

# **CALIBRATION**

Episode 2 – "CALIBRATION"

Written by

Jeremy Salsburg

calibration.ThresholdFiction.com |  
info@ThresholdFiction.com

(561) 247-3842

## COLD OPEN

### EXT. ROCKY MOUNTAIN FOREST – DAY

SUPER: ESTES PARK, COLORADO – OCTOBER 2016

HUGO (15, tall, heavy, the careful posture of a boy who has spent a decade learning not to break things) walks through dense pine forest with a HUNTER (50s, orange vest, Remington 700 slung over one shoulder). The hunter is a neighbor – casual acquaintance, the kind of invitation a homeschooled teenager accepts because invitations are rare.

They move through the trees. The hunter talks about elk patterns, wind direction, the boring practical details of stalking. Hugo listens, his hands in his pockets, his stride deliberately shortened to match the older man's pace.

#### HUNTER

You ever shoot before?

#### HUGO

My dad took me once. I'm not very good.

This is a lie. Hugo has never fired a gun because Abednego never allowed it – the recoil management would reveal too much.

They stop at a clearing. The hunter sets up against a fallen log, glassing the far tree line.

A branch SNAPS behind them. The hunter spins – a reflex, pure startle response – and the Remington discharges.

The round hits Hugo's right thigh from four feet away.

Hugo staggers. Drops to one knee. His hand goes to his leg.

CLOSE ON HUGO'S THIGH. The denim is torn. Beneath it: a red welt, already fading. On the ground beside his knee: a .30-06 round, flattened into a copper disc. The bullet hit

Hugo Danner's thigh at 2,820 feet per second and stopped.  
The hunter is white-faced, shaking, already reaching for Hugo.

**HUNTER**

Oh God - oh Jesus, I'm - let me see,  
let me -

Hugo stands. He picks up the flattened round and closes it in his fist.

**HUGO**

It's fine. It just grazed me.

**HUNTER**

That didn't graze you, that hit you  
dead center, I saw -

**HUGO**

(calm, controlled, the voice  
of a boy who has been lying  
about what he is for fifteen  
years)

It grazed me. Look.

He shows the hunter the welt - a red mark, nothing more. No blood. No entry wound. The hunter stares. His brain is telling him what happened. His eyes are telling him something else. The eyes win, because the alternative is impossible.

**HUNTER**

Jesus. I - we should get you to a -

**HUGO**

I'm fine. Let's go home.

They walk back through the forest. Hugo trails behind. He opens his fist and looks at the flattened round. His face is not relief. It is the face of a boy discovering another thing about himself that he will never be able to tell anyone.

> TITLE CARD: CALIBRATION

## ACT ONE

### INT. DANNER GARAGE LABORATORY - NIGHT

SUPER: TWO YEARS LATER - 2018

Hugo (17, larger now, 6'1", 245 lbs, the body of a man on a teenager's frame) sits at the workbench. Before him: Abednego's journal. Five composition notebooks, dense with handwriting, diagrams, gene maps, dosing calculations.

He's been reading for hours. The journal tells the complete story - the research, the cat, the injection, the fourteen-gene cascade, the AAV vector design.

Hugo closes the last notebook. He stacks them neatly. He sits in the garage where his father modified him before he was born, and he is very still.

### INT. DANNER HOME - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

ABEDNEGO (56, thinner, grayer, the two-decade erosion of a man carrying a secret) sits at the kitchen table. Coffee. The eternal notebook. He hears Hugo on the stairs.

Hugo enters. He sets the five journals on the table, one by one. The sound of each notebook landing is deliberate, measured - the way Hugo does everything.

Abednego stares at the journals. He knows.

HUGO

I read them.

Silence.

HUGO (CONT'D)

All of them.

ABEDNEGO

When did you -

HUGO

Last week. The lock on the filing cabinet was three-dollar hardware,

Dad.

