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## **In His Wake: Applying Life's Truths in Fiction**

Joseph M. Balderas

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

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IN HIS WAKE: APPLYING LIFE'S TRUTHS IN FICTION

A Thesis

by

JOSEPH M. BALDERAS

Submitted to the Graduate College of  
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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December 2017

Major Subject: Creative Writing



IN HIS WAKE: APPLYING LIFE'S TRUTHS IN FICTION

A Thesis  
by  
JOSEPH M. BALDERAS

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

David B. Carren  
Chair of Committee

Dr. Philip Zwerling  
Committee Member

Dr. Britt Haraway  
Committee Member

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## ABSTRACT

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The culmination of the creative work and its introduction attempt to delve into the psyche of what it means to lose someone you love. The screenplay explores the grieving process and the coping mechanisms that accompanies it, with an examination on how far some people are willing to go for closure.

To reach my conclusions, I draw from my own life experience, the experiences of others, and a fine amount of research. It also means to shed light on the impermanent mental strain that chaperons grief.





## DEDICATION

The completion of this master's degree would not be possible without the love and support of my family. I dedicate this thesis to my mother, father, brother, and sister.

I love you all.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deepest appreciation falls to Professor David Carren for fulfilling the position of chair on my thesis committee. His mentoring, collaboration, and backing have made the writing process rewarding.

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## CHAPTER I

### IN HIS WAKE: APPLYING LIFE'S TRUTHS IN FICTION

Since the concept of writing for pleasure, as opposed to academic standard, was introduced to me I thought there could be no greater joy than to bring life to the unknown worlds that have always occupied my mind. I could write something with grand spectacle like space pirates seizing one of Jupiter's moons or possibly something closer to the ground such as a drama involving a doctor doubling up for the mafia. Through the medium of creative writing I found the possibilities infinite, thus extremely appealing. The notion that I controlled any success, or failure for that matter, in my work, was exciting and being confined to my imagination was like a dream come true. So, a writer was born.

However, a problem persisted. I kept hearing the phrase "write what you know" being tossed around from classroom to classroom, which often confused me. How could I explore the boundless universe that fiction composes if I haven't stepped foot out of my home state of Texas? How do successful writers such as J. R.R. Tolkien or J.K Rowling seamlessly transport audiences to these different, fantastical worlds? Surely they did not sneak off to an underground network of dragons and wizards, jotting notes whenever they could, keeping their discovered myths close to their chests. It took quite some time for me to realize that the culmination of the human experience, imagination, and sufficient research determined how successful a work might be.



For my screenplay I knew I wanted to attempt to write something that deviated from my portfolio of written work, but didn't have the slightest idea what topic would be suitable to spend two intimate semesters with. I was beginning to lose hope when I stumbled upon a documentary called *The Dark Side of Everest*. The title intrigued me enough, but the thumbnail picture of a horrendously frost bitten man convinced me to hit play. The film discusses the absurd number of bodies that Mt. Everest harbors from failed attempts at its peak and their stories, many of which are used as land markers for other climbers. The gruesome details reviewed by the film piqued my interest and made me wonder how the families of the fallen climbers might cope. I wondered how I would feel if a loved one of mine called the mountainside their "resting site". I told myself, "I would want someone to bring back their body, so they could have a proper funeral, and not be some display piece for other climbers to gawk at." After further research I realized the task is not as easy as I naively concluded. Hundreds of climbers are still left on Everest's face, some perfectly mummified in its sub-zero temperatures and others only recognizable by their sun-bleached clothes. The majority of these fallen climbers died in what has been dubbed, "The Death Zone," any section of the mountain that exceeds 26,000 vertical feet above sea level, where it's nearly impossible to hurl yourself up or down, let alone retrieve a lifeless body. But what if someone was determined enough to try?

Around a year before my research commenced my grandfather passed away due to a rare form of blood cancer. The disease sprang up aggressively and had him in its clutches a few short months later. Up until then I had relatives pass away in vehicular accidents and succumb to other forms of cancer, but at their respective times I assumed ignorance, much too young to fully grasp the concepts of death and grief. When the news broke of his passing it hit me like nothing ever

had, breaking something inside of me that would never fully heal. Death and I had a different relationship at that point (a healthier one), as I had truly looked it in the eye for the first time.

I mourned for my grandfather and grieved his loss for months on end until I accepted the truth: he was not coming back and I would never see him again. That fact hung heavy on my spirit, and I couldn't help start thinking about the eventuality of losing other loved ones, loved ones that I was closer to, such as my mother and father or maybe a future spouse in some unforeseen circumstance. These thoughts plagued my mind up until I discovered the documentary mentioned earlier. Without consciously thinking about it, right before me, the story I was waiting for came to fruition.

My screenplay, *In His Wake* acts as a marriage between the morbid realities of Everest and the grief that accompanies the passing of a loved one. I delivered this amalgamation through the perspective of a widowed woman named Emma. Within the first few pages of the screenplay she discovers that Patrick, her husband, has perished on his descent from Mt. Everest's peak. Local news stations receive word of the disaster and praise his efforts, disclosing that his body will serve as a marker that will aid future climbers on the way to the summit; a martyr. The revelation enrages Emma and sparks the onset of her journey to recover his remains from the face of the mountain. Using a seemingly impossible task as a way to grieve a lost loved one allowed me to present a unique story that I'm proud to call my own. That's not to say that writing the screenplay didn't have its challenges.

I haven't had the pleasure of climbing to the top of Mt. Everest, or any other mountain in all honesty, but I believed I could apply genuine human experience. Anuja Chauhan, a best-selling author, once said, "All fiction, at some point, is derived from personal experience. I am hoping to write 20 books before I die, and all of them will be memoirs". (Hindustan Times)

Since emotion dictates the majority of the story arc in my screenplay, I felt comfortable enough to take on the medium of mountaineering, a completely foreign experience. However, the additional challenges of portraying a woman, and the intricacies attached to mountaineering still loomed over me.

My experience gathered as a twenty-something old man only afforded the backbone of my piece but not the concrete details that would bring it to life. When I realized this complication I thought about changing my story to something more conventional. Maybe I'd make my protagonist male, or change the plot in some ways to make the writing less challenging. I thought back and forth on it, but my younger self and the excitement that fueled my initial passion for writing convinced me otherwise. How could I successfully write about space pirates or mafia doctors if I didn't know each and every detail that belonged to those stories? Before I put my fingers to the keyboard to start writing, I meticulously researched everything I possibly could that contained relevance to my story.

By far the most difficult challenge during the writing process was role-playing as a woman. The option of cherry-picking certain stereotypes or common personality traits found in women dwelled too deep in convenience. I wanted my character to feel as authentic as possible, without the powerless tropes often imparted to female characters in mainstream pop culture. From the story's origin, I knew I wanted a female-driven drama for two reasons: 1. I don't believe multi-dimensional women have fair representation in film and 2. Inherently, the story would be far more interesting if a female decided to retrieve her husband's body, instead of vice-versa. Yet, my aim wasn't to create the next Ellen Ripley or Sarah Connor (not to say that they aren't great), but to create a character that resides a little closer to someone people might actually

know. To render justice for the character and what she represented to me, I knew I would need to spend time analyzing other films with strong female protagonists.

The film *Wild* served as my first study of the female driven narrative. Directed by Jean-Marc Vallé and starring Reese Witherspoon, this film (based on a true story) follows Cheryl Strayed, a city woman who decides to take a thousand mile hike in order to battle the mental anguish of the serious tragedies that have occurred in her life. While parallels can be made between the plots of my screenplay and this film, I primarily took note of structure and character development.

As Cheryl hikes the Pacific Coast Trail, one that spans from New Mexico to Washington State, we get to see her personality and motivations unfold through a series of jarring flashbacks and visions. Through these memories, we see her abusive childhood, her mother losing her battle with cancer, and Cheryl's downward spiral into disorder. She cheats on her husband, becomes a heroin addict, and loses contact with her brother, her only sibling.

Similarly, while not as extreme, I chose to implement this strategy in my character, Emma. In my screenplay, we quickly receive the fundamental reason why she's climbing Mt. Everest, but not the logic behind that reasoning. I intended to reveal a genuine relationship between husband and wife, highlighting the certain life experiences that garnered such an extreme response to one of their deaths. It is only through flashbacks and visions that we see, through Cheryl and Emma, why they are really going on these "suicide missions".

I also noticed a few subtle (and not so subtle) details of the film that I felt could benefit the storytelling of my piece. From the beginning of her journey, we see Cheryl doesn't really know what she's doing, overloading her backpack and even being forced to eat cold oatmeal from not bringing the right fuel for her stove. This suggests that proper preparation didn't take

place or was directly thought of. It can be inferred that Cheryl wanted to abandon her traditional life as soon as possible and start on her journey without the luxury of rehearsal.

I display this also as Emma traverses through mountaineering agencies, trying to get escorted up the mountain with no clear plan of attack. It's only when she hires a complete stranger that she realizes that she could've prepared a bit more. This also becomes apparent when she burns a hole in her tent from her stove, or when Garrett scolds her for not training sufficiently, referencing her lack of experience crossing ladder bridges. The last quote that Cheryl writes in the PCT expedition log is, "We are never prepared for what we expect," a quote from James Michener. I think this quote rings true for both Cheryl and Emma at the end of their ventures.

Another film that I looked to for reference was the Oscar award winning *Million Dollar Baby*, directed by Clint Eastwood, starring Hillary Swank. This film follows Maggie Fitzgerald (Swank) on her journey to becoming a professional boxer. Wanting to learn from the best, she convinces a disgruntled old coach Frank Dunn (Eastwood) to train her, eventually turning into one of the fiercest boxers in her division. During her championship fight, tragedy strikes as she breaks her neck resulting in her becoming a paraplegic. Once a strong spirit, she now finds herself at odds with her useless body, deteriorating as she lies in the hospital bed.

The narratives presented in *Million Dollar Baby* and in my screenplay do not align in the slightest, but their protagonist's character traits share a resemblance. Right away, we see Maggie's tenaciousness in the boxing gym, training even when Frank and some of the other gym members harass her for being a woman. Eddie Scrap-Iron Dupris, played by Morgan Freeman, comments on this in a voice over. He says, "If there's a magic in boxing, it's the magic of fighting battles beyond endurance. Beyond cracked ribs, ruptured kidneys, and detached retinas.

It's the magic of risking everything for a dream that nobody sees but you." From this particular film I wanted to implement Maggie's fortitude and perseverance in Emma's character (post Patrick's death) so the audience had an appealing feature in her to support. When we see Emma a year after her husband's funeral she is stronger both physically and mentally, setting out to accomplish her mission. This newfound resilience and toughened attitude assists her march up the mountain and is tested along her path.

The final film analyzed in the context of exploring the female psyche was *Gravity*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón, starring Sandra Bullock and George Clooney. Dr. Ryan Stone (Bullock) is a successful medical engineer on her first shuttle mission with seasoned astronaut Matt Kowalski (Clooney) in command of his last flight. When their mission goes array their shuttle is destroyed, leaving Stone and Kowalski completely alone—tethered to nothing but each other, spiraling into the infinite void.

I felt this film necessary to analyze because of the protagonist's character growth as a result of traumatic experience and the opportunity to warp this idea. The tagline for this movie reads, "Don't let go," but I believe the entire journey of the film is about releasing the hardships life has thrown at Dr. Stone. When Kowalski is forced to detach from their tether, Dr. Stone pleads with him, "Don't let go" but he does so in order to save her life, just as she must let go of her daughter's death in order to save herself during the film's climax. I wanted to present a similar set of circumstances in my screenplay without having the same conclusion. In the case for my narrative, Emma must abandon the mindset that incited her journey in order to survive the mountain, but after a few drafts I felt this would be too convenient. Like Dr. Stone, Emma faces her internal battles, them becoming more apparent as the narrative progresses, however she remains persistent in her way of thinking, resulting in her eventual death. She initially presents

them as her doing Patrick the favor of reuniting him with his family by bringing him back home, but eventually is led to question the validity of her logic through her interactions with Garrett. She tells him, “He was my husband. An actual human being with human experiences. It just irks me the wrong way. I think it’s only right to bring him back,” to which he replies, “Sounds like you’re taking care of yourself more than you’re taking care of him.” Even Patrick’s “ghost” questions her motive, but she still remains adamant on her mission’s objective until the very end.

Through these films I found it possible to represent an accurate portrayal of a woman on the page. Emma represents these selected protagonists as a fusion of their personalities and motivations.

Other than assuming a different gender, the technical aspects of mountaineering required research as well. The components such as mountaineering know-how, economics, and culture all required arduous research to maintain the story’s technical accuracy. I knew right away that this story wouldn’t act as a typical mountaineering venture: achieving the summit wouldn’t function as the goal for my protagonist. She merely wants to find her husband and bring him home but has to jump through a few hoops in order to do so.

First, I needed to understand why people are inclined to climb a mountain as dangerous as Mt. Everest to fully get a handle on Patrick’s motivations for his passion of climbing. Everywhere I searched I found a variety of reasons, but my favorite comes from a line in the 2014 movie *Everest*, a film recounting the 1996 Everest disaster (claiming 16 lives), which sums up the rationale quite nicely. A conversation, which takes place in a mess tent on the mountain between the “Adventure Consultants” crew, leads to the question that I, myself, sought to answer. Michael Kelly’s character, Jack Krakauer, a journalist, surveys the anxious group, “All right, it’s all on the table here. It hurts, it’s dangerous, it destroys relationships, costing all of you

a small fortune. I gotta ask the question, you know I do—why [are you doing this]?” (*Everest*)

After a few unsatisfying answers, Krakauer asks Doug Hanson, a mailman who inherently shouldn't be there, on what he's specifically doing on the mountain. Hanson timidly replies:

“There's an elementary school back home. I've been going and talking to the kids there and they actually helped me raise some of the money to come and gave me a flag to plant on the summit, and so I was thinking maybe they see a regular guy can follow impossible dreams, maybe they'll be inspired to do the same, I guess. I'm climbing Mt. Everest...because I can. Because to be able to climb that high and see that kind of beauty that no one ever sees...it would be a crime not to.”

(*Everest*)

The group nods in solidarity, giving their cries of “charge” toward the mountain. The yearning to witness indescribable beauty placed among the common denominators for wanting to scale the mountain. In their essay titled, “Exploring Feel and Motivation with Recreational and Elite Mount Everest Climbers: An Ethnographic Study,” Shaunna Burke, Natalie Durand-Bush, and Kelly Doell offer other insights on this phenomenon. They state, “one finding in [climber's] personality research [suggests] that high altitude climbers tend to be sensation-seekers and, hence, search for situations that are unfamiliar or risky.” (Burke, Durand-Bush, Doell 374 p3) Intriguing enough, the vast majority of climbers, felt illogical about the whole thing, and attributed that feeling toward their mountaineering ambitions. In his book *Into Thin Air* the actual Jack Krakauer states:

“There were many, many fine reasons not to go, but attempting to climb Everest is an intrinsically irrational act—a triumph of desire over sensibility. Any person



who would seriously consider it is almost by definition beyond the sway of a reasoned argument.” (Krakauer XIII)

My intention with Patrick’s character was to give him different fragments of these various climber’s mentalities, isolating him from his family, and to give him legitimate reasons why he would choose to leave them for long periods of time. We see this in Emma’s first flashback as she argues with him, claiming he “love[s] the mountains more than [his] own family”. The argument forces him to say, “This is exactly why I go on these ‘little mountain trips’. To get away from all of this,” implying he’s not happiest when he’s with his family. He never thought he would be domesticized like the way it appears, but fell in love young and produced a family as a result. His life turned into a conflict between household responsibility and the desire to do the things that made him feel alive. Instead of perfecting his juggling act, he pays the ultimate price with his life, setting the plot into motion.

