She finds an old shotgun case and opens it.

Empty.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Where is it?

Harper says nothing.

Jenny slams the case shut.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Where is it?

HARPER
You don't know what that place is.

JENNY
Whose fault is that?

Harper takes the hit.

Jenny sees something in his face.

JENNY (CONT'D)
You knew.

Harper looks away.

JENNY (CONT'D)
You knew about Mama.

INT. HARPER'S BARN - CONTINUOUS

Harper sinks onto an overturned feed bucket.

The barn seems to listen.

HARPER
I followed her trail.

Jenny goes still.

HARPER (CONT'D)
After she didn't come home. I told
the deputy she was mad, maybe gone
to your aunt's, maybe walking it
off. I said all kinds of coward
things because I had already said
them to myself.

Jenny's eyes fill, but she does not move.

HARPER (CONT'D)
I found her scarf on the road to
Corpsewood. Blue mud on it.

Paint on the edge. I went as far as the outer graves.

JENNY
Graves?

HARPER

Horse graves. Least that's what I told myself. But they smelled wrong. Like meat packed where meat had no business being.

He swallows.

HARPER (CONT'D)

Then I heard her.

JENNY

Mama?

Harper nods once.

HARPER

Calling from the house. Sounded just like her. Sounded like the first night I met her. I took one step toward it and every grave behind me started breathing.

Jenny stares at him.

HARPER (CONT'D)

So I ran.

A long silence.

JENNY

You left her.

Harper cannot defend himself.

HARPER

Yes.

INT. HARPER'S BARN - LATER

Harper opens a locked cabinet hidden behind old saddle blankets.

Inside: a shotgun, shells, a rusted revolver, and a flashlight.

Jenny takes the shotgun.

Harper takes it back.

JENNY

Give it to me.

HARPER
 You go in there alone, you die
 before you find him. I know where
 the house lies.

Jenny studies him. Hates that he is useful.

JENNY
 You ran last time.

HARPER
 I know.

JENNY
 What makes this time different?

Harper loads the shotgun with shaking hands.

HARPER
 You are.

Steven steps forward.

STEVEN
 Jenny, we should call county--

JENNY
 And say what? My fiance went to a
 haunted house with Rolland Hayes?

Steven has no answer.

JENNY (CONT'D)
 Either come with us or get out of
 the way.

Steven looks toward the woods. Fear wins by an inch.

STEVEN
 I will call it in.

Jenny almost laughs.

JENNY
 You do that.

EXT. HARPER'S RANCH - MORNING

Harper's old truck roars to life.

Jenny sits behind the wheel. Harper climbs in with the
 shotgun across his lap. Steven stands in the yard, radio in
 hand, watching them leave.

For a moment he looks like a man who knows the law has already failed.

Jenny drives hard toward the woods.

Harper looks at the tree line.

The fog beyond the pasture folds in on itself.

HARPER

Do not answer every voice.

Jenny keeps her eyes on the road.

JENNY

What?

HARPER

When we get there. Do not answer every voice. Some are dead.

Some are hungry. Some just know what you need to hear.

Jenny swallows.

JENNY

And Mama?

Harper cannot look at her.

HARPER

I don't trust myself to know.

Jenny drives faster.

The truck disappears into the gray.

EXT. BACK ROAD TO CORPSEWOOD - MORNING

Harper's truck bucks through mud and fog.

Jenny drives. Harper rides shotgun with the shotgun across his lap.

HARPER

When we get there, do not drink. Do not answer every voice. Do not stare into the paintings. And if you hear me call from somewhere I ain't standing, it is not me.

JENNY

What about Mama?

Harper looks to the dead trees closing around them.

HARPER

That is the voice I ran from.

Ahead, the road narrows to a tunnel of fog.

EXT. CORPSEWOOD PROPERTY - BURIAL FIELD - MORNING

Jenny and Harper cross low mounds in the wet grass.

Horse graves. Some old. Some fresh. Some marked with horseshoes.

Jenny reads: BLUEBELL. MERCY. SUNDAY. PRINCE.

An open pit waits near the tree line.

The rope line is slick with mud and blood.