Abednego looks at his son. Hugo sits across from him – the same table, the same configuration as every crisis this family has processed.

**HUGO (CONT'D)**

The science was magnificent.

Abednego's face flickers – surprise, something like gratitude.

**HUGO (CONT'D)**

What you did to Mom was unforgivable.

The gratitude dies. Abednego sits with the sentence. He does not argue. He does not defend. He sits.

**ABEDNEGO**

Yes.

**HUGO**

She knew. The whole time. She knew, and she stayed, and she raised me, and she taught me how to hold a glass without breaking it. And you let her carry that alone.

**ABEDNEGO**

I didn't let her –

**HUGO**

You injected a pregnant woman in her sleep. Everything after that is her carrying what you did.

Beat. The kitchen clock ticks. Wind against the windows.

**ABEDNEGO**

What do you want me to say?

**HUGO**

I don't want you to say anything. I want you to know that I understand exactly what you are. You're brilliant. You're a coward. And I'm

what happens when those two things meet.

Hugo stands. He walks to the door. Stops.

**HUGO (CONT'D)**

I'm going to college. CU Boulder. I'm going to try to be normal for four years. If it works, I'll be something. If it doesn't -

He doesn't finish the sentence. He leaves. Abednego sits alone with the journals.

**EXT. CU BOULDER CAMPUS - DAY**

SUPER: CU BOULDER - AUGUST 2020

Wide shot: the Flatirons. The campus spread below, sandstone buildings, students everywhere. Hugo (19, 6'2", 265 lbs, wearing a backpack that looks small on him) walks across campus. He is enormous. People notice. People always notice.

He navigates the crowd with the careful spacing of a man walking through a field of soap bubbles. He does not brush shoulders. He does not bump backpacks. Every step is a calculation.

**INT. BAKER HALL - DORM ROOM - DAY**

Hugo opens the door to a standard double room. One side is already occupied - posters (Kendrick Lamar, the Broncos, a Reservoir Dogs print), a laptop, clothes scattered with the confident disorder of someone comfortable with space.

MARCUS WEBB (19, Black, average build, the easy energy of a person who has never been afraid of a room) is lying on his bed, scrolling his phone. He looks up.

**MARCUS**

Holy shit.

Hugo freezes in the doorway.

**MARCUS (CONT'D)**

You're my roommate?

**HUGO**

Hugo. Danner.

**MARCUS**

Marcus Webb. Dude, you look like you could bench-press a car.

Hugo sets his bag down. Carefully.

**HUGO**

I get that a lot.

**MARCUS**

What are you, football? You gotta be football.

**HUGO**

I haven't decided yet.

**MARCUS**

With that build? Bro, Coach Dorrell would lose his mind. Walk-on tryouts are next week.

Hugo sits on his bed. The frame creaks. Marcus notices.

**MARCUS (CONT'D)**

You want the bottom bunk? Because honestly, I'm worried about structural integrity.

Hugo almost smiles. It is the first time in a long time someone has made him almost smile.

**EXT. FOLSOM FIELD - WALK-ON TRYOUTS - DAY**

SUPER: WALK-ON TRYOUTS - SEPTEMBER 2020

Forty hopefuls line up on the track. Hugo stands among them - visibly the largest, visibly the most out of place. He wears generic workout clothes. No branded gear, no high school letters, no training camp tan.

The STRENGTH COACH reads off the protocol: 40-yard dash, bench press reps at 225, vertical jump, agility shuttle.

40-yard dash. Hugo lines up. He runs.

CLOSE ON HUGO'S FACE as he runs. He is counting. Calibrating. His body wants to move at 75 miles per hour. He lets it move at roughly 21. The effort of running slowly is visible – a tightening around his eyes, a conscious throttling.

The timer reads: 4.31 seconds.

The strength coach looks at the timer. Looks at Hugo. Looks at the timer again.

**STRENGTH COACH**

Run it again.