Another mountaineering aspect that required serious consideration was the necessary amount of experience needed to summit Everest. Since the conditions of the plot necessitated Emma being a novice (at best) mountain climber, the actual act itself needed to be in the realm of plausibility to contribute to the legitimacy of the story. Surprisingly enough, amateurs often find themselves at the summit; sometimes spending upwards of sixty thousand U.S dollars in permits and guides to do so, no matter if their trek succeeds or not. Everest stands taller than any surface in the world but, technically speaking, climbers don’t need the climbing aptitude one might expect. With sufficient oxygen training (acclimatization) anyone healthy enough to go on an average hike can make the climb up Everest on a day with fair weather. Making this reality explicit during the story was essential, whether it be spoken by Garret, her guide up the mountain, or fellow climbers commenting on the mountain’s tourism trends. The apparent ease

exhibited by mountaineers who made it to the summit prompted the commercialization of the mountain, inciting experienced climbers to start expedition companies to guide the wealthy to what was thought to be the impossible a few years ago. As a result, ‘serious’ climbers, such as Krakauer, began to turn their heads away from the mountain, claiming that the mountain was no longer a sacred test, but just a tourist attraction. He states:

“At some point in my midtwenties I had abandoned my boyhood fantasy of climbing Everest. By then it had become fashionable among alpine cognoscenti to denigrate Everest as a ‘slag heap’—a peak lacking sufficient technical challenges or aesthetic appeal to be a worthy objective for a “serious” climber, which I desperately wanted to be. I began to look down my nose at the world’s highest mountain. Such snobbery was substantiated in the early 1980s by which time Everest’s easiest line—via the South Col and the Southeast Ridge—had been climbed more than one hundred times.” (Krakauer 21)

As business on the mountain grew, consequently the death toll also began to rise. Shriya Shah, a Canadian born businesswoman’s story is a recent controversial case. Her experience, the subject of the documentary *Mount Everest: Into the Death Zone*, lives in Everest’s infamy. Without ascending a single mountain beforehand, Shah attempted to mount 29,029 feet, hiring a trekking crew with limited experience to guide her. To many people’s surprise, she accomplished her mission and reached the summit, but ran out of supplemental oxygen coming down. The Sherpas that were assisting her desperately tried to get Shah to come down, but were forced to desert her as her body ceased all motor function, resulting in her eventual death. An expert climber Russell Bryce, a consultant on the documentary, said, “That’s amazing determination from her, but absolutely stupid,” citing her minimal experience and lack of support

from her expedition crew. In his essay, “Why Are So Many People are Dying on Everest”, Dr. Andrew Sutherland tries to answer the question on why rookie climbers meet similar fates as Shah. He writes, “In my view, climbers are not climbing beyond their ability but instead beyond their altitude ability. Unfortunately it is difficult to get experience of what it is like climbing above 8300 metres’ until you climb Everest.” (Sutherland P6) While climbing Everest, with nominal climbing experience is possible, it is not recommended for an amateur.

I present similar conversations as Emma bounces between trekking companies, desperately trying to find someone to go out on a limb and escort her up the mountain. The character Jackal, a man whom she buys fraudulent climbing permits from, even compliments her fortitude, saying, “Not many women would or could do what you’re doing. Got to hand it to you,” but doesn’t hesitate to state the reality of most people like her. Hey says, “Seen a lot of people die, and you don’t look like the surviving kind, sorry to say”. The odds quickly stack themselves against her, presenting an incredibly hard and dangerous journey, but her determination fuels a fire that cannot tame her tenaciousness.

Besides the technical mountaineering aspects of the screenplay, other components of my narrative included the abstract concepts that naturally accompany any story dealing with death. A couple of motifs presented are grief and coping, two extremely complex human mechanisms. Before I began diving into quantifying these, I understood that no two situations dealing in grief are the same. However, a significant amount of research realized that most parallel with one another. In her essay “On Grief and Loss,” Elizabeth Pomeroy, a sociologist writes:

“The death of a friend or family member through violent crime, suicide, accident, or unexpected illness can be traumatic. These few examples of loss can lead to grief, depression, anxiety, relationship discord, substance abuse, and trauma,

which in turn can lead to chronic mental and physical health problems. (Pomeroy P5)

Considering my grandfather's recent death, I didn't have an issue harnessing those emotions in Emma, but I struggled with representing them accurately on the pages. I turned toward literature for reference, because I believe the subtle complexities of grief can't be seen on film, but only read.

One piece of literature that proved useful was *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion. The National Book Award winning memoir follows Didion's attempts to come to terms with her grief over the sudden death of her husband John, and her adult daughter Quintana's serious illness. The name of the book references Didion's strategy of coping with the lack of control she has over her loved one's mortality. Part of her strategy is implementing a conscious denial of what she refers to "the night" (her husband passed) throughout the book. In her narration, she constantly refers to her husband John as if he were still alive, sometimes saying, "I need to tell John," or "John says"—always keeping his tense in the present. This characteristic of her book was interesting to read, and I wanted a version of that present in my screenplay. In the book grief is presented as a certain state of "madness," or "chronic mental health problem" as Pomeroy would put it, and we can see this in Emma's character. She's climbing Mt. Everest, one of the most dangerous mountains on earth, and is even being coached by the ghost of her late husband.

I also wanted to parallel Didion's experience receiving the news that her husband had died as much as I could. I found the way she recalled the events extremely powerful without overdoing it.

“I opened the door [to the ambulance] and I see the man in the dress greens and I knew. I immediately knew... But I thought that if, as long as I didn’t let him in, he couldn’t tell me. And then it—none of that would’ve happened. So he kept saying, ‘Ma’am, I need to come in.’ And I kept telling him, ‘I’m sorry, but you can’t come in.’” (Didion 13)

When Emma receives the phone call from Everest Base Camp, she assumes it’s Patrick, but Henrietta, the tent’s operator, answers. When the person on the other line isn’t him, deep down she knows something went wrong. When Henrietta delivers the news, Emma freezes in the kitchen, denying the fact, even calling Henrietta a liar. This denial makes it that much harder to watch and to read.

Another tricky piece of this literary puzzle was splicing together a relationship between a husband and a wife, again trying my best to disguise my own inexperience on the subject. Fortunately, although subjective, societal perceptions on what make a marriage strong are generally the same. Between the married couples I interviewed, the commonalities that made up a “good marriage” were communication and compromise. In understanding these virtues as a basis for a strong relationship, I could bend them at my leisure to make for more than dramatic situations for my characters. In his article, “Successful Marriage,” marital therapist, James Gau, examines the relationship process in marriage and how it evolves, stating:

“At the center of every merged relationship is the urgent, even desperate desire for one’s spouse to meet one’s needs. Not meeting them could be interpreted as abandonment or rejection [...] The requirement that the spouse change sets up a hostile environment and the pressured spouse will distance, resist, and retaliate in order to survive.” (Gau p7-8)

Referencing Emma's first flashback once more, I believe I accomplish establishing a rift in their relationship by having her and Patrick conflict with each other's ideals. She wants a successful family, with her husband present, and he desires to live life the way he has always believed, with his heart beating out of his chest. This distances Emma from mountain life, making it all the more interesting when she decides to abandon her children to climb one.

Despite giving Emma and Patrick a rocky road to start off with, I wanted to produce glimpses into the successful aspects of their marriage as well to motivate her actions of leaving home. I attempted this by giving Emma the sight of Patrick's "ghost," and giving the audience other flashbacks throughout the story. Patrick's "ghost" represents how emotionally broken Emma has become and how her subconscious perceives him, often displaying his personality as supportive or knowledgeable, the qualities that make her love him. We also see a flashback that supports this notion, a scene with Emma, Patrick, and their children, all together for the first time in the film, having a great moment. These are the thoughts and memories that keep her going, and the higher she gets up the mountain the less they are prone to occur as a result of her utter misery.

This is true, with the exception of Emma's last flashback, a controversial one among my peers and committee members. Just when Emma contemplates heading back down the mountain, before reaching Patrick's body, we see her flashback to the stillbirth of their first baby together. Most people who gave me comments on this screenplay weren't keen on this scene, or at the very least its placement, but I persistently stand with it and the role it serves. To me, this scene represents the pinnacle of solidifying their relationship over marriage and even over sharing other children together. In the moments after the doctor delivers the news, Patrick tells her, "We're going to get through this together, Emma. No matter what," representing their

solidarity, forever bonding the two. This realization is what allows Emma to toss her reasoning aside and continue on her mission.

For this one moment, I studied one film in particular, *Rabbit Hole*, from director John Cameron Mitchell, starring Nicole Kidman and Aaron Eckhart. The film explores the relationship between a husband and wife after the premature death of their son. It's been eight months since the accident that took his life, but Becca (Kidman) and Howie (Eckhart) are still reminded of their son's absence, whether it be pictures of him, his toys, or just others talking about their own children during their group therapy sessions. This harrowing story attempts to bring light to the afflictions that losing a child can have on a marriage and how differently some people might cope with that specific type of pain. Towards the end of the film Becca asks her mother, who had lost her son, Becca's brother, if the pain ever subsides. She says:

“No, I don't think it does. Not for me it hasn't. It's been going on for eleven years. It changes though...the weight of it, I guess. At some point it becomes bearable. It turns into something that you can crawl out from under, and carry around like a brick in your pocket. And you even forget it for a while, but then you reach in for whatever reason and there it is. “ (*Rabbit Hole*)

After this realization, it becomes apparent to Becca that nothing she can do will change the past, and she has to learn to continue living for the future. Howie, who Becca has kept at distance for the duration of the film, has an opportunity to cheat on her with another woman from their group therapy sessions, but doesn't, causing him to realize how deep his connection with his wife runs. The film concludes when they meet up and talk about their future's unknowns, saying that they're willing to face them together.

For my screenplay, I wanted Emma and Patrick's relationship to be a mirror of Becca and Howie's because of its honesty. Although, I don't explicitly show the turmoil their relationship suffered as a result of the loss of their baby, I wanted to make it the obvious reason why Emma endures the physical pain she's going through towards the end of the story. This bond that she shares with Patrick acts as her fuel reserves. Unlike the characters in *Rabbit Hole*, however, Emma has other children she abandons for the sake of her journey, creating additional stakes.

A major Hollywood trope that I couldn't avoid was adding a secondary male figure, which in turn would hold some sort of secret, simultaneously gaining the trust of the protagonist, and eventually betraying that trust. Obviously, this has been seen many times before in mainstream film, and I tried to think of alternative ways for the story to go and be exciting, but without Garrett's character the screenplay fell flat and lost a good portion of its charm. It became bleak and uninteresting to write (and I'm sure to read), but throwing a monkey wrench into the plot made for enjoyable character moments and gave me a practical avenue to relay essential climbing jargon to the audience without the technicality being too overbearing. Despite this, I told myself if I was going to input this sort of device in my screenplay it would have to serve more than just an obstacle for the protagonist.

In the first scene where Emma meets Garrett he tells her the details of her husband's accident, claiming the stories were told to him, but through the flashback shown it's implied that he took part in the same expedition and maybe even in his death. I kept reasonable doubt present, giving overt clues to which side of the coin Garrett might be on as the screenplay progressed. When asked why he's helping her, he resorts to lying by saying, "The attention, darlin'. Soon as you get down with his body there will be cameras waiting for you down here, all wondering the same thing: "How did she do it? That's when you point at me. The rest is history. 'Müller's



Mountain Adventures' takes off". Garrett constructs this façade to mask his guilt and his reasoning on why he feels he has to assist her, even though he knows he wasn't responsible for Patrick's death. His journey with Emma makes him somewhat forget this shame and he begins to sincerely care for her. I wanted them to end up together, but knew it wouldn't be right for the story in the end. I take solace in that, if done correctly, Garret's perspective of the whole ordeal could deliver a brand new film on its own.

One of the last, but certainly not least important, considerations I had going into the writing process were the roles mothers and fathers play in family dynamics, and what the effect of their absence might have on their children. How might fathers leaving their family influence the dynamics of their family? Early on, during the funeral scene, we see Julianne, Patrick's mother, give Emma a piece of advice concerning the death of her son. She tells her:

"I never forgave Peter for deserting me, for leaving the burden of parenthood on my shoulders. I suppose I wasn't the best mother because of it. I'd be lying if I said it was easy, but you have to try and get on with your life after today [...] For your children."

She cites her own husband's death in the construction of how her family turned out, asking Emma to follow a different path. However, just a few pages later Emma reveals that her father was killed in the war overseas, surely impacting the way she was brought up. In his essay, "Time Does Not Heal All Wounds: Mortality Following the Death of a Parent." Mikael Rostila states:

"Studies have found that parental attachment is very strong during young age. Accordingly, the death of a parent is especially disruptive and difficult among minor children. Attachment theories have suggested that the child has a need for a secure relationship with adult caregivers, without which normal social and

emotional development will not occur. Thus, attachment loss as a result of parental death gives rise to emotional and behavioral problems, separation stress, and psychiatric disorder.” (Rostila 237 p6)

When she sees Patrick on the news and is in fact dead, it clicks that her children are going to go through what she did as a child, prompting her to melt down in her mother’s living room. This also serves as a foundation from which she builds her idea of recovering his body.

In my own particular family, before my father retired from his construction job, he would be gone for sixth months at a time. This routine lasted until I was in college and while I recognize that my father’s constant absence is not the same as having him dead, it still had a profound impact on my life. My mother raised me by herself for half a year, every year until I was nineteen or so, and today I find that our car rides are filled with conversation, while truck rides with my father are similar to going to the movies with not much talking.

This relationship had me wonder what the children of the story might be feeling. Andrew, the eldest child, presents his anxiety on his father’s trip within the first few pages, asking Emma if Patrick is going to die. He presents a situation that could very well happen, but Emma remains confident that Patrick will be okay, eventually betraying the trust of her child. This dishonesty results with a breach of trust in their relationship that truly never gets resolved. I chose to keep this aspect of the screenplay open ended because I feel the character’s lives aren’t confined to the screenplay. A relationship like theirs takes time to mend and grow. Their daughter, Ronnie, however, acts as the family’s force of innocence. Much like my younger self, she’s aware of the situation at hand, but doesn’t have the emotional maturity to fully gauge the scope. Like Emma, she’ll grow up without a father, likely contributing to attachment issues.

After much contemplation I found myself leaning towards a grim ending. I knew the story needed to have stakes, but was unsure about Emma dying on the mountain. My goal wasn't to orphan Emma's children completely, but for the story to have the impact of a Shakespearean play I had no choice. Despite the difficulty in the decision to have my protagonist perish along with her husband, I found the conclusion to be slightly romantic, yet heartbreaking. On one hand we see Garrett reunite with his family after a newfound appreciation for them, but we also see Emma's children and are left to wonder about their future. Emma's final monologue acts as my best attempt to redeem her character from her incredible selfishness, but that decision is ultimately up to the audience.

Through developing this narrative I reminded myself why I initially fell in love with writing. Spending an abundance of time delving into the minds of different characters, learning the ins and outs of unfamiliar mediums, and reflecting on my personal life through the work are features of what makes my writing fulfilling for me. However, through the process I've learned that it is only after the research that I am able to write about the things I choose. I'm sure my middle and high school teachers would be pleased to know that I wrote what I knew.

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## APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

IN HIS WAKE

Written by

Joseph Balderas

FADE IN:

INT. SKARSGARD RES. - BEDROOM - DAY

The early morning sun snakes its way through the window curtains, revealing a sleeping woman. She's thirtyish and good-looking, in an oversized shirt draped over underwear. This is EMMA SKARSGARD.

Her phone alarm SHOOTs on, interrupting cozy bliss. Her hand emerges from the nestled blankets, reaching for her husband, but meets only cold pillows, she remembers...