JENNY

Snowflake.

A whisper slides through the graves.

VOICES (V.O.)

Firefly...

Jenny raises the shotgun.

HARPER

Do not let it make you waste shells.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - LOWER LEVEL - MORNING

A cellar door groans open.

Jenny and Harper enter beneath the house.

Stone. Wet wood. Hanging roots. The smell of wine, earth, paint, and meat.

Jenny starts to call out. Harper covers her mouth.

HARPER

It listens for need.

They find the wine room: dark bottles, medical tools, paintbrushes, Polaroids, cloudy liquid, drying tabs beneath glass.

Jenny opens a ledger.

Horse names. Dates. Initials.

BLUEBELL - 1981 - C.B.

SNOWFLAKE -

The Snowflake line is unfinished.

JENNY

He brought her here.

A bottle whispers.

FEMALE VOICE (V.O.)

Jenny girl...

Jenny turns.

HARPER

Make it prove itself.

CAROLINE (V.O.)

Little Snow came with black ears.

Jenny nearly breaks. That was private.

CAROLINE (V.O.)

Not the left stair. It remembers
teeth.

They find the hidden right stair behind hanging canvas.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - ULTRA VIOLET ROOM - SAME

Dustin is strapped to a wooden chair in violet light.

His eyes leak red. His glasses are gone.

Before him: his unfinished portrait. One painted eye
complete.

One blank.

Schroeder mixes Dustin's blood into paint. Rolland watches
from the shadows with a revolver and no patience.

SCHROEDER

Wine softens the door. Blood
teaches the walls your name. The
portrait tells the soul where to
go.

Schroeder lifts Dustin's chin and studies his eyes.

SCHROEDER (CONT'D)
And the eyes open.

ROLLAND
You said before noon.

SCHROEDER
Men who hurry immortality deserve
graves.

Dustin tries to speak.

DUSTIN
Jenny...

Schroeder paints the blank eye.

The walls breathe in.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - SERVICE HALL - MORNING

Jenny and Harper climb the hidden stair.

Covered portraits line the walls. The cloth over each one
trembles.

A door at the end opens by itself.

Warm light.

Caroline's voice comes from inside.

CAROLINE (V.O.)
Harper. I am cold.

Jenny hears the wrongness. Too sweet. Too whole.

JENNY
No. She is ahead of us.

Harper stares into the room, ruined by hope.

HARPER
Caroline?

JENNY
Daddy.

CAROLINE (V.O.)
You can still come get me.

Harper pulls free.

HARPER
I left her once.

He enters.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - PORTRAIT ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Jenny reaches the threshold.

Harper stands before a damaged portrait of Caroline in the blue dress.

The painted Caroline smiles with too many teeth.

JENNY
Daddy, look at me.

The portrait's eyes split and bleed.

The wall behind Harper softens. Hands press through plaster.

Faces without mouths. Roots wrapped around bone.

Harper turns back to Jenny.

HARPER
Go.

The wall takes him.

Jenny fires. The blast tears plaster and canvas.

Harper is gone.

The false Caroline laughs.

CAROLINE (V.O.)
Not me. Run.

Jenny reloads and runs.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - ULTRA VIOLET ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Schroeder paints Dustin's blank eye.

SCHROEDER
An unfinished portrait leaves the door open. Not death. Not life. A hallway.

Rolland presses his revolver to Schroeder's neck.

ROLLAND
Where's the money?

SCHROEDER
We are so near, and still you bring
money into the room.

A SHOTGUN COCKS.

Jenny stands in the entrance.

JENNY
Let him go.

Dustin turns toward her voice though he cannot see.

DUSTIN
Jenny... I should have listened.

JENNY
Then listen now.

Rolland shoves Schroeder toward the fallen portrait.

ROLLAND
I buried your mess for six years. I
want mine.

Schroeder smiles through blood.

SCHROEDER

The house chooses what remains.

Jenny fires.

The blast shatters shelves of wine and chemicals beyond the
room.

Blue flame crawls across the floor.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - ULTRA VIOLET ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Fire climbs the drapes.

Jenny cuts Dustin's straps with a knife from the table.