Hugo runs it again. 4.33. The coach writes the number down. His hand is shaking slightly.

Bench press. 225 pounds on the bar. Hugo lies down. He begins pressing. Each rep is identical – the same speed, the same range of motion, the same controlled exhalation. He is performing "elite human" with the precision of a concert pianist playing scales.

He racks the bar at 42 reps. The actual limit of his endurance is somewhere north of 1,000. He chose 42 because it's extraordinary but documented – a first-round combine number, not an impossibility.

Vertical jump. 41 inches. Hugo could clear a building. He clears 41 inches.

The coaching staff huddles. Hugo stands alone, drinking water, watching the other walk-ons with the detached focus of a man who has just performed the most elaborate act of restraint of his life.

HEAD COACH approaches Hugo.

**HEAD COACH**

Hugo Danner? No high school tape?

**HUGO**

Homeschooled. Estes Park.

**HEAD COACH**

You ever play organized ball?

**HUGO**

No sir.

The coach studies him. Hugo meets his eyes – calm, steady, the practiced blankness of a man who has been hiding in plain sight for nineteen years.

**HEAD COACH**

You just ran a 4.31 forty at 265 pounds with no coaching. What the hell have you been doing?

**HUGO**

Hiking.

## **ACT TWO**

**INT. BAKER HALL – DORM ROOM – NIGHT**

Marcus is on his bed. Hugo enters, drops his bag.

**MARCUS**

Well?

**HUGO**

I made the team.

**MARCUS**

Obviously you made the team. What position?

**HUGO**

Linebacker.

**MARCUS**

(sitting up)

Walk-on to starting lineup?

**HUGO**

Practice squad. For now.

**MARCUS**

For now. Right. The 265-pound freak athlete from the mountains is going to ride the bench.

Hugo sits at his desk. He opens a textbook. Environmental science. He reads with the focused attention of someone who has spent his life studying things more carefully than anyone around him.

**MARCUS (CONT'D)**

You know what your problem is?

**HUGO**

Which one?

**MARCUS**

You don't take up space. You're the biggest person on any campus in America, and you move like you're trying to disappear.

Hugo looks at Marcus. No one has ever articulated this to him before.

**MARCUS (CONT'D)**

I'm a communications major. I study how people present themselves. You present like a guy who's afraid of his own shadow. Except your shadow is six-two and weighs as much as a washing machine.

**HUGO**

What would you suggest?

**MARCUS**

Take up space, man. You're here. Be here.

Hugo considers this. It is the opposite of every lesson his father ever taught him.

**EXT. CU CAMPUS - LIBRARY LAWN - DAY**

Hugo sits on the grass, reading. ELENA NAVARRO (21, Latina, dark hair, the confident posture of a woman working toward a PhD at twenty-one) sits nearby, also reading. Different book. Different field. Same patch of grass.

She glances at Hugo's book. He glances at hers. Molecular biology.

**ELENA**

You're reading Kolbert.

**HUGO**

The Sixth Extinction. For class.

**ELENA**

That book changed my life when I was sixteen.

**HUGO**

What are you reading?

**ELENA**

Doudna. A Crack in Creation. CRISPR.

Hugo's face does something – a stillness, a micro-flinch that Elena notices but cannot interpret.

**HUGO**

Is it good?

**ELENA**

It's the most important technology humans have ever developed. Or the most dangerous. Possibly both.

She extends her hand. Hugo takes it. The handshake – calibrated, precise, the exact pressure his father taught him at five years old.

**ELENA (CONT'D)**

Elena Navarro. Molecular biology.

**HUGO**

Hugo Danner. Environmental science.

**ELENA**

You're on the football team. I've seen you at practice.

**HUGO**

You watch football practice?

**ELENA**

The field is between my lab and my apartment. You're hard to miss.

She smiles. Hugo absorbs the smile the way a man in a desert absorbs water – carefully, aware that it might not last.