She frantically checks for any phone alerts and finds an unread email. Attached, a photo of a man adorned in mountain climbing gear, kneeling on Everest's peak. "We made it".

EMMA

Yes!

She tussles with the blankets in excitement.

INT. SKARSGARD RES. - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Emma stretches sleeping muscles as she walks on squeaky floorboards. She ducks her head into-

INT. SKARSGARD RES. - CHILDREN'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

ANDREW (10) and RONNIE (6) Skarsgard lay asleep in their respective beds. Emma tip-toes in, careful to avoid the Barbie dolls and G.I Joe's on the floor.

EMMA

(sotto)

Hey, guys. Wake up.

ANDREW

It's the weekend.

Andrew shifts, burying his face in the pillow.

EMMA

I have a surprise.

Ronnie rubs her eyes awake.

RONNIE

Surprise? For my birthday?

ANDREW  
Your birthday is a month from now,  
idiot.

EMMA  
Be nice.

Ronnie sticks her tongue out to Andrew, who still drowns in his pillow.

EMMA (CONT'D)  
(to Ronnie)  
No, but this is sort of an early  
birthday gift.

Emma tries her best to keep her smile hidden.

RONNIE  
What is it?

EMMA  
Daddy made it to the top of his  
mountain. He's coming home.

Andrew lifts his head and looks at Emma. His lip starts to tremble, and tears begin to well up. Emma embraces him.

EMMA (CONT'D)  
Aw, baby, why are you crying?

ANDREW  
I just thought he was going to die.  
The kids at school said-

EMMA  
You never believed that, did you?  
He would never let that happen.

ANDREW  
Promise?

EMMA  
Of course. He'll be back in no  
time.

She glances at the comic book posters tacked to Andrew's side of the room.

EMMA (CONT'D)  
Your dad is a super hero.

RONNIE  
Like Superman?



EMMA  
Like Superman.

INT. SKARSGARD RES. - KITCHEN - DAY

Breakfast sizzles as the kids watch cartoons in the living room.

EMMA  
Ready!

The kids come and sit at the kitchen bar. Emma serves them bacon, eggs, and a puffy pile of pancakes.

ANDREW  
When do you think dad will take me climbing?

EMMA  
Good luck with that. He won't even let me go with him.

Emma sips her coffee.

ANDREW  
Well, that's because you're a girl.

EMMA  
Hey, hey. None of that. Besides, we all know girls are WAY better than boys.  
(to Ronnie)  
Right, girlfriend?

Emma goes for a high-five, but Ronnie just picks at her food.

EMMA (CONT'D)  
What's wrong, sweetheart? You should eat.

RONNIE  
Daddy said he would call.

EMMA  
He will.

She walks over to a map labeled, "MT. EVEREST" on the pantry. It spans from the top of the door to the doorknob, detailing different camps and landmarks. Its worn surface and torn edges tells us its been there for awhile.

EMMA (CONT'D)  
See, he was up here.

She tiptoes and reaches for the peak. Her finger slides all the way down to a marker labeled, "BASE CAMP".

EMMA (CONT'D)

Once he gets aaaaall the way down here he'll be able to call us. He's probably still going down.

RONNIE

I want to be the first to talk to him.

ANDREW

No, me!

EMMA

We will all talk to him at the same time. I'm sure he misses all of us.

INT. SKARSGARD RES. - KITCHEN - LATER

The kitchen looks like a war zone between breakfast ingredients and dishes.

As she tackles the cleaning job her phone rings. Too excited to dry her hands, she puts the phone to her ear with her shoulder.

EMMA

Patrick?

HENRIETTA (FROM PHONE)

Emma. Listen.

EMMA

I can barely hear you.

HENRIETTA (FROM PHONE)

This is Henrietta.

(beat)

I'm sorry, Emma. I don't know how to say this, so I'll just come right out with it. He didn't make the descent. Patrick is gone.

She puts down the dish and switches hands.

EMMA

I don't understand.

HENRIETTA (FROM PHONE)

The team had some complications coming down.

(MORE)

HENRIETTA (FROM PHONE) (CONT'D)  
(voice trembles)  
Patrick just collapsed. A storm was  
about to hit, they had no choice  
but to leave him.

EMMA  
God, please.

HENRIETTA (FROM PHONE)  
I'm sorry, Emma.

EMMA  
No...

Tears weigh heavy on her eyelids.

Andrew brings back a dirty dish and takes one look at her.

ANDREW  
What's wrong?

Emma composes herself.

EMMA  
Nothing, go watch TV.

We hear nothing but silence.

She takes the dirty glass from him and turns toward the sink.  
Tears begin to fall. She wraps her hands around her mouth to  
muffle any noises that try to escape and sinks towards the  
floor.

CUT TO:

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

A modest group of people gather for the funeral ceremony.  
Emma sits between Ronnie and Andrew.

Patrick's portrait sits at the head of his coffin. He has  
kind eyes and a charming smile.

FATHER CORTEZ stands toward the front of the group, reading  
from his bible.

FATHER CORTEZ  
"God is our refuge and strength, an  
ever-present help in trouble."  
(MORE)

FATHER CORTEZ (CONT'D)

Therefore we will not fear, though  
the earth give way and the  
mountains fall into the heart of  
the sea, though its waters roar and  
foam and the mountains quake with  
their surging. And the peace of  
God, which transcends all  
understanding, with guard your  
heart and your minds in Christ  
Jesus."

The congregation say, "Amen" and cross their hearts. Father Cortez approaches the casket, puts his palm on its glossy wood, and says a prayer silently to himself. He opens the front half of the casket, revealing the empty padded interior.

FATHER CORTEZ (CONT'D)

I know a few of you mentioned you  
might want to put something in the  
casket before the burial?

A line forms but Emma stays frozen. Andrew explodes off his chair, making a break for the parking lot. She reacts, but a firm hand plants itself on her shoulder. It's her sister, ANNA SANTIAGO, a woman in her late-twenties. Her makeup is running, but her smile offers some comfort.

FRANCES

I got him.

EMMA

Thanks, Anne.

Emma watches as loved ones and even strangers place precious knick-knacks inside the casket. CD's, a fishing reel, a war coin, and even an ice axe makeup a few items in the pile.

Patrick's mother, JULIANNE SKARSGARD, fifty-something, and tenacious approaches and takes Andrew's spot beside her. We can't see her eyes behind bug-framed sunglasses.

JULIANNE

Must be difficult for Andy.

She looks at Ronnie who is snoozing on Emma's shoulder.

JULIANNE (CONT'D)

For both of them.

(beat)

God knows I'm struggling to keep it  
together.

EMMA

It's okay to lose it. A parent shouldn't bury their child.

JULIANNE

Somehow I always knew I would.

Emma looks at her, slightly confused. Julianne dabs her eyes with a tissue.

JULIANNE (CONT'D)

Like his father, Patrick was a fool for the rush. Whether it be scaling mountains or women. I suppose that's why he married young.

She looks over to an adjacent grave. "Peter Skarsgard, Loving Father and Husband" is etched into the dark marble slab.

JULIANNE (CONT'D)

I never forgave Peter for deserting me, for leaving the burden of parenthood on my shoulders. I suppose I wasn't the best mother because of it. I'd be lying if I said it was easy, but you have to try and get on with your life after today.

(beat)

For your children.

EMMA

I can't fault him for doing what he loved, but I can take issue for breaking his family.

JULIANNE

Don't be dramatic. It's a bad look. This will all work out.

Emma picks up Ronnie, and leaves Julianne staring at her son's casket.

EXT. CEMETERY - ACROSS WALKWAY - CONTINUOUS

A man, mid-thirties, dressed in black, watches the funeral from afar. He's looks unkept and rugged. The kind of guy you'd see at a hunter's expo.

He tries to drown his grief with a sloppy swig of his flask.

CUT TO:

EXT. SANTIAGO RES. - LATER

An old wooden home rests at the end of a cul-de-sac. Cars overflow the driveway and the curb along the front. We hear dogs barking and children playing.

INT. SANTIAGO RES. - DAY - LIVING ROOM

Different people cling to their familiar groups reminiscing. Anne does her best playing hostess, offering cheap hors d'oeuvres to her guests.

We hear different conversations...

DAVID

Yeah, Kilimanjaro. I was on my last leg of O2, and Pat muscled me to the top. Never let me live it down.

Then another.

EDDIE

He was pissed. Punched me in the face, and broke my nose.

He reenacts the hit and laughs.

EDDIE (CONT'D)

At least he covered the doctor's bill.

Then another.

GEORGIA

Oh, so that's how he chipped his tooth?

NICK

Yep, beer bottle.

INT. SANTIAGO RES. - LIVING ROOM - LATER

While people chat, the kids watch T.V, and Emma watches them from the couch. She wishes she could share their innocence.

INT. SKARSGARD RES. - LIVING ROOM - VISION

Emma still sits on the same couch, however the room has changed. She sees Patrick lying on the floor with Andrew and Ronnie, all engaged with the TV. Patrick looks at her and flashes his smile. She doesn't want to leave.

INT. SKARSGARD RES. - LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Anne sits next Emma, placing a full tray of snacks on the coffee table.

ANNE  
I hope people realize I'm paying  
student loans.

Emma nods.

EMMA  
It's fine. Thank you again for  
doing this.

Anne kisses her cheek.

ANNE  
Anytime, and anything you need.

EMMA  
I know.

Patrons begin to exit, paying respects to Emma, but she will never remember their faces.

ANDREW  
(to Ronnie)  
Change it, I don't want to watch  
this baby stuff.

Andrew snatches the remote, and flips the channels.

RONNIE  
Mom!

Julianne hears the ruckus, and comes over to quiet them down.

Emma sees a local news station among the channel flipping. She sits up, letting her mother's hand go.

EMMA  
Andrew! Stop.

ANDREW  
Okay, I was just-

EMMA  
No, I mean go back to the channel  
you were just on.

He flips backward.

EMMA (CONT'D)

Keep going.

He lands on the local news.

EMMA (CONT'D)

There.

We see a images of Patrick plastered on the screen.

NEWS REPORTER (FROM TV)

Patrick Skarsgard was a skilled climber, having some of the most difficult mountains in the world under his belt. Words like brave and daring are typically used to describe adventurers, but I think that it's fair to say those are understatements for the people of Durango, Colorado.

Emma feels her eyes swell.

NEWS REPORTER (CONT'D)

Let's join one of our reporters Samantha Ybarra down in Durango.

The camera cuts to downtown Durango, where a number of people are gathered, some carrying signs, others tissues. Samantha holds a microphone to her mouth.

SAMANTHA (FROM TV)

Yes, Stephen, I'm here with about one hundred Durango locals.

Some of them wave in the background.

SAMANTHA (CONT'D)

As you can see, Patrick Skarsgard has become something of a legend here.

Emma turns to Julianne.

EMMA

(to Julianne)

Did you know about this?

JULIANNE

I knew they were going to have a vigil downtown, but I didn't know there would be this much commotion.



EMMA

They're making this into a  
publicity thing.

RONNIE

Are those people there because  
Daddy died?

Julianne picks her up.

JULIANNE

Because your daddy is a hero.

On screen, Samantha holds the microphone to an elderly man.

CARL (FROM TV)

An exceptional young man with  
exceptional drive. He made the  
people of this town proud. Now, his  
preserved body is a monument on  
that mountain, representing the  
people of Durango. Today, we stand  
unified in remembrance of him.

Samantha begins to pull the microphone away.

CARL (CONT'D)

My prayers to his family,  
especially his wife and kids. God  
bless'em.

SAMANTHA (FROM TV)

There you have it. Unified, these  
people stand with Patrick Skarsgard  
and the feat he desperately wanted  
to accomplish. Back to you,  
Stephen.

The camera cuts back to the studio.

NEWS REPORTER

And so do we, Samantha.

A 3D graphic of Mt. Everest appears on the screen,  
highlighting a path up to the top. It stops just before the  
mountain's peak, marking the destination with a red "X".

NEWS REPORTER (CONT'D)

Everest Base Camp Operations  
reports that his body is placed in  
such a position that he will  
actually aid climbers finding their  
way upward, right before the  
mountain's peak.

(MORE)

NEWS REPORTER (CONT'D)  
Once they pass his body, they will know they're headed in the right direction to climb the greatest mountain in the world. Even in death, Patrick finds a way to give back.

The New's outro chimes.

Emma's eyes are wide.

EMMA  
They're using him as a red flag?

She turns to her family, surprised by the lack of uproar.

EMMA (CONT'D)  
That old man called him a monument!

ANNE  
Em, he's helping other-

EMMA  
You think dad would've wanted to be abandoned out in the desert, blood stained skin and all?  
(sarcastic)  
Thank God the U.S Army has enough decency to send their soldiers home.

JULIANNE  
What did you think was going to happen, Emma? We buried a box full of crap in his place for Christ sake.

Emma starts to tear up.

EMMA  
I don't know. That the someone would eventually bring him home?

She stares at the blank faces of her family.

EMMA (CONT'D)  
We can hire someone. We can do something. He's up there all alone.

JULIANNE  
He's dead! Don't talk about my son like he's alive.

Anne grabs Emma's hand

ANNE

Em, the kids.

Ronnie and Andrew stare, tears running down their faces.

EMMA

He was your son, Julie! My husband!  
A god damn person, left to rot like  
road kill on the side of a tourist  
attraction.

ANNE

Calm down. It's going to be okay.

EMMA

No, it isn't, Anna! You don't  
understand.

Emma looks at her children.

EMMA (CONT'D)

I can't do this by myself!

Guests can't do anything but stare and Emma disappears into  
her sister's arms.

FADE TO:

INT. HOTEL THAMEL - ROOM - DAY

**ONE YEAR LATER...**

A phone is plopped on a dingy bed, set to speaker phone. We  
hear sounds of packing and movement in the room. The  
wallpaper tells us we're in a run-down motel.

ANDREW (FROM PHONE)

So, turns out it was the neighbor's  
dog. He had been the one eating all  
of grandma's tomatoes.

EMMA (O.S.)

Uh-huh. That dog has always been a  
handful. He likes it when you give  
him grandma's cookies too.

JULIANNE (FROM PHONE)

No, don't listen to your mother!

ANDREW (FROM PHONE)

Mom, tell Grandma that if I get all  
A's I can get a new video game for  
my Xbox, please!

Emma steps into the light. She looks more athletic, and has darker hair. She starts packing a day bag.

EMMA

Grandma knows best. She'll get you something, but it'll be up to her, got it, bud?

ANDREW (FROM PHONE)

Okaaaay. Ronnie wants to talk to you.

RONNIE (FROM PHONE)

Mommy, how long til you come home?

EMMA

I don't know, baby. Mommy still has a lot of work to do.

RONNIE (FROM PHONE)

Me, and Andy, and grandma can help.

EMMA

You know how hard mommy's job is, right?

RONNIE (FROM PHONE)

Yeah, but-

EMMA

Plus, you'd be very bored here.

Emma looks at the old TV. It plays a foreign movie.

EMMA (CONT'D)

There's not even a working TV in my room.

RONNIE (FROM PHONE)

Why not?

EMMA

Detroit is a boring place, sweet heart. Not much to do, but boring old work.

RONNIE (FROM PHONE)

How about my birthday?

EMMA

I promise I'll bring you all the presents you want, if you're good, okay?

RONNIE (FROM PHONE)  
But I want you here!

EMMA  
I'll try my best, baby. Can't  
promise anything right now.

Emma hear the phone break up.

EMMA (CONT'D)  
Ronnie?

JULIANNE (FROM PHONE)  
She just gave the phone back.

Emma takes her phone off speaker and puts it to her ear.

JULIANNE (CONT'D)  
She's really wants you here, at  
least for her birthday. It was hard  
enough without her dad last year.

EMMA  
I know.

JULIANNE  
You have to prioritize Emma.

EMMA  
I can't just leave. I could lose my  
job. I need at least a few more  
weeks.

Emma checks under her mattress, and takes out an exceptional  
wad of money hidden under there.

She counts it. 100,200,300,400..

JULIANNE (FROM PHONE)  
Okay, okay, I understand. Just know  
your family misses you.

EMMA  
Put me on speaker please.  
(beat)  
You both be good. I want to hear  
grandma say some wonderful things  
next time I call, okay?

RONNIE/ANDREW (FROM PHONE)  
Okay.

EMMA  
I love you.

RONNIE/ANDREW (FROM PHONE)

Love you.

EMMA

Thanks, Julie.

She hangs up the phone quickly.

Emma wants to cry, but she bottles it in. She grabs a water from her bag and cracks it open.

She gets up, walks over to the curtains, and swings them open to reveal...

**KATHMANDU, NEPAL.**

Cramped buildings accompany claustrophobic streets. Emma cracks the window and is greeted with the city's sights, sounds, and even some smells from the bustle. She takes a gulp of her water and we-

CUT TO:

EXT. KATHMANDU MARKET - DAY

The sun pours down on the vibrant Nepalese market. The buzz from motorcycles weaving in and out of traffic overpowers street chatter. We see locals mainly but can spot the tourists easily. They wear climbing packs and bright colored parkas.

Emma makes her way through street vendors and preoccupied commuters.

JACKAL (V.O.)

You've got some balls on you,  
woman.

CUT TO:

INT. TAPAS BAR - DAY

The bar is dimly lit with only a few patrons. Emma sits across from a man who's not a day younger than sixty. There's something inherently shady about this character, whether it be one of his golden teeth, missing fingers, or his drunken slur. We'll call him JACKAL.

JACKAL  
Have got to hand it to you though.  
Not many women would or could do  
what you're doing. Got to hand it  
to you.

She stares at him, irritated.

JACKAL (CONT'D)  
All right, all right. All work, no  
play.

He places a stained manila folder containing documents on the  
table.

JACKAL (CONT'D)  
Still don't feel right giving you  
the goods. Seen a lot of people  
die, and you don't look like the  
surviving kind, sorry to say. Very  
sorry to say.

EMMA  
I've got your money, now give me  
what we agreed upon.

JACKAL  
Okay, okay. Calm your tits, woman.  
Sheesh. Can't have a decent  
conversation with anyone anymore.

He slides over the folder.

JACKAL (CONT'D)  
All set as far as legality is  
concerned. But you get caught,  
you've never heard of me, yeah?

She counts the wad of twenties and throws it to him. At least  
five thousand.

EMMA  
It's all there.

JACKAL  
Much obliged.

She starts to get up, but he grabs her arm.

JACKAL (CONT'D)  
Not too late to pack your bags,  
sweetheart. Little thing like you  
doesn't belong up there.

Emma pulls her arm free and leaves.

Jackal laughs to himself as he counts his money.

CUT TO:

INT. NEST ADVENTURE AGENCY - DAY

Emma enters a modern office and looks around. She marvels at all of the expedition photos hanging from the wall. The majority of climbers in them sport American flags, but there are a few others, such as England, Australia, Japan, etc.

A twenty-something year old man, appears from the back office. He's handsome and athletic.

NEST GUIDE

Hello! English?

Emma nods.

NEST GUIDE (CONT'D)

Welcome. You looking for a guide up Everest?

EMMA

In the market.

NEST GUIDE

American? Sweet. We have some options for next year's-

EMMA

No, I need to get up there this month.

NEST GUIDE

That's a no go. Since safety regulations constitute- wait, do I know you?

EMMA

Don't think so. Never been here.

NEST GUIDE

No, I know you.

He runs to the back of his desk, and pulls out a sheet of paper.

NEST GUIDE (CONT'D)

Emma? Emma Skarsgard. That's you, right?



He points to a corked panel with a few xeroxed photographs of various driver's licenses tacked to it.

NEST GUIDE (CONT'D)

Anyone who gets their permit request flagged by the Nepalese government gets put up there.

EMMA

Can you get me a guide or not?

He gives her a patronizing look.

EMMA (CONT'D)

I'll pay double your asking price to get me to the Hillary Step. Not even the summit.

NEST GUIDE

Can't, even if I wanted to. You're in what we call "the no fly zone". Besides, it's a little late in the year to acclimatize before the weather window closes.

EMMA

I don't need a damn coach, just the man power.

NEST GUIDE

I was actually instructed to call the cops if you came in, but if you just maybe wanna hang out later, I can forget you came in here.

Emma turns around and leaves.

NEST GUIDE (CONT'D)

Awh, c'mon, I was joking!

(sotto)

Bitch.

He pulls a phone from under the desk and dials.

NEST GUIDE (CONT'D)

Yeah, boss? I have a cork boarder.

CUT TO:

EXT. KATHMANDU TEAHOUSE - PATIO - DAY

A man, the same one we saw at the funeral, sits at an umbrella'd table outside the teahouse, across the street.

His hair is shorter, beard trimmed, but he still has the same piercing gaze.

He watches as a flustered Emma makes her way to a neighboring climbing agency, sipping his tea.

CUT TO:

INT. EVEREST SUMMITS GUIDING CO. - DAY

Emma walks in, almost caught off guard by the awful smell of the place. She notices a ceiling leak, the unkept documents on the desk, the outdated decorations.

A squirrely Australian man appears from below the desk, startling Emma.

SUMMITS GUIDE

Oi, welcome. How can I be of service?

PATRICK (O.S.)

You sure about this one, Em?

Emma looks to her left and sees Patrick sitting comfortably on a rusted chair in his full mountaineering garb.

She's not surprised and tries to ignore him.

EMMA

I think I might be lost actually.

SUMMITS GUIDE

Can't you read?

He points to the half-torn sign behind him.

SUMMITS GUIDE (CONT'D)

"Summits Guiding Corporation". You looking for an affordable guide?

EMMA

Any guide really. I need to be up there this month.

The guide shuffles papers around on the desk, looking for the calendar. He laughs nervously.

SUMMITS GUIDE

We can make that happen, at an extra charge of course.

EMMA

Not a problem.

SUMMITS GUIDE

Perfect! Before we start any of the paper work, by regulation I have to ask you these three questions.

EMMA

Okay.

SUMMITS GUIDE

Number one: Do you have a climbing permit?

EMMA

Yes.

She takes out the laminated paper and hands it over.

The guide looks at it and back at her.

SUMMITS GUIDE

We can make this work. Number two: Do you have professional climbing experience? Any previous major climbs?

EMMA

No.

SUMMITS GUIDE

Yes, you do.

He winks at her.

Patrick shrugs his shoulders and smiles. "What can I say?"

EMMA

Okay.

SUMMITS GUIDE

Number three: Are you single?

Emma is taken off guard, and looks toward Patrick.

He's no longer there.

EMMA

What?

SUMMITS GUIDE

I'm just joshin'. Not every day a beautiful woman wants to solo.

(MORE)

SUMMITS GUIDE (CONT'D)  
Usually some husband of the year  
type wants to drag the missus up.  
It's refreshing.

He takes out a stack of papers, laughing.

SUMMITS GUIDE (CONT'D)  
Let's get you signing, yeah?

Hesitant, Emma moves closer to the desk, but the bell at the door interrupts. The man from the tea shop steps in with heavy boots. We know him as GARRETT.

He looks around the office, lifting up an oxygen tank that appears thirty years old, judging by the rust accumulating on the valves.

GARRETT  
These regulation?

His southern drawl falls out of his mouth, slow as molasses.

SUMMITS GUIDE  
Be right with you, mate. I'm in the  
middle of some paper work with the  
lady.

GARRETT  
Take your time.

Emma begins looking over the documents.

SUMMITS GUIDE  
You'll want to sign there, and  
there. You don't need to read it  
all. Just a bunch of legal jargon  
that no one really pays attention  
to. Were you gonna rent gear or?

EMMA  
Actually-

GARRETT  
Do you guys operate on a closed or  
open O2 system?

SUMMITS GUIDE  
Excuse me?

GARRETT  
Closed or open oxygen? Just  
curious.

SUMMITS GUIDE

Erhm. Open, I suppose.

GARRETT

You suppose? Huh, a bit dangerous, considering she hasn't climbed before, don't you think?

EMMA

What makes you think I haven't climbed before?

GARRETT

You wouldn't be in a dump like this if you knew what you were doing. Name's Garrett.

SUMMITS GUIDE

I'd appreciate you leaving about now. I don't need you harassing customers.

(to Emma)

Don't listen to this loon.

GARRETT

She won't be a customer if she's smart.

EMMA

I can take care of myself, thanks.

GARRETT

Look, I know you're desperate, but this guy will get you killed. I seen you scurrying from agency to agency, and this place is probably the only one who will take you, right?

EMMA

Have you been following me?

GARRETT

Just observing, ma'am. You are way in over your head here. You need someone who knows what they're doing.

EMMA

Oh, and I expect you do? A random stranger who picks up his customers in other people's shops?

(to Summits Guide)

So here?

GARRETT  
I can help you bring your husband  
down.

Emma's pen freezes.

EMMA  
What?

Garrett begins to exit.

GARRETT  
Join me for some tea, we can talk  
it over.

Emma bits her lip.

SUMMITS GUIDE  
You're not seriously considering  
going with him, love?

GARRETT  
Better hurry before your friends  
find you.

Emma looks out the window and a couple of Nepalese police men  
are making their rounds questioning people with her picture.

EMMA  
(to guide)  
I've got to go.

SUMMITS GUIDE  
Shit.

CUT TO:

EXT. KATHMANDU TEAHOUSE - PATIO - DAY

Emma and Garrett sit at the table we saw earlier. He places  
his feet on a neighboring stool, while she crosses her arms  
and legs. She puffs up her scarf to hide her face from  
onlookers.

GARRETT  
As you know, the name's Garrett.  
Garrett Müller.

Emma gives him a skeptical look.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Lots of Germans in Texas.

He lights a cigarette.

EMMA

Joan.

GARRETT

What?

EMMA

My name.

GARRETT

Joan?

Garrett starts to laugh.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

What, you think you're some sorta spy? People are talking like crazy about you, Emma.

EMMA

About what?

GARRETT

About your plan. "Stay away from Emma Skarsgard," they say. Grieving widow applies for an Everest permit just three months after her husband dies. People raise eyebrows.

(beat)

So, tell me. What's your plan when you reach the body?

EMMA

Excuse me?

GARRETT

That's why you're here ain't it? Bring him down and take him home? I suppose you wanted to round up a couple of fellas, and have them muscle him down, huh? You know where he is right?

EMMA

Hillary Step.

GARRETT

Then you know how difficult it will be.

The world around them starts to crumble, revealing...

EXT. HILLARY STEP BASE - MOUNTAINSIDE - DAY

Emma and Garrett still sit at their tea shop table, but transported to a frozen hell twenty-some thousand feet above sea-level. The wind hisses, throwing snow violently in every direction.

The storm cloaks the majority of their surroundings, but Garrett spots a group of climbers descending a lip on the mountainside.

GARRETT

His group was descending the step,  
when the nose of a monsoon hit 'em.

The climbers lose their bearings one by one, and call out to each other, their raspy screams obscured by the howling wind.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Your husband fell in a shallow  
crevice.

One of the climbers falls to his knees, and rolls over into a thick gsp of ice.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Others got lost. Every man for  
himself.

One of the group members approaches Patrick. He attempts to pick him out of the crack to no avail.

CLIMBER

Pat, we can't give up!

Patrick brings the climber closer and tells him something. The climber gets back up, and starts to descend, passing the teashop table. Garrett looks into the reflective mask, almost ashamed.

GARRETT

Some of them succumbed to the cold,  
and the others made it down with a  
story.

EMMA

How do you know so much?

GARRETT

The news spread like wildfire.



EXT. KATHMANDU TEAHOUSE - PATIO - CONTINUOUS

We come back to reality at the patio.

GARRETT

You must've known nobody would've done it. They would've just turned around and had the police waiting for you when you got back. If you got back.

(laughs)

You made it this far, I guess.

EMMA

I could do it myself.

GARRETT

Sure, ya can, but then end up like him. A chunk of ice glued to the mountainside. You're lucky I found you before you did something stupid.

EMMA

And what makes you so interested in this?

GARRETT

What do you mean? I heard about what happened last year, and now I see you here trying to get yourself killed. I have no choice, I got to.

EMMA

I mean, what's in it for you?

Beat.

GARRETT

The attention, darlin'.

Emma appears puzzled.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Soon as you get down with his body there will be cameras waiting for you down here, all wondering the same thing: "How did she do it?" That's when you point at me. The rest is history. "Müller's Mountaintop Adventures" takes off, and everyone's happy at the end of the day.

EMMA  
You're kidding, right? I'm a  
publicity stunt now?

He becomes frustrated.

GARRETT  
What choice do you got? No one will  
take you. No one qualified that is.

Emma is slightly taken aback.

EMMA  
And what are your qualifications?

Garrett sits upright.

GARRETT  
I've summited more mountains than  
half these bozos out here, on six  
continents mind you. I know the  
difference between an open and  
closed oxygen system for Christ  
sake. I know that you don't need a  
ton of climbing experience for a  
mountain like Everest, but you *do*  
need to know what you're doing. If  
you're serious about bringing him  
down, I'm your best bet.

Emma takes time to think about his offer.

EMMA  
How much do you want?

GARRETT  
Don't want your money.

EMMA  
I haven't met anyone here that does  
anything for free.

GARRETT  
Your story is all I need.

Emma disregards the comment.

EMMA  
So, what's first?

GARRETT  
Have you acclimatized before?

EMMA

I'm in the best shape I've ever  
been in-

GARRETT

Not good enough. If we want to make  
the weather window, we'll have to  
speed up the process.

EMMA

Whatever's necessary.

GARRETT

You're saying that now. Just wait  
til you're twenty thousand feet  
above sea level.

CUT TO:

INT. HOTEL THAMEL - ROOM

Emma throws her ruck onto the bed, and starts taking out its  
contents. Garrett watches, amused.

Multiple layers of clothing, different foods, O2 bottles,  
crampons, body harness, face mask, helmet, pack frame, etc.  
are all sprawled out onto the mattress. The gear is endless.

GARRETT

Nope.

He takes three pairs of socks off the bed and throws them to  
the floor.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Nope.

He throws around bags of assorted snacks.

EMMA

But-

GARRETT

Definitely nope.

He throws an Everest memoir further.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Every extra ounce of weight is  
going to feel like an extra pound  
on those shoulders of yours. We  
need to strip you of everything you  
definitely don't need.

EMMA  
What's in your pack?

GARRETT  
(laughing)  
Whiskey to keep me warm.

Garrett sifts through more stuff, tossing aside little items like extra toilet paper and floss.

He finds a picture of her kids. They're both in Halloween costumes, smiling with bags full of candy.

EMMA  
Don't-

He hands it to her.

GARRETT  
No, you're going to need this.

He produces a picture out of the baseball cap he's wearing; a girl about thirteen.

EMMA  
She's beautiful.

GARRETT  
She's gotten me back safe every time. I just do the heavy lifting.

He chuckles as he gets back to sorting.

EMMA  
Is she with her mom?

GARRETT  
They both moved to Florida after we separated.

EMMA  
I'm sorry, didn't mean to pry.

He grabs a tattered leather-bound notebook, lifting it to her.

GARRETT  
What's this?

EMMA  
(laughing)  
I guess my medicine.

Beat.

GARRETT

What?

EMMA

My doctor back home thought it would be good to journal my anxiety instead of taking meds. She says it would be therapeutic for me.

GARRETT

Not working?

EMMA

I'm here. What do you think?

Garrett takes a second of contemplation, and sticks it back in her backpack. Back to sorting.

GARRETT

Doesn't hurt.

He starts to search under the bed.

EMMA

Uh, what are you looking for?

GARRETT

That's all the O2 ya have?

EMMA

I thought twelve bottles should be enough.

GARRETT

Not for you, mama. You need at least double to be safe.

EMMA

You're shitting me. That cost me like five grand.

GARRETT

I'll spot you the bottles, and a sherpa to mule it up.

EMMA

I don't need the charity.

Emma reaches underneath the mattress and takes out the wad of money from before.

GARRETT

Woah, all right, Escobar.

She counts and gives him a handful of hundreds.

EMMA

I can pay my way.

GARRETT

All right then.

Garrett heads toward the door.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

We head for Base Camp tomorrow,  
before the rooster crows.

He exits, shutting the door behind him.

She collapses on the bed on top of all the gear and stares at the ceiling.

CUT TO:

INT. SKARSGARD RES. - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Patrick has three heavy duffle bags gathered by the front door. He looks through them, checking off the mandatory materials in his head.

Emma looks at him, curled up on the couch. Her eyes are swollen and nose is red.

PATRICK

We'll fix this when I get back. We can do that second honeymoon you're always going on about.

EMMA

IF you get back, right? Annie was telling me that one in twenty people don't come back from Everest. One in twenty, Patrick. That could be you, and then what? What the hell am I supposed to do if you don't come back?

PATRICK

For fuck sake, Emma. Why are you trying to ruin this for me? You know how much this means to me, don't you?

END FLASHBACK

CUT TO:

INT. HOTEL THAMEL - ROOM - NIGHT

Emma lays on her bed, writing in the journal from before. It looks like the book is full three-fourths of the way.

INT. HOTEL THAMEL - ROOM - BATHROOM - LATER

**MONTAGE**

Emma spoils herself with a hot bath, the last one she'll have for a couple of weeks.

We grab a series of shots undressing, never revealing too much. Her hand tests the water, it's perfect. She stays until the water becomes room temperature.

Once she's done, she dries off and looks at herself in the mirror. She barely recognizes herself.

INT. HOTEL THAMEL - ROOM - LATER

Emma is face chatting via her phone with Ronnie and Andrew.

EMMA  
Morning, love bugs.

INTERCUT BETWEEN EMMA AND CHILDREN:

INT. SENIOR SKARSGARD RES.- DAY

Ronnie and Andrew lay on the sofa with a tablet in their hands. We see Emma from the chin up on the screen.

RONNIE  
Great morning, mommy.

EMMA  
Getting ready for school?

ANDREW  
There's no school on Saturdays.

Emma covers her mistake.

EMMA

I know, hon, I was just teasing.  
What do you all have planned with  
grandma today?

RONNIE

We're going to Aunt Annie's!

EMMA

Aunt Annie?! What's going on there?

RONNIE

Playing!

ANDREW

Grandma wants to play bingo with  
her friends, so she's handing us  
over.

EMMA

Well, I think grandma deserves it,  
don't you?

ANDREW

I guess.

RONNIE

Look what I made, mommy.

Ronnie pulls out a crayola art piece featuring herself, her  
brother, and Emma.

EMMA

Wow, that's awesome, Ron. That's so  
good.

(beat)

Where's daddy?

RONNIE

I didn't put him in.

EMMA

Why?

RONNIE

He's dead.

Emma looks toward her left and Patrick sits on the edge of  
the bed with his chin resting on his hands.

He smiles.



PATRICK  
(mouthing)  
It's okay.

She looks back towards the screen.

EMMA  
I know, but he's your father. He's  
still a part of the family.  
(eyes water)  
Listen, guys, I have to go to work  
soon. I just wanted to check in and  
make sure everything's okay.

RONNIE  
Don't cry, I'll add him in.

She begins to fiddle for her crayons.

EMMA  
Hold on, Ronnie, I have to go  
already. After today, I won't be  
able to call for a while.

ANDREW  
Why not?

EMMA  
Because my work is moving me to a  
place that doesn't have a very good  
signal.

RONNIE  
Signal?

EMMA  
Don't tell grandma, it's a secret.

ANDREW  
Why is it a secret?

She wants to get off the phone before she breaks down.

EMMA  
Because I said so. If you tell her,  
I won't bring you any presents!

RONNIE  
Don't tell!

She hits Andrew on the arm.

ANDREW  
Okay! Geeze.

Julianne steps into the room with the kids, Emma composes herself.

JULIANNE  
Don't tell what?

RONNIE  
Nothing, grandma. Mommy was just talking to us.

JULIANNE  
Is that right? Hey, Emma! How's work.

EMMA  
Work's work. Dropping the kids off at Anne's?

JULIANNE  
Yeah, the girls were going to come over. Hope that's okay?

EMMA  
Yeah, it's no problem.

Emma starts to tear up again, trying her best not to show it.

EMMA (CONT'D)  
I love you all very much, okay?  
Very much. Look after them, Julie.

Julianne suspects something is off.

JULIANNE  
I will.

RONNIE/ANDREW  
Love you, mom.

END INTERCUT:

Emma hangs up and tosses her phone aside as she buries her face in a pillow and sobs.

CUT TO:

EXT. HOTEL THAMEL - DAY

Emma waits, with all of her gear on her back, at the curb.

She watches local vendors navigate the darkness and set up for the morning. There's a certain beauty in their routines. Peaceful.

Garrett pulls up in a ratty jeep, a Nepalese man sitting uncomfortably in the back seat. This thing could break down any second.

GARRETT

Hop in!

Emma unclips her ruck and throws it in the back with Garret's new friend.

EMMA

How in the world? Did you buy this?

GARRETT

Rented the jeep and picked him up.  
His name is Kaiden.

EMMA

Is he certified?  
(to Kaiden)  
Are you certified?

GARRETT

(grins)  
Course he is! Doesn't speak a lick  
of English though. Guess that's why  
they were both discounted.

She gets in and Garret starts driving.

CUT TO:

INT. JEEP - NEPALESE COUNTRY - LATER

Garrett fiddles with the radio in vain. He sees Kaiden sleeping. Laughs.

GARRETT

Kaiden, sleeping on the job.

EMMA

It's too beautiful to sleep out  
here.

GARRETT

Beauty will get ya killed.

Beat.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Half the people climbing get stuck  
up on the top looking down at the  
view.

(MORE)

GARRETT (CONT'D)

By the time they're ready to leave  
their O2 is, boop--gone. Then  
they're in a world of trouble.

EMMA

Got it. Beauty equals death.

GARRETT

Mock all you want, lady.

EMMA

You know, it's hard to keep track  
of all these Texan proverbs.

GARRETT

I got a pen somewhere if you wanna  
jot them down.

Emma stares at him, admiring his smile. She sits there in  
silence for a couple of beats.

EMMA

Can I ask you something?

GARRETT

Yeah, sure.

EMMA

Why'd you and your wife split?

GARRETT

Same old cliché every other climber  
tells ya. I liked climbing  
mountains more than I liked  
climbing her.

Emma shoots him a look, like she can't believe what he just  
said.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

I wouldn't expect you to  
understand.

EMMA

And your little girl?

GARRETT

Nelly was the only thing keeping us  
together, but I guess it wasn't  
enough. We suffered every day.  
That's all it was. We both knew it  
was coming. We weren't bitter or  
nothing.

(beat)

(MORE)

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Funny thing is, she'd take me back if I just quit.

EMMA

Really?

GARRETT

Yeah, just can't find the will too. I like to imagine one day this sorta thing getting boring. When that day comes, I'll go to Florida, and beg my family to take me back. Maybe have a nice hot dinner. I can't see me doing that though, my wife let the monster out last time we saw each other.

EMMA

Often, Patrick and I were close to that point, but I don't know. I could never bring myself to leave him. We've been through so much together, and the kids--it was just hard.

(beat)

When he left us for the last time to come here, I hated him for it. I resented him, and...

(breaking down)

Just had a bad feeling about the whole thing. But when he died he was all I thought about, and even now his memory haunts me. I can't sleep, I can't eat; it's a cancer. Don't think I'm crazy, but I see him sometimes.

Emma looks in the rear view mirror. Patrick is asleep on Kaiden's shoulder.

GARRETT

I'm sorry you had to go through that, but believe me, it ain't easy leaving your family. Yet, as bad as it sounds, you forget about them when you're up there. It's just you and your ice axe, trucking up like a wild man, trying to survive. I think everyone willing to do this has that in them somewhere.

Emma tears up. Looks out the window, ashamed.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

What's wrong?

EMMA

I can't believe I promised him.

GARRETT

What do you mean?

EMMA

Before Patrick died, I promised my little boy his dad was coming home. It was a sure thing in my mind. You should've seen his face when I told him. Light of the world. After the news broke, he didn't talk to me for weeks. He still hardly does.

Garrett sinks in his seat.

EMMA (CONT'D)

You all might forget about your families, but all we look forward to is getting you back.

GARRETT

"Take care of family, take care of this and that." Whatever happened to taking care of yourself?

EMMA

Life. Responsibility.

GARRETT

Life is walking across a ladder to an unending drop. You'll feel alive after that trust me.

(beat)

You trained ladders before, haven't ya?

EMMA

I've seen Patrick do it a thousand times at our gym back home. Looks easy enough.

Garrett's eyes widen.

GARRETT

Jesus Christ, you were gonna go up without training on a ladder first? How stupid can you be?

EMMA

Hey, back off! I had a family to take care of. I couldn't be galavanting about like some free-spirited buffoon every day with my crampons.

GARRETT

That so-called galavanting will save your skin. When we get up to the camps I'll find a ladder we can use, and you'll see how easy it is.

They sit in silence and watch the country go by.

CUT TO:

EXT. 100 M BELOW BASE CAMP - NIGHT

Garret parks the jeep in the dirt. He looks back to Kaiden, who's still asleep.

GARRETT

Hey! Kaiden!

The sherpa opens his eyes.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Time to get to work, brother.

EMMA

This is Base Camp?

GARRETT

Nope. B.C is one hundred vertical meters. We got a bit of a hike, get your gear.

Emma buckles her ruck, mentally preparing for a long night.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

We good? Kaiden lead the way.

He equips a head lamp and turns it on.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Head lamp, Em.

Emma does the same. Kaiden doesn't, as they all start to walk towards a rock-face opening. It's hard to make out anything in the darkness that surrounds them.

**MONTAGE**

EXT. TRAIL TO BASE CAMP - NIGHT

The three trek into the night alongside the full moon. Small hills of loose rock guide their paths and don't pose much of a challenge for any of them. They pass villagers during their early-morning prayers at various Nepalese shrines.

EXT. BASE CAMP - LATER

**BASE CAMP 17,600 Ft.**

Dozens of tents of various of colors and sizes sit in mini villages all around the rocky plain. Some of them are lit from the inside, silhouetting exhausted climbers, and others appear empty.

Emma sits to rest, taking out a water bottle from the side of her pack.

GARRETT

I'll get the tent situation handled. Wait here.

No arguments from her. She looks towards the stars. They couldn't be clearer.

Emma takes out a protein bar from her fanny pack. Breaks it in half and offers it to Kaiden. He takes it and bows, "thank you".

Garret returns with their tent numbers,

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Okay, you're in 22, you're...  
(to Kaiden)

...in 23, and I'm in 24. Northeast corner of the camp. You need to use the restroom? For number one there's bladders you can fill up in your tent. For number two, there are bags as well. You double seal those bad boys or you're in for a rough time.

Emma give the thumbs up, starts to head out.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Emma, try not to talk to anyone. One whiff that you're not supposed to be here, and you're off the mountain. Maybe into a jail cell, ya hear?



EMMA

Yeah.

They head toward their tents, passing by the communal center filled with other climbers.

INT. COMMUNAL TENT - CONTINUOUS

They stop eating as they look to the three through the tent's transparent walls.

CLIMBER 1

Think they're soloing?

CLIMBER 2

(shakes head)

Probably a private climb.

CLIMBER 1

Must cost a pretty penny.

CLIMBER 3

She's just a wannabe. Huffing and puffing already. Just another tourist wanting to climb the big bad mountain.

CLIMBER 1

What does that make you?

They all laugh.

EXT. BASE CAMP - CONTINUOUS

Garret leads the way. Emma hears the laughter, envious of their good time.

She spots a tent marked "22" in white paint. Home.

GARRETT

We're sleeping in. Gotta rest up for Camp I tomorrow.

EMMA

Okay, goodnight.

GARRETT

Night.

(to Kaiden)

Night, Kaiden. Sleep well.

CUT TO:

INT. TENT - BASE CAMP - CONTINUOUS

Emma throws her ruck into the corner. Up goes a lantern for her source of light. She sighs at the sight of her bathroom, the bag and bladder. She gets to work, unfolding her sleeping mat and bag.

She unfolds the picture of Ronnie and Andrew and tacks it to a string in the side of her tent.

CUT TO:

EXT. TENT - BASE CAMP - DAY

Emma unzips the entrance of her tent, to see the camp bathed in the sun. Exhausted and cold, she watches in awe as other climbers appear peppy and vivacious. The show-offs exercise in their underwear, while others dance to Nepalese pop music.

INT. TENT - BASE CAMP

She lights her propane stove and throws on a tin of water.

As it boils she sprinkles in some instant coffee. She stirs but sees a light stream coming from above. Holes are widening in the tent's nylon above the propane stove.

EMMA

Shit, shit!

She knocks over the watery coffee onto her tent's floor and onto herself.

EMMA (CONT'D)

God! Shit!

She opens the tent fully and falls back into...

EXT. TENT - BASE CAMP - DAY

Her torso exits, her legs dangle inside.

EMMA

Ow!

Other climbers notice and laugh. She gets her bearings, reaches for the propane stove, and burns her hand.

EMMA (CONT'D)

Fuck!

She instantly throws it, melting the snow underneath it.  
Garrett steps up.

GARRETT

What are you doing?

Garrett laughs as he carefully picks up the stove and turns it off.

EMMA

I was making coffee.

She looks up at him and he's shirtless. He's not exactly ripped, but he has a good amount of muscle on him.

GARRETT

Black, please?

EMMA

Funny.

He starts to help her up.

GARRETT

So, I was thinking about staying the rest of the day here, and heading for camp one tomorrow.

EMMA

Why tomorrow? I'm ready, I'm good to go right now.

GARRETT

Apparently.

(laughs)

No, I've got reports from HQ that weather is looking bad on camp four and three. Might come a little lower to two and one. It's up to you whether you want to freeze your ass off.

EMMA

I can handle it.

GARRETT

Not enough hot coffee in the world for what it's like up there.

Emma throws the tin at him.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Okay, geeze!

She takes off her soaked shirt. Garrett tries not to look.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Listen, I found a ladder, we can use. There's a couple we have to cross in the ice fall, so we'll do a few rounds before we head out.

Emma wrings her shirt out into the hard snow.

EMMA

Okay, sounds good.

GARRETT

I'll come get you in an hour.

CUT TO:

EXT. BASE CAMP - NORTHERN PERIMETER - DAY

A dinky ladder is held up by two buckets on each end in the middle of the snow.

Garrett is covering Emma's eyes.

GARRETT

Ready?

EMMA

Mhmm.

Garrett holds his arms out. She opens her eyes.

Emma doesn't look impressed.

GARRETT

Now, I know what you're thinking. No way Garrett could do this by himself. And you'd be right. Kaiden set it up.

She walks over to the buckets and checks them out.

EMMA

These won't break?

GARRETT

Didn't break on Kaiden. Ya'll are about the same size.

EMMA

I don't think-

GARRETT  
Quit stalling and get your crampons  
on!

Emma plops down and starts fitting the metal spikes to her boots.

She stands and approaches one end of the ladder.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
I'll make you a little wager.

EMMA  
I'm listening.

GARRETT  
You cross on the first try, and  
I'll make the coffee for the rest  
of the climb.

EMMA  
Two cream, two sugar.

Garrett chuckles.

GARRETT  
You got it, little lady.

Emma puts one foot on the first step of the ladder. Metal rubs on metal, sending goosebumps down her back.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Focus up, c'mon.

She lifts her other leg and puts it ahead onto the second step. The wind pushes her from all directions, but she still maintains her balance. She notices other climbers watching her from the camp's center.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Don't mind them.

She steps, but a spike gets snagged. Just in time she catches herself and takes a few more baby steps.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Heel first. Bend and pick up from  
your knees. That'll keep the wind  
at bay for the most part.

She follows his directions, but a gust of wind knocks her off balance. She falls HARD on the ice.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Shit, you okay?

EMMA  
I'm fine.

GARRETT  
You did better than I expected.

EMMA  
I would've died out there.

GARRETT  
Yeah, probably. But that's why  
we're doing this. Let's give it a  
couple more tries, yeah?

He extends his hand, and she takes it.

**MONTAGE**

EXT. BASE CAMP - NORTHERN PERIMETER - LATER

We see a series of shots of Emma making her way across the  
ladder to only fall. She gears up for more tries, but...

Emma falls quite a bit before making it to the end.

EMMA  
Whoo, I did it!

GARRETT  
Nice job! Now do that five times in  
a row, and we'll head out.

Garrett counts on hand, signaling Emma how many more times  
she needs.

Five fingers up, then four.

She falls.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Start again.

Five, four, three, two.

She falls again.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
We'll be here the whole day if we  
have to.

Five, four, three, two, one. She finally makes it.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
I was starting to get worried.

Emma shoots him the finger. He gives her a hug.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
I'm proud of you.

She hugs him back. It feels good to be held again.

EMMA  
Thank you for this. For helping me.

He nods.

GARRETT  
We'll head out in an hour, and  
you're making the Joe.

CUT TO:

EXT. TENT - BASE CAMP

Garrett approaches Emma's tent with his gear on his back.

GARRETT  
Ready to go?

No response.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Emma? You in there?

He opens the tent, and sees her sleeping. He zips the door  
back up, frustrated.

He looks to Kaiden, who also has his pack ready.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
She's fucking knocked out, man.

Kaiden unbuckles his pack and gets back into his tent.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Christ.

CUT TO:

INT. COMMUNAL TENT - NIGHT

The wind wails, making the tent's entrance flap rapidly.

Garrett has the tent to himself as he prepares a meal. He checks the refrigerator to find some deserted goodies, and manages to snag a beer.

GARRETT

Come to Papa.

A couple of climbers barge into the tent, braking off the ice shards from each other's clothes.

They carry a walkie playing a weather report.

WEATHER REPORT (FROM RADIO)

South western gusts up to forty miles per hour. Temperatures as low as negative twenty.

The first climber BORIS, the second LANDON.

BORIS

Weather report was shit.

GARRETT

Yeah?

LANDON

We tried to get up to camp one, but had to turn around. Wind got too strong on the icefall.

GARRETT

Good to know.

He goes back to eating.

BORIS

Garrett is it?

Garrett puts down his spoon.

GARRETT

Yeah.

LANDON

(to Boris)  
He's the guy?

GARRETT

Yeah, I'm the guy. We got a problem?



LANDON

No, no problem, man.

Boris sits opposite from Garrett. He unpacks a protein bar, and starts eating it.

BORIS

I just hope the girl your taking up  
knows she hired a coward. It would  
be a shame if you got her killed  
too.

Garrett shoves the rest of his food in his mouth and gets up. He starts for the door.

GARRETT

Stay away from her.

BORIS

She doesn't know?

Boris starts laughing. As he leaves Garrett pours the rest of his beer on Boris' protein bar, who still continues to eat it, laughing.

EXT. TENT - BASE CAMP

The early morning sun peeks over the mountain's ridge, expiring the shadows from the cluster of tents. Patches of dark rock peek up from the hard snow.

Emma opens her tent, stretches out, feeling the warmth on her skin.

Garrett steps up, holding a thermos.

GARRETT

Morning.

EMMA

Morning.

GARRETT

Don't fall asleep before lights out  
again. We gotta be ready to move at  
any given time. We could've beat  
that storm that blew in.

EMMA

I'm sorry.

GARRETT

Don't apologize, just do better.

Garrett gives her the thermos.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Two creams, two sugars.

She looks surprised.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
You fall that many times you  
deserve some sort of prize.

She smiles as she takes it, and sips. Better than how she  
makes it back home.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Don't tell Kaiden, or he'll want  
some too.

EMMA  
Don't worry. This is all mine.

GARRETT  
Soon as you're done, we'll head for  
the ice fall. Hopefully you  
remember how to navigate a ladder  
by the time we get up there.

She takes another gulp.

EXT. KHUMBU ICEFALL - DAY

Emma approaches a ladder, bridging a medium sized crevasse, a  
river of darkness flowing endlessly below. There's something  
hypnotizing how the blues of the ice turn to rich purples.

Garrett and Kaiden wait for her on the other side. The mini  
storm has left a tail end of wind, making things difficult.

GARRETT  
Just like we did yesterday, no  
biggie.

Emma takes a step onto the ladder, shaking it deeper into the  
snow.

EMMA  
It's a bit windy, don't you think?

GARRETT  
Clip your carabiner.

Emma wants to slap her hand against her forehead that she forgot. She clips herself to the walk rope, staring intensely at Garret. Baby's first steps.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Don't look at me. Helps if you look down.

Emma's face turns into a scowl.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
I'm not trying to be funny. You gotta watch your crampon alignment!

She looks down at the endless abyss. The white snow turns to blue, then to black deep in its depths. Snowflakes land on her cheeks, numbing her face.

EMMA  
I'm scared of heights by the way!

GARRETT  
You're disclosing this now?

EMMA  
Not a good time?

GARRETT  
Don't worry about falling. Just keep stepping.

Emma takes a step, locking in the metal spikes in between each ladder step.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
C'mon, just a couple more.

Emma makes it to the edge and skips off onto the cliffside. She hugs Garrett in relief.

EMMA  
I didn't die.

Kaiden heads off without them, not amused.

GARRETT  
Only twenty more to go.

EMMA  
You're kidding.

GARRETT  
For you? Emma "Conquerer of Ladders"? Should be no problem.

They head after Kaiden towards the jagged rock face of the mountain.

**MONTAGE**

EXT. KHUMBU ICEFALL - CONTINUOUS

We see the mess that makes up the icefall. Different thicknesses of ice poke out of the mountainside, making it difficult to find the path. The only guides are Kaiden, and a rope in the chunky ice. Each crack could be a few feet deep or thousands.

Emma climbs some with ease, but needs help with others. Garrett and Kaiden navigate the maze like pros until they reach...

EXT. CAMP I. - DAY

**CAMP I. 19,685 Ft.**

There are fewer tents and even fewer people than at Base Camp. However the village exudes mountain life as climbers socialize and sunbathe.

Garrett pulls out a map and examines it.

GARRETT

Looks like we're in the southwest corner of the camp this time around.

Kaiden unbuckles his pack and sets it by his feet.

EMMA

Can't we just go up to camp two? I mean, the sun's still pretty high, and I feel great.

Garrett motions to Emma with his thumb sarcastically.

GARRETT

(to Kaiden)

You think she's up for it?

Kaiden just stares at him.

He squints as he looks towards the sun.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
I think we got enough light to get  
to camp two. What do you say,  
Kaiden?

Kaiden lets out a sigh and buckles up again.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Great.

CUT TO:

EXT. WESTERN CWM - DAY

The three struggle to walk in shin-deep snow. Emma drags  
behind Kaiden and Garrett. They all are attached to the  
walking rope via their carabiners.

GARRETT  
You okay back there, Emma?

EMMA  
Yeah, just trying to get my  
footing.

GARRETT  
Don't strain yourself. It'll only  
get harder the further we go. Air  
starts to get thin, snow starts to  
feel like sand. Let us know if you  
want to slow down.

EXT. WESTERN CWM - LATER

Emma is falling way behind her companions. She sits down to  
rest.

EMMA  
Garrett!

He turns around to see her on the ground and takes off after  
her.

GARRETT  
Kaiden!

Kaiden follows suit.

Garrett reaches Emma in a hurry.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
You okay? What's wrong? Twist an ankle or something?

EMMA  
Relax, I'm fine. I just needed to sit down.

GARRETT  
Jesus, woman. You scared the shit out of me.

Garrett plops down next to Emma.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Take five, Kaiden.

He looks at Emma, huffing.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Make it ten.  
(to Emma)  
Got a headache?

Emma shakes her head.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Breathing okay?

EMMA  
No.

GARRETT  
Good. Breathe through your nose and out your mouth.

Climbers come into view behind them, unlinking their carabiners from the line to pass them.

CLIMBER 4  
You all might want to rest untetherd, so we don't go rolling down.

GARRETT  
Pardon us, we'll just be a few.

CLIMBER 5  
(to team)  
This is why they shouldn't allow rookies up here. I don't know what's the matter with these people.

GARRETT

Take it easy, pal. She's just a bit  
tired. We're coming from Base Camp.

They scoff, but one of the team members at the back speaks  
up. His name is BEAR. He looks just as his name implies.

BEAR

Garrett Müller? That you?

GARRETT

Yeah! Who's asking?

BEAR

It's Bear! I heard you were making  
your rounds up here again, but I  
couldn't believe it until now.

GARRETT

Yep, trying.

Bear looks at Emma.

BEAR

And who's this pretty lady?

GARRETT

This is Joan.

Emma smiles at him.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

She hired me to take her up.

EMMA

Nice to meet you.

Bear looks at him like he's crazy.

BEAR

Great, great.

(sotto)

You know, I'm sorry about-

GARRETT

Yeah, I know.

BEAR

It isn't true is it, what they're  
saying?

Garrett looks at Emma.

EMMA

Is what true?

GARRETT

Good talking to you, Bear. We better get going though.

CLIMBER 4

Wait until we're at least fifty yards up. We don't want you to slow us down.

BEAR

(to Garrett)

Don't listen to these numb-skulls. They're as tired as can be.

(to team)

We'll rest up here! Let them go on ahead.

GARRETT

We'll be seeing you.

Garrett helps Emma to her feet and they start up the trail again.

BEAR

Be safe, Garrett. Be safe.

EXT. CAMP II. - NIGHT

**CAMP II. 21,000 Ft.**

A handful of tents sit just below a slope of shiny ice. Still wet from the afternoon sun. The rocks below are barely visible under the blanket of fresh snow.

The sunset's oranges and yellows cut through the morose grey of the camp, signaling dinner time.

Emma is sitting just in front of the slope's view. Garrett comes quietly, not wanting to disturb her.

GARRETT

I have some bad news.

EMMA

What is it?

GARRETT

We're going to have to share a tent tonight.



Emma's eyes roll.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Yeah, I screwed up and didn't radio them we were headed up from camp one. It's all they could spare. Hell, Kaiden is going to have to sleep in the Sherpa's tent, so he probably has it worse than us.

EMMA

It's fine.

GARRETT

At least we'll be warm, huh?

EMMA

I'm gonna get some rest.

She gets up and heads for their tent, leaving Garrett alone. He takes a swig of his flask.

By a nearby tent a red haired woman stares at the two. She sips her coffee, but never breaks her gaze. This is SHIELA.

INT. TENT - CAMP II.

Emma strings up a blanket, dividing half the tent, allocating herself the right side.

She's too tired to set up the picture of her kids before she falls asleep.

CUT TO:

INT. SKARSGARD RES. - BEDROOM (FLASHBACK)

Emma sits in bed, painting her toes, while Patrick packings up a suitcase and rucksack. He has his hair parted, and to the side, making sure it never gets in his eyes.

PATRICK

Honey, have you seen my headphones?

EMMA

Checked with the kids? Maybe one of them borrowed them.

PATRICK

They know better than to take my things. That's why I buy them their own.

(MORE)

PATRICK (CONT'D)

These are two hundred dollar head phones. I need them for the plane. Last thing I want is to be kept up by some screaming baby, or bachelorette party's, "woos".

EMMA

I don't know what to tell you, babe. Maybe we should get you new ones before I drop you off at the airport.

PATRICK

Are you fucking kidding me, Emma? Those things were expensive.

EMMA

Do not talk to me that way. I'm just trying to help.

PATRICK

You're not helping.

EMMA

I know you're stressed out about your little mountain trip, but it doesn't give you an excuse to be such an ass.

PATRICK

You see, this is exactly why I go on these "little mountain trips". To get away from all of this.

EMMA

All of what? Your family?

PATRICK

No! This arguing!

EMMA

That's part of the package! We're going to argue, whether you like it or not.

PATRICK

Out there, it's just silence. I feel the wind through my hair, not a worry in the world. You should try it sometime.

EMMA

You love the mountains more than your own family, don't you?

PATRICK  
Right now, yes. The thought of them  
just makes me want to jump for joy.

EMMA  
You're such a dick.

She throws the opened nail polish at him, streaking the front  
of his shirt in red.

PATRICK  
God damnit, Emma!

Emma runs to the bathroom.

CUT TO:

INT. SKARSGARD RES. - BATHROOM - (FLASHBACK)

As the tears run down her cheeks, she looks in the mirror.

END FLASHBACK

CUT TO:

INT. TENT - CAMP II.

Emma wakes up cuddled up to Garrett.

Once she gets her bearings, she shoves him off.

GARRETT  
Ow! What's going on?

EMMA  
Sorry.

Emma's face is hot.

EMMA (CONT'D)  
I didn't mean- I.

GARRETT  
It's okay. I thought you were cold  
or something.

EMMA  
Or something?

GARRETT  
You know what I mean.

Emma puts on her boots and parka.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Hey, c'mon.

She steps into...

EXT. CAMP II. - TENT - DAY

The camp looks more alive than the night before. New climbers arrive as old ones take off either back down to camp one, or up to camp three.

Emma feels a sensation in her stomach and vomits just outside the tent.

Sheila approaches her.

SHEILA  
Hey, you okay?

EMMA  
I'll be fine.

Sheila reaches into her pocket and produces a medicine tube. She takes two pills out, hands them over.

SHEILA  
These should help with the elevation sickness.

As Emma takes them she looks closely at Sheila. She is rugged, but in a good way. Her freckles carry an innocence rarely found on the mountain.

EMMA  
What are they?

SHEILA  
Concentrated cocoa. Sherpas use this stuff all the time. Don't worry, there's no cocaine in it.

Sheila hands her a water bottle.

EMMA  
Thanks.

Emma swallows the pills.

SHEILA  
What's your name?

EMMA  
Joan.

Sheila holds out her hand.

SHEILA  
I'm Sheila.

Emma shakes it, reciprocating the red head's smile.

EMMA  
Nice to meet a friendly face.

SHEILA  
I know what you mean. Everyone  
seems in a grumpy mood up here.

EMMA  
I just thought it was me. They all  
keep staring.

SHEILA  
When you're pretty, that's what  
they'll do. If you haven't noticed  
this is horn-dog mountain.

Garrett groans as he unzips the front of the tent and appears to Emma and Sheila.

SHEILA (CONT'D)  
I should get going. Hopefully, I'll  
see you later, Joan.

Sheila walks away toward the communal tent. Garrett steps out of their tent half-dressed.

GARRETT  
What did I say about talking with  
people up here?

EMMA  
Yeah, yeah.

GARRETT  
Why did she give you those pills?  
You sick?

EMMA  
I'm fine. She was just being  
friendly.

GARRETT

She'll be the first to turn you in.

EMMA

What makes you so sure?

GARRETT

People pay a lot of money to be up here. They see someone who cut through the yellow tape and they turn into a pack of wolves.

EMMA

If you're uncomfortable with the way I'm handling myself, then you can just head back down.

She storms off.

EXT. CAMP II. - WESTERN SIDE - LATER

Emma sits atop a boulder overlooking the horizon. She looks towards the mountain range, journal in hand.

PATRICK (O.S.)

What's it today?

She looks down to her words, and glances at Patrick, seated on a nearby boulder

PATRICK (CONT'D)

You know, he is only trying to help you.

EMMA

Why are you taking his side?

PATRICK

Because he's your best shot. You have to trust him.

EMMA

He has a micromanaging problem.

PATRICK

Your stubbornness is a problem. You've always been that way.

EMMA

I'm trying to do this for you.

PATRICK

Are you?

She looks at him, but he's no longer sitting by her.

GARRETT (O.S.)

This seat taken?

Garrett comes from behind her and sits down where Patrick was.

Emma turns to him, shaking her head "No".

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Wanted to apologize. It's just that-

EMMA

I'm the one who should be saying sorry. It's just- Patrick took care of me and the kids. This was my shot to take care of him, and I can't even do it right. You're doing all the work for me.

GARRETT

You're doing it. You're here, what more do you want? You're fuckin' climbing Everest.

(beat)

Beats the hell out of me why you're here in the first place. Any other person would be trying to move on.

After some consideration, she hesitantly opens up her journal to around page four or so and reads.

EMMA

"May 5th, 2017. I woke up today in a haze and couldn't feel sensation in my legs. I couldn't hear the kids making any noise, assumed they were asleep, so I just lied there. The image of Patrick's frozen body flashed through my head like a strobe light that had gone haywire. I wondered if he died with his eyes open." That was the day I realized I wanted to do this.

Garrett wraps his thick arm around her tiny body.

EMMA (CONT'D)

I guess the idea of him being on display got to me. He's not a museum piece. He was my husband. An actual human being with human emotions and experiences. It just irks me the wrong way. I think it's only right to bring him back.

GARRETT

Sounds like you're taking care of yourself more than you're taking care of him.

EMMA

Maybe I am, I don't know. You must think I'm selfish leaving my kids back home.

GARRETT

No, I don't think that. We all do crazy things for different reasons.

EMMA

I left a will for them, you know?

GARRETT

Smart, considering.

He holds his arms out toward the mountain range. Emma laughs.

EMMA

Hopefully it all means something in the end.

GARRETT

I'm trying not to let you down.

EMMA

You mean my story?

GARRETT

I respect what you're doing. You got character.

Garrett looks directly at her.

EMMA

Don't go falling in love with me.

He breaks eye contact.

GARRETT

Sorry. I just-



Emma smiles as she gets up.

EMMA

I should get some sleep.

GARRETT

Okay.

She stumbles and falls to her knees.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Are you okay?

EMMA

Yeah, just lost my balance.

He helps her up.

GARRETT

I think we'll go back to B.C.  
tomorrow to get some fresh air.

EMMA

No, we don't have to, I'm fine.

GARRETT

Not up for debate. You won't make  
it to Camp Three puking your guts  
out.

Tired, Emma gives him the thumbs up and walks off.

EXT. CAMP II. - TENT - NIGHT

Emma approaches the tent, coughing her lungs out. She buckles to her knees, dry heaving. Her eyes water as she struggles to breathe.

CUT TO:

EXT. SKARSGARD RES. - BACKYARD - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Emma sits on the deck, just outside the house's backdoor. She wears a bathing suit, matching Ronnie's, who sitting in a kiddie pool at her feet. Andrew fills up water balloons at the garden faucet.

RONNIE

When are you coming in, mommy?

Emma puts her feet in the pool.

EMMA  
Not too many, Andrew.

ANDREW  
But I need the ammo.

EMMA  
No, you don't.

PATRICK (O.S.)  
Yeah, he does, babe.

Patrick appears from the house in his trunks and sneaks a kiss with Emma. He's armed to the teeth with water guns.

EMMA  
Just don't get us involved.

RONNIE  
Yeah! We don't want to get wet.

Patrick leans over and kisses Ronnie on the head.

PATRICK  
Hate to break it to you, kiddo.  
He splashes her in the pool water she's sitting in.

RONNIE  
Hey!

Before Andrew can get ready, Patrick shoots him in the chest with a stream of water.

ANDREW  
No fair!

PATRICK  
C'mon, son. You know the first rule  
of war?

He winks at him and signals toward Emma.

Andrew nods, and gets two handfuls of balloons in his hands and sneaks behind Emma's chair.

ANDREW  
Expect the unexpected!

He squeezes his aquatic grenades, causing them to explode all over his mother and sister.

EMMA  
Andrew!

Emma reaches over and snatches one of Patrick's water pistols and shoots Andrew between the eyes.

RONNIE  
I need a weapon!

Patrick picks up Ronnie and puts her on his shoulders.

PATRICK  
Dual action! Super Skarsgard!

ANDREW  
No teams!

The family erupts into a free-for-all, laughing as their water ballet breaks out.

END FLASHBACK

CUT TO:

INT. CAMP II. - TENT - DAY

Emma sleeps alone and shivering.

GARRETT (O.S.)  
Emma, you up? Let's go, we got a long day!

Emma groans.

GARRETT (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
C'mon, you wanted this remember? I don't want to drag you outa there. We got to make our rounds back to Base and up again. No time to lose!

EMMA  
I'm up.

Emma rolls her eye, and closes them.

CUT TO:

## **MONTAGE**

EXT. SOMEWHERE BETWEEN BASE CAMP II AND I - DAY

TIMELAPSE

We see Emma and Garrett slowly trek down the mountainside. Their bright colored parkas juxtaposed with the pale snow below their feet.

EMMA

How many times do we have to do this?

GARRETT

Til' you feel strong enough to hike between camps no problem.

EMMA

Ugh.

GARRETT

That's acclimatizing for you.

The sun goes down and then comes back up.

The two hike back up the same trail, this time smiling.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

There's no way you've never been to the beach.

EMMA

I'm serious. I don't know what sand feels like between my toes. Does it feel gross?

GARRETT

One of the more relaxing things actually. It kinds feels freeing. There's this nice spot in Texas...

The sun performs its routine again.

They come back down.

EMMA

You can't believe in that, right?

GARRETT

All I'm saying is those pyramids are put there for a reason. Why would they align with the stars?

EMMA

You're ridiculous.

GARRETT

You better hold your tongue when the martians show up is all I'm saying.

Up the mountain again, this time Emma leads.

EMMA

C'mon! Want to make it up to camp before Kaiden wakes up. I want to tell him how much I kicked your ass this time.

GARRETT

Ha. Ha. You were privileged with more sleep than I.

EMMA

Sounds like an excuse.

GARRETT

Nope. You have a snoring problem.

EMMA

Whatever. Hurry up!

CUT TO:

INT. CAMP III. - NIGHT

**CAMP III. 23,625 Ft.**

Emma is sound asleep in her sleeping bag. Garrett peaks in and smiles.

He holds a radio to his ear.

WEATHER TENT (FROM RADIO)

Yeah, looks like the season might be closing a couple of weeks early folks. Mama monsoon is hungry, so if you haven't reached camp four yet in your acclimatization, your trip might be cut short.

GARRETT

Shit.

WEATHER TENT (FROM RADIO)

Weather window officially will close April 3rd.

(MORE)

WEATHER TENT (FROM RADIO) (CONT'D)  
I repeat, next wednesday will be  
the absolute last day to summit for  
camp four climbers.

INT. CAMP III. - TENT - CONTINUOUS

Garrett unzips the front and crawls into the orange hued  
cave.

He looks at Emma, peaceful and beautiful.

GARRETT  
Emma.

He nudges her shoulder.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
Emma, wake up.

She opens her eyes slowly.

EMMA  
Hey.

She sits up.

EMMA (CONT'D)  
What's going on? Time to go?

GARRETT  
We're gonna have to speed up the  
mountain. Weather window is  
closing.

EMMA  
How long do we have left.

GARRETT  
Wednesday.

EMMA  
Can we do it?

GARRETT  
I don't know.

Emma looks torn.

GARRETT (CONT'D)  
We can try.  
(beat)  
How do you feel?

EMMA

Exhausted.

Her lower lip starts to tremble.

GARRETT

Hey, hey.

EMMA

I'm sick of all the bad news.

Tears stream down.

GARRETT

Hey, we can do this. You need to be strong. It's gonna be dangerous.

Emma looks up at him, genuine hope in her eyes.

He wipes away the tears, and she grabs his hands. She pulls him close and hugs his neck.

Without thinking he kisses her. She doesn't pull back, but opens her eyes, and sees Patrick right behind Garrett.

EMMA

(startled)

Shit!

GARRETT

What? I'm sorry. I don't-

EMMA

Me too. Lets not do that again.

GARRETT

Agreed. I never-

EMMA

Shut up.

GARRETT

Okay.

She steps out, leaving Garrett by himself.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Fuck.

CUT TO:

EXT. CAMP III. - DAY

Emma unzips the door and exits the tent.

She moves slowly, taking each step like it weighs one hundred pounds. The extra exertion makes her dizzy and feel ill.

Sheila steps up, catching her before she falls.

SHEILA

We have to stop running into each other like this. Sorry, I ran out of my special pills.

EMMA

I could use the whole bottle.

SHEILA

I bet a nice warm meal will do the trick.

EMMA

Yeah, granola bars are not cutting it anymore.

SHEILA

C'mon.

Sheila assists Emma in walking.

EMMA

I shouldn't.

SHEILA

One meal is not going to kill you.

Emma looks back at her tent.

EMMA

Okay.

CUT TO:

INT. CAMP III. - COMMUNAL TENT - CONTINUOUS

Sheila takes two instant noodle cups out of the microwave.

SHEILA

Breakfast of champions.

She serves Emma.



EMMA  
Isn't exactly four seasons  
material, but it'll do.

Emma wastes no time scooping some of the noodles into her  
mouth, burning her lips.

SHEILA  
Careful.

EMMA  
I don't mind. Feels amazing.

SHEILA  
Yeah, it's kind of funny how  
different things are up here, don't  
you think?

Emma nods.

EMMA  
The lack of bathing.

Sheila laughs.

SHEILA  
Exactly!

One of the patrons of the tent burps as he exits.

SHEILA  
And manners apparently.  
(beat)  
So, why Everest?

Emma finishes the food in her mouth.

EMMA  
You know, I'm just like everyone  
else here. Trying to do the  
impossible.

SHEILA  
Your first time?

EMMA  
Climbing?

SHEILA  
Everest.

EMMA  
Oh, yeah.

SHEILA  
I'm on my third.

EMMA  
Why?

SHEILA  
I love being miserable I guess. But  
really, it's the view.

EMMA  
That good, huh?

SHEILA  
Better than the best sex you've  
ever had.

Emma gives her a skeptical look.

EMMA  
Been hearing that a lot lately.  
Some mountain, huh?

SHEILA  
(laughs)  
Ask your husband if he feels that  
way once you reach the top.

EMMA  
Huh?

SHEILA  
Your husband. The man you're  
bunking with?

EMMA  
Oh, he's not my husband. He's my  
guide.

SHEILA  
I'm so sorry. I just- Never mind.

EMMA  
It's okay.

SHEILA  
I mean he is cute though.

EMMA  
Yeah, he's something else.

SHEILA  
Sounds like you like him.

EMMA

I have too many things on my mind to be worrying about that.

(beat)

Besides, Garrett's a cowboy. He's all about being a man, and doing things the tough way. The Texas charm is starting to wear off.

SHEILA

Texas? You don't mean Garrett Müller?

EMMA

You know him?

SHEILA

Not personally, but there is a story behind that name. You should find a new guide if it's not too late. I think I can get you fixed up with-

EMMA

Wait, what story?

Sheila seems hesitant.

SHEILA

Around a year ago he deserted his team at the base of the Hillary Step. The story goes, he saw some of his team collapse but continued on his own. When he got down, he told everyone his team got lost. Some of the members came down and threw punches. It was a whole thing apparently. Hell of a year to skip.

Emma's hands begin to shake.

EMMA

Was Patrick Skarsgard a part of that expedition?

SHEILA

Skarsgard? Sounds familiar. I want to say yes. You know him?

Emma is on the verge of tears.

SHEILA (CONT'D)

What's wrong?

Emma storms out.

SHEILA (CONT'D)

Joan?

EXT. CAMP III. - COMMUNAL TENT - CONTINUOUS

Emma steps out of the tent, and pukes all over the snowy ground.

She wipes her mouth and sets her eyes on her tent.

CUT TO:

INT. CAMP III. - TENT - CONTINUOUS

Emma rips the tent door off its zipper and runs in.

EMMA

Tell me it's not true!

Garrett wakes up as if from a nightmare.

GARRETT

What? What the hell are ya doing?

EMMA

Tell me the truth!

GARRETT

Truth about what? What are you talking about, Em?

EMMA

Don't call me that! Were you on Patrick's expedition?

Garrett turns white.

GARRETT

Now- I can explain.

EMMA

How could you do this to me?

GARRETT

You don't understand.

EMMA

You lied to me!

GARRETT

Emma, you got to believe me. I tried everything I could to get him down.

He tries to get close to Emma.

EMMA

Get the fuck away from me. Get out of my tent.

GARRETT

Can I put my pants on?

EMMA

Get the fuck out!

Garrett gathers his things the best he can and heads for the opening.

GARRETT

I'm sorry. I made a promise to myself. I couldn't let you die up there with him.

Emma punches him in the face, making him fall out of the tent.

EMMA

For your fucking story?  
(sarcastic)  
"Müller Mountain 'Fucking' Adventures"!

GARRETT

God damnit, there was never any company! Just needed to give you a reason.

He stands back up.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

You know what his last words were?  
"Let me see the sunset."

Emma wipes away her tears.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

I tried everything I could to get him to come down, but he was out of it, Emma. If I would've stayed any longer I would've ended up there with him.

Emma uses all of her energy to shove him back to the ground.

EMMA  
Wish you would have!

EXT. CAMP III. - TENT - CONTINUOUS

Garrett's nose bleeds on the snow. A mini crowd has gathered as a result of the yelling.

One of the climber's laughs. It's Boris.

BORIS  
You realize you're not welcome here anymore?

Emma exits her tent and steps over Garrett. She walks nearby to the large Sherpa tent and peeks in.

EMMA  
Kaiden! Camp four. Gear up.

Garrett starts getting dressed as he continues to bleed.

A sizable group has gathered and all stare at Garrett, whispering among themselves.

GARRETT  
Shut the fuck up!

Sheila emerges from the crowd.

SHEILA  
That's Garrett Müller, the guy who left his team to die last year.

CLIMBER 6  
Get the hell out of here, dude! No one wants you here anymore.

Another climber seconds the remark.

Garrett looks at Emma with nothing but shame in his eyes. She turns away.

GARRETT  
Okay, okay.

He puts his shirt on, and a crew in black and red approach him.

REPORTER  
Hello, sir. We'd like to interview you. Get the story behind last year's tragedy from someone who experienced it first hand?

GARRETT  
Where did you come from?

REPORTER  
We're doing a story on the declining Sherpa culture on the mountain, but we'd be interested in what you have to say about last year's storm disaster as well.

GARRETT  
I have nothing to say. I told everything to the cops last year. Take it up with them.

The reporter blows Garrett off as he sees Emma departing the camp.

REPORTER  
Ma'am! Any comment on Mr. Müller?

Emma keeps following Kaiden, not turning back.

REPORTER (CONT'D)  
Why would you hire a guide you did not know, ma'am?

GARRETT (O.S.)  
Stop pestering her! She's been through enough.

As Emma walks away, she doesn't wipe away her tears. The reporter turns around toward the camera, revealing an embroidered "CNN" logo on his parka.

CUT TO:

INT. SENIOR SKARSGARD RES.- NIGHT

Julianne is cleaning up a chocolate mess on the living room carpet. Ronnie stands nearby teary-eyed, holding her stuffed animal. Andrew sits on the couch, playing a video game on the television.

JULIANNE  
Are you still crying, Veronica?

RONNIE

No.

JULIANNE

We just need to be a little more careful with our pudding, okay?

RONNIE

Okay.

ANDREW

I told her, grandma.

RONNIE

Stop!

JULIANNE

It's okay, children.

The phone starts to ring. Julianne takes a break from the scrubbing and answers.

JULIANNE (CONT'D)

Hello? No, Andy is playing his game on the tele- What's happened?

(to Andrew)

Pause your game, and turn it to the news, honey.

ANDREW

But I'm almost done with this level.

JULIANNE

I'm not going to ask you again, Andrew.

ANDREW

Ugh, fine.

He switches to the local news, and we see Emma's face plastered all over the screen.

JULIANNE

Oh my god.

NEWS REPORTER (FROM TV)

This footage, courtesy of CNN, is the latest we have at Durango local. We will update you once we know more.

RONNIE

Why is mommy on TV?



JULIANNE

I-

Footage of Emma walking behind Kaiden loops over and over.

ANDREW

Is that what Michigan looks like?

NEWS REPORTER (FROM TV)

Here, we can see Emma Skarsgard, a Durango local, at Camp three on Mt. Everest. The very mountain her husband perished on just last year.

Julianne falls into the couch in disbelief.

ANDREW

Everest?

NEWS REPORTER (FROM TV)

We're receiving word from CNN she was put on a watch list by the local Nepalese government not to be allowed on the mountain, out of fear of what they call "body retrievalists". Yes, that's right. From what we are hearing, she is there on a mission to reclaim her husband's frozen corpse.

JULIANNE

What are you doing, Emma?

She puts the phone to her ear.

JULIANNE (CONT'D)

(to Phone)

What do I do now?

CUT TO:

EXT. SOMEWHERE BETWEEN CAMP III. AND IV. - DAY

Emma trudges through the snow, oxygen mask on, behind Kaiden. She stops for a breather.

Kaiden looks back.

KAIDEN

Keep going!

Emma's eyes widen.

EMMA  
You speak English?

KAIDEN  
Only when I have to.

He mispronounces the syllables, but Emma is impressed nonetheless.

EMMA  
Why now?

KAIDEN  
Because if we go any slower, we won't make it.

Emma looks down. She's trying her best.

KAIDEN (CONT'D)  
We can always turn back. You have nothing to prove.

EMMA  
No!

KAIDEN  
Okay. We still have ladders up ahead. Prepare your mind.

Emma fights through the pain and catches up to him.

EMMA  
I can do this.

We can only see Kaiden's eyes but can tell he's impressed.

### **MONTAGE**

EXT. SOMEWHERE BETWEEN CAMP III. AND IV. - LATER

Emma and Kaiden continue on their journey to Camp IV.

Beautiful glacial slopes and colossal rocks sprout from the mountainside, causing shadows to fall on top of the pair of climbers.

The sun is sandwiched between atmospheric clouds and lower ones, creating a beautiful, but post-apocalyptic guise.

### **END MONTAGE**

EXT. SOMEWHERE BETWEEN CAMP III. AND IV. - CREVASSE FALL -  
LATER

Emma goes first and begins crossing like she's done many times before.

She steps quickly and confidently. Midway, one of her crampons gets locked on a step. She loses her balance, but wraps her arm around the guided rope.

KAIDEN

Emma!

She stands on one leg, leaning on the rope.

EMMA

Shit! Kaiden?

KAIDEN

Stay still. I'm going to come to you.

He steps on the ladder, and we hear it creak as the metal slightly bends from the pressure.

EMMA

No, don't! I can feel the give.

KAIDEN

You can do this! Lock your left foot and use your hips as leverage to swing back into position.

She positions her foot between the ladder steps in a way where she can't move it.

KAIDEN (CONT'D)

Don't push too hard, or you'll break your ankle, and fall down.

EMMA

I'm gonna do it.

She swings, MISSING the ladder with her other foot. Kaiden leaps from the ledge, grabbing her hand before she falls into the ravine. She gains her balance, but the ladder begins slipping off the side of the cliff.

EMMA (CONT'D)

Kaiden!

He backpedals, but the ladder slips pulling him down with him.

Before Emma falls too, she jumps to the side of the crevasse, planting her ice axe into its mountain's hide. She pulls herself up, and looks back down to a dangling Kaiden.

EMMA (CONT'D)

You okay?

She extends her hand as far as her arm will let her and grabs his hand. She plants her feet and uses all of her fuel reserves to pull him up.

Kaiden releases his breath as he comes over the lip.

KAIDEN

We're almost there. We must hurry.

Emma stares in awe as he continues.

CUT TO:

EXT. CAMP IV. - NIGHT

**CAMP IV. 26,085 FT.**

Emma and Kaiden come into view of the camp. A few abandoned tents lie dormant inside the rock bed. The only signs of life are the lanterns dangling from tent poles, lighting two walking paths.

INT. CAMP IV. - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Kaiden makes a break for the sherpa tent, but Emma sits down, allowing her lungs to catch up.

She takes a bite of a pop-tart she had been saving.

Before she can finish, two men, wearing black parkas approach her. Their names are MALEEK and CLARK.

Their Nepali accents signal trouble.

MALEEK

Emma Skarsgard?

Emma is too tired to look up. She unclips her oxygen mask.

EMMA

Who?

CLARK

We know who you are, Mrs. Skarsgard.

EMMA

My name is Joan.

Maleek gives a suspicious look to Clark.

CLARK

Let's see some ID and permit.

EMMA

And who are you?

MALEEK

We work for the Nepalese  
government.

This concerns Emma, but she doesn't show her hand.

EMMA

Prove it.

Clark reaches in his parka and takes out his credentials.  
Emma looks at them, and they seem legitimate.

CLARK

Your turn.

Emma reaches in her pack, and takes out a laminated piece of  
paper.

EMMA

There's your permit, but my ID is  
deep at the bottom.

CLARK

We have time.

Clark hands the permit to Maleek, and he shines his  
flashlight to review it. After a few seconds he shakes his  
head to Clark.

CLARK (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, miss, but we have to  
detain you on behalf of the  
Nepalese government.

EMMA

For what?

MALEEK

For the fraudulent permit.

CLARK

Please come with us.

Kaiden peeks out of the Sherpa tent to investigate the commotion.

Emma gives him a pleading look, but there's nothing he can do.

MALEEK

We already have a tent set up for you until morning. We'll escort you down then.

She stands, too tired to argue.

CLARK

Please, don't argue. We're all tired enough as it is.

Clark puts his hand on her arm.

EMMA

Don't touch me.

They escort her to a small tent in the front of the camp.

MALEEK

We'll leave in four hours, so try and get some sleep.

INT. CAMP IV. - TENT - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Emma crawls into her tent. She makeshifts a bed, and clips her oxygen mask back on.

A silhouette arrives at her doorway. Clark pokes his head in.

CLARK

Knock, knock.

EMMA

What is it?

CLARK

You got a phone call.

Emma looks perplexed.

EMMA

How?

CLARK

Blue-tooth, satellite.

EMMA

From?

CLARK

Your mother-in-law.

EMMA

(to herself)

Fuck me.

She holds her hand out and the satellite phone meets her glove.

EMMA (CONT'D)

Hello?

JULIANNE (FROM PHONE)

What the fuck are you doing?

Emma works to get a decent breath in.

EMMA

I'm sorry.

JULIANNE

No, you don't get to apologize to me. How could you do this to Ronnie and Andrew? They're over here worried sick that you're going to die just like their father! I said I wasn't a good mother the day of Patrick's funeral, but I was wrong. You are a horrible person for doing this. I told you to prioritize your children, Emma! How hard is that...

Emma zones out. She unwinds a valve on her pack, allowing a surge of pure oxygen into her lungs.

EMMA

How could you leave your little boy up here, Julie? I love him too much to let him go like this. I swear to God it ate at me and would eat at me for the rest of my life. I had to.

JULIANNE

What about your kids? The ones that are alive? What about them? Don't they deserve some comfort?

EMMA

They're in good, capable hands.

The stars begin to shine exuberantly through the tent's nylon.

EMMA (CONT'D)  
I'll see you, Julie.

JULIANNE  
What? We're not done here!

EMMA  
Tell Ronnie and Andrew I love them very much.

JULIANNE  
Please, Emma. Don't do this.

She hangs up before Julianne can answer. Her head falls onto the uncomfortable tent floor.

Beat.

We hear the entrance unzip. Emma jolts up and shines a flashlight towards the source.

PATRICK (O.S.)  
Easy!

He takes off his mask, revealing his face. With a sigh she falls back down.

PATRICK (CONT'D)  
Thought you were going to kill me.

EMMA  
That's not funny.

Patrick takes off his pack and cuddles up behind her.

PATRICK  
Warm?

EMMA  
No.

He hugs her tighter.

PATRICK  
Remember that time, before the kids were born, camping for the first time.

EMMA  
Tell me about it again.



PATRICK  
Well, we watched "The Great  
Outdoors" one night and we decided  
to go out to the woods as soon as  
possible, no preparation  
whatsoever.

Emma smiles.

EMMA  
You struggled with making the fire.

PATRICK  
BUT I got it going. Kept you warm  
then. That sunset was a beauty,  
huh? I used to live for moments  
like that.

He rubs her bare hands with his.

EMMA  
Better.

Beat.

PATRICK  
You don't have to do this, Em.

EMMA  
Do what?

PATRICK  
Be here. I'm fine where I am. Go  
home, be with our kids. They need  
you.

She overexerts herself, breaking away from him.

EMMA  
You can't stay up here, Patrick.

PATRICK  
There's nothing for me down there  
anymore.

EMMA  
You're not real.

Emma starts checking her pack for the essentials.

PATRICK  
I'm real to you.

EMMA

Fuck you.

She shoves the last oxygen tank into her pack, and heads for the exit. To her surprise its a pad lock secures the zippers from the outside.

She produces a knife from her hip and cuts a hole right through.

PATRICK

Go down, Emma!

She disappears into the dark.

CUT TO:

EXT. CAMP IV. - DAY

Morning comes, but we can't tell due to the ominous cloud cover. We hear the snow crunch, two black mountain suits appear.

MALEEK

What do you think will happen once she's down?

CLARK

Could be jail time. Could be a slap on the wrist. You never know with the Americans.

Clark spots the tent that holds Emma. He sees the clean cut hole through the center of the door.

CLARK (CONT'D)

God damn it!

They run over.

MALEEK

Mrs. Skarsgard?

CLARK

She's gone.

MALEEK

Where?

GARRETT (O.S.)

I'll give you boys one guess.

Garrett appears depleted and beaten, but still retains his Texas twang.

CUT TO:

EXT. "THE BALCONY" - DAY

**The Balcony 27,500 Ft.**

Emma pulls herself over the final lip of a towering rock face. She collapses. Her lungs produce dry coughs. Sandpaper sounding.

Close behind a small climbing party scales the lip.

CLIMBER 1

Bout' time.

They hop over one-by-one, each burning holes into Emma. Kaiden steps up and helps her to the side.

KAIDEN

We have to speed up.

She nods as she looks over the edge, impressed with herself.

Kaiden replaces her O2 bottle.

KAIDEN (CONT'D)

This is the last one you can afford.

EXT. BETWEEN BALCONY AND SOUTH SUMMIT. - LATER

Emma digs into the ice with her axe, then her crampon, pulling herself up inch by inch. The cold has taken its reign on her, making it difficult to grip or even move. She looks up towards Kaiden, he's going a mile a minute.

**MONTAGE**

The pair continue to push up the incline of ice, reaching into the depths of their soul to pull out energy reserves. Each of Emma's movements feel hypnagogic, making the never ending drop on each side of her insubstantial.

Kaiden operates the incline like a spider, each limb having a specific job and executing to perfection. Every now and then he looks down at Emma to make sure she's still there. Each time he grows more disappointed with her progress.

CUT TO:

EXT. SOUTH SUMMIT - LATER

**South Summit 28,700 Ft.**

Kaiden sits on the bare ice, trying his best to stay warm to no avail. He wears his frustration and concern.

Before long Emma's axe plops by his feet. She emerges from the edge clinging to the rope.

EMMA

Kaiden.

Kaiden springs into action and drags her to safety.

KAIDEN

I hate to say this, but we have to go back down now.

Emma unclips her mask halfway.

EMMA

Why?

KAIDEN

By the time we hit summit, it'll be far too cold to survive.

EMMA

We just need to get up to the Hilary Step.

KAIDEN

Still, the sun is going down rapidly, and at your pace...

Emma shields her eyes and looks at the sun peeking through the clouds.

EMMA

I can speed up, Kaiden.

Emma struggles to get up.

KAIDEN

We'll never make it, I'm sorry.

Kaiden clips on his rucksack.

EMMA

We can't go back. I've come too far.

He takes off a glove and shows her his hands. The tips of his fingers are turning blue.

KAIDEN  
You can choose to follow or not.  
It's ultimately your choice.

EMMA  
Wait..

Kaiden clips himself onto the walk rope and starts to descend.

KAIDEN  
Good luck with your mission.

EMMA  
Kaiden, get back over here! I can't  
do this alone!

The wind consumes her screams. Once she has nothing left, she approaches the walk rope, and clips on.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL - DELIVERY ROOM - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

A sweaty Emma sits on a delivery bed, nurses and doctor cheering her on. Patrick kneels by her clutching her hand never taking his eyes off hers.

EMMA  
I'm scared, Pat.

PATRICK  
Hey, hey. You are doing great.

EMMA  
It doesn't feel right. I can't do  
this.

PATRICK  
Everything is fine. You're going to  
be fine.

DOCTOR SHEPARD  
Seven centimeters dilated!

PATRICK  
This baby is so lucky to have a  
strong mother. Do you have a name  
yet? I want it to be the first  
thing she hears.

EMMA

Samara.

PATRICK

Samara. We can call her Sam.

Emma laughs, then screams.

DOCTOR SHEPARD

Keep pushing.

PATRICK

I love you so much.

EMMA

Don't leave me.

DOCTOR SHEPARD

Here it is!

The doctor relieves Emma of the baby, but no crying.

DOCTOR SHEPARD (CONT'D)

Nurse!

She takes the lifeless baby and sets it on the table. The doctor takes off his apron and lifts the baby from its leg, and begins rubbing its back, lightly tapping it.

EMMA

What's wrong?

PATRICK

Doctor Shepard! What's happening?

The doctor continues to work frantically. Patrick looks back at Emma helplessly.

PATRICK (CONT'D)

She's going to be okay.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL - DELIVERY ROOM - LATER

Doctor Shepard takes off his gloves and medical mask, revealing a look of despair, a face no one in a hospital wants to see. He pats Patrick on the back, while trying his best to explain the situation of their baby's death. There are no easy words for Patrick to say as Emma cries hysterically in his arms.

PATRICK (V.O.)  
We're going to get through this  
together, Emma. No matter what.

CUT TO:

EXT. SOUTH SUMMIT - DAY

Emma stands looking out towards the horizon.

PATRICK (V.O.)  
I love you.

Emma unclips from the walk rope. She finds new energy that propels her towards the next, steeper incline. She grabs her axe off the floor and drive it into the ice.

One hundred more