JENNY
Look at me.

DUSTIN

I can't.

Jenny swallows the old question.

JENNY

Then hear me.

Across the room, Rolland pounds Schroeder's face. Dentures skitter across the floor.

Underneath: sharpened teeth.

ROLLAND

Where is it?

SCHROEDER

You are standing in it. The house.
The body. The inheritance.

Rolland understands there is no fortune.

He shoots Schroeder in the face.

Again.

Again.

The voices scream.

INT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - BURNING HALLS - MOMENTS LATER

Jenny drags blind Dustin through smoke.

The house stops pretending to be a house.

Doors open onto impossible rooms. Portraits blister and howl.

Hands pound from inside walls.

VOICES (V.O.)

This way.

No, here.

Wear me.

Jenny.

Dustin.

DUSTIN

Too many.

JENNY

Find hers.

He listens. Through the screaming, Caroline's voice appears, thin but true.

CAROLINE (V.O.)

Left.

Jenny pulls him left.

CAROLINE (V.O.)

Down.

They descend a staircase that was not there before.

FALSE JENNY (V.O.)

Dusty, wait for me.

Dustin stops.

Jenny grips his face.

JENNY

I'm right here.

CAROLINE (V.O.)

Now.

Jenny kicks open a service door.

EXT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - MORNING

Jenny and Dustin burst into white fog.

Behind them, Corpsewood burns from the inside, stained glass glowing like organs.

Dustin collapses in the wet grass.

Jenny falls with him, holding him.

For a moment he goes still.

Too still.

JENNY

Dustin. What do you hear?

A long beat.

Dustin breathes.

Not quite his rhythm.

DUSTIN

You.

Jenny wants that to be enough.

In the burning doorway, something shaped like Schroeder stands in the smoke.

Then the roof folds in and takes it.

Jenny hauls Dustin toward Harper's truck as the manor screams.

EXT. CORPSEWOOD MANOR - GROUNDS - MORNING

Jenny half-carries Dustin through the white fog.

Behind them, Corpsewood burns without wind. The flames stay inside the brick like something being digested.

Dustin's feet bleed in the grass.

JENNY

Come on. Come on, Dusty.

A final SHRIEK rises from the manor.

It is not human. It is many humans trying to be one.

Jenny looks back.

In an upper window, the fire outlines a portrait frame with no wall behind it.

The frame falls inward.

Silence drops hard.

EXT. BURIAL FIELD - MORNING

Jenny drags Dustin past the horse graves.

The open pit waits for Snowflake.

Beside it: Harper's shotgun, dropped in the mud.

Jenny sees the grave markers through smoke.

BLUEBELL. MERCY. SUNDAY. PRINCE.

One fresh marker lies blank, waiting for a name.

Dustin stops.

DUSTIN

Harper?

Jenny cannot answer.

A whisper moves through the mounds.

CAROLINE (V.O.)

Go, Jenny girl.

Jenny closes her eyes for half a second.

Not grief. Not yet.

She lifts Dustin again.

EXT. HARPER'S TRUCK - MORNING

Harper's truck sits crooked beside the tree line.

Jenny shoves Dustin into the passenger seat. Runs around to the driver's side.

The keys are not in the ignition.

JENNY

No. No, no, no.

She searches the visor. The floor. Harper's coat.

Dustin reaches across her, blind and shaking, and feels beneath the cracked dash.

A key drops on a string.

Jenny stares at him.

JENNY (CONT'D)

How did you know that?

Dustin's fingers close around the key.

DUSTIN

I do not know.

The words are his.

The calm is not.

INT. HARPER'S TRUCK - WOODS - MORNING

The truck ROARS alive.

Jenny shifts into gear. The clutch bucks. The engine dies.

JENNY

Damn it.

She tries again. Stalls again.

Dustin turns his bleeding eyes toward the windshield.

DUSTIN

Let me.

JENNY

You cannot see.

DUSTIN

I can hear it.

Jenny does not move.

Behind them, something inside the manor collapses with a thunderous GROAN.

She lets Dustin slide behind the wheel.

He works the clutch, gearshift, and gas with smooth country familiarity.