**INT. FOLSOM FIELD – GAME DAY – MONTAGE**

A compressed sequence: Hugo's football career at CU. He plays at 60-65% of his capability – enough to be extraordinary, not enough to be impossible.

He makes tackles that coaches call "textbook" – because the technique is perfect, the force is measured, the result is dominant without being suspicious.

He learns the playbook. He studies film. He does the work of being a football player because the work itself is the disguise.

**SPORTSCASTERS (V.O.)**

(layered, overlapping)

– Danner with the stop at the line –  
incredible instincts for a walk-on –

– Where did this kid come from?  
Homeschooled, no high school tape –

– Pac-12 Defensive Player of the Week,  
Hugo Danner –

– They're talking about him for the  
Butkus Award, and he was a walk-on  
eight months ago –

**INT. BAKER HALL – DORM ROOM – NIGHT**

Hugo and Marcus. Late night. Takeout containers.

**MARCUS**

ESPN wants an interview.

**HUGO**

No.

**MARCUS**

The Athletic wants a profile.

**HUGO**

No.

**MARCUS**

Hugo. You're the best defensive player in college football and you won't talk to a single reporter. People are going to start asking why.

**HUGO**

Let them.

**MARCUS**

(serious now)

What are you hiding?

The question lands. Hugo looks at Marcus – his only friend, the first person in his life who treats him normally because Marcus doesn't know there's anything abnormal to treat.

**HUGO**

I'm not hiding anything. I just don't want attention.

Marcus studies him. The communications major reading the subject.

**MARCUS**

Everybody's hiding something. You're just worse at pretending you're not.

**INT. ELENA'S APARTMENT – NIGHT**

Hugo and Elena. The relationship has progressed – six months of careful proximity. They sit on her couch, close but not touching. A movie plays unwatched.

Elena reaches for his hand. Hugo lets her take it. The contact is electric and terrifying – every touch is a conscious decision, a calibrated output.

**ELENA**

You're so tense.

**HUGO**

I'm fine.

**ELENA**

You hold my hand like you're holding a baby bird.

Hugo looks at their intertwined fingers. Her hand is small in his. The differential between what his hand can do and what her hand can survive is the distance between a human being and an industrial machine.

**HUGO**

I'm careful.

**ELENA**

With me?

**HUGO**

With everyone.

She looks at him. The curiosity of a scientist meeting something she doesn't understand.

**ELENA**

Why?

Hugo cannot answer this. He looks at her and the secret fills the room – the secret he will never tell her, the secret that makes every moment of intimacy a controlled experiment in not destroying what he loves.

**HUGO**

I just am.

She leans against him. Hugo holds still. He breathes. He calibrates.

### **ACT THREE**

#### **EXT. FOLSOM FIELD – GAME DAY – NIGHT**

SUPER: CU vs. USC – OCTOBER 23, 2021

Folsom Field. 53,750 people. Night game. The lights make the field a stage. The crowd noise is a physical force – 100 decibels of expectation.

Hugo lines up at outside linebacker. He is in his element – the one place where his body has a sanctioned purpose. Football is calibration made into sport. Every play is a calculation: how hard to hit, how fast to close, how much of himself to deploy.

USC has the ball. Third and seven. TREY KENSINGTON (22, USC quarterback, confident, vocal, the body language of a young man who believes he is the best player on the field) takes the snap.

Hugo reads the play. Screen pass. He drops into coverage, reads the throw, and breaks on the ball.

Kensington scrambles. He cuts upfield. Hugo is in pursuit.

What happens next takes three-tenths of a second.

Kensington jukes left. Hugo adjusts. Kensington plants his right foot to cut back, and Hugo arrives.

The tackle is textbook – shoulder to hip, wrap the legs, drive through. Hugo has made this exact tackle two hundred times. Every time, calibrated. Every time, controlled.

This time, something slips. The crowd noise, the adrenaline, the competitive fury of a close game – something in Hugo's calibration shifts by a fraction. Not much. Perhaps three percent. Perhaps five.

But three percent of Hugo Danner is the difference between a hard tackle and a catastrophe.

The SOUND is wrong. Not the thud of pads on turf – a deeper sound. A crack. Muffled by muscle and equipment but unmistakable to anyone who has heard it before. The sound of a spine failing.

Kensington hits the ground. He does not move.

Hugo stands over him. The stadium goes silent. Not quiet – silent. 53,750 people holding their breath simultaneously.

CLOSE ON HUGO'S FACE. He knows. Before the trainers arrive, before the stretcher, before the medical team swarms the field – Hugo knows. He has been afraid of this moment for nineteen years. He felt the vertebrae give. He felt the fraction – the tiny, fatal surplus of force that his calibration failed to contain.

The medical team arrives. A stretcher. A backboard. Kensington's fingers are moving, but his legs are not. The entire USC sideline is standing. Some are kneeling. One is crying.

Hugo walks to the CU sideline. He removes his helmet. He sits on the bench. The game continues around him. He does not move. He does not speak. He stares at his hands – the hands that broke a cabinet handle at three days old, that crushed eggs, that shattered a fort, that now have broken a man's spine.

A COACH approaches.

**COACH**

Danner. Danner, you okay? It was a clean hit. It was –

Hugo stands. He walks past the coach, past the bench, toward the tunnel.

He does not come back.

**INT. BAKER HALL – DORM ROOM – 2:00 AM**

The room is dark. Marcus is asleep. Hugo moves through the room without a sound – he knows the layout, he knows where Marcus's shoes are, he knows the precise path between desk and door that avoids every creaking board.

He takes a backpack. One change of clothes. His wallet. A water bottle. Nothing else.

He writes two notes. He places one on Marcus's desk. He places the other in an envelope marked ELENA and leaves it propped against her mailbox slot on the way out.

CLOSE ON MARCUS'S NOTE:

Marcus – I have to go. Don't look for me. You were the best thing about this place. I'm sorry I can't explain. –  
H

**EXT. CU BOULDER CAMPUS – 2:15 AM**

Hugo walks off campus. He passes the library, the science building, Elena's apartment (the light is off), the football stadium (dark, empty, the scene of his failure six hours ago).

He reaches the edge of campus. The road heads west. The mountains are black shapes against a darker sky.

Hugo starts running.

Not at human speed. At his speed.

**EXT. COLORADO HIGHWAY – VARIOUS – NIGHT**

Hugo runs west on Highway 36, then cuts north through the mountains. The speedometer equivalent: 45 miles per hour, sustained. He is not sprinting. He is traveling.

He passes through Roosevelt National Forest. Through the Never Summer Mountains. Through North Park, Middle Park, the Continental Divide at Rabbit Ears Pass.

He runs for four hours. The distance: 180 miles. Boulder to Steamboat Springs, over mountain passes that would kill

a car in winter.

At dawn, he stops.

**EXT. RIDGELINE ABOVE STEAMBOAT SPRINGS - DAWN**

Hugo stands on a ridgeline at 10,000 feet. Snow covers everything. The Yampa Valley stretches below. Steam rises from hot springs in the distance. The world is white and silent and empty.

Hugo is not winded. His body could run another 180 miles. His body is not the problem. His body has never been the problem.

He looks at the valley. He looks at his hands. He thinks about Trey Kensington - twenty-two years old, a career, a life, a body that worked, all of it compromised in three-tenths of a second by a fraction of Hugo Danner's capability.

**HUGO**

(quietly, to the mountains)

Never again.

The mountains do not answer. They never do.

HOLD. Hugo stands in the snow. The sun rises. The world fills with light that he cannot feel.

> SMASH CUT TO BLACK.

> NEXT: "DRIFT"

> END OF EPISODE