The truck lurches forward, then settles.

Perfect.

Jenny watches his hands.

Those are Dustin's hands.

They do not move like Dustin.

EXT. WOODS / INT. HARPER'S TRUCK - MOVING - MORNING

The truck tears down the mud road.

Jenny sits close, one hand on the wheel in case he loses it, the other gripping the shotgun.

Dustin drives blind through fog.

He tilts his head, listening to the engine, the gravel, the trees.

JENNY
You ever drive a truck like this?

DUSTIN
No.

JENNY
Then stop doing it like you have.

He almost smiles.

Almost Dustin.

Then a BLACK HORSE appears in the woods beside them, running at the same speed.

No saddle. No rider. Its mane wet with ash.

Jenny sees it.

Dustin does too, though he should not.

DUSTIN
Beautiful.

Jenny turns to him.

JENNY
What?

The horse vanishes behind dead trees.

Dustin's face slackens. Confused. Afraid.

DUSTIN
Jenny?

She grips his shoulder.

JENNY
I'm here.

EXT. HARPER'S RANCH - LATER

The truck rolls into Harper's ranch as morning breaks gray.

Steven's patrol truck is already there.

Steven steps from the porch, stunned by the sight of them:

Jenny covered in soot, Dustin barefoot and blood-eyed, Harper nowhere.

STEVEN
Jesus Christ.

Jenny helps Dustin out.

STEVEN (CONT'D)
Where's Harper?

Jenny looks back toward the road.

Nothing follows.

JENNY
Gone.

Steven absorbs that, then sees the blood on Dustin's face.

STEVEN
What happened up there?

Jenny looks at him. At the badge. At the town behind him.

JENNY
Everything y'all decided not to ask
about.

Steven has no answer.

In the empty stable, one horse grave marker falls over by
itself.

No one sees it.

INT. ATLANTA APARTMENT - NIGHT

SUPER: THREE MONTHS LATER

The apartment is quieter now.

Jenny's horse paintings are turned toward the wall. The easel
is folded closed. Brushes sit dry in a jar.

Dustin sits on the couch wearing dark glasses. His face has
healed, but not cleanly. Fine red lines branch near one eye.

Jenny enters with two mugs of tea.

He turns before she speaks.

DUSTIN
Chamomile.

JENNY
You smelled that?

DUSTIN
You make it when you do not want to
dream.

That is Dustin. Tender. Specific.

Jenny hands him the mug.

Their fingers touch.

For a moment, they are simply two people who survived.

DUSTIN (CONT'D)
I am sorry about Snowflake.

Jenny sits beside him.

JENNY
I know.

DUSTIN
And Harper.

Jenny nods, but does not make him feel better.

JENNY
I know.

A long silence.

DUSTIN
What do you see?

That was her question.

Jenny looks at him.

Dustin realizes it a beat too late.

DUSTIN (CONT'D)
Sorry. I do not know why I said
that.

Jenny sets her mug down.

The apartment wall gives the faintest settling CREAK.

INT. ATLANTA APARTMENT - BEDROOM - LATER

Jenny lies awake beside Dustin.

His dark glasses rest on the table beside him.

His eyes are open.

The left is bloodshot but human.

The right catches the lamp in a color that does not belong in the room.

His hand moves with certainty. Not practice. Memory.

On the canvas: Dustin in the Ultra Violet Room.

Half his face unfinished. One eye blank. One eye alive with Schroeder's color.

Jenny cannot breathe.

JENNY

Dusty.

He does not turn.

The brush keeps moving.

JENNY (CONT'D)

What do you see?

The brush stops.

For a moment, Dustin is very afraid.

Then something in his posture settles.

DUSTIN

A door.

Jenny steps back.

From inside the apartment walls, a whisper answers.

Then another.

Then another.

Not as loud as Corpsewood.

Not yet.

Dustin resumes painting the blank eye.

Softly, without turning:

DUSTIN (CONT'D)
Come closer, my dear.

Jenny looks to the turned horse paintings.

One of them bleeds a thin line of wet paint down the wall.

The unfinished eye on Dustin's portrait darkens.

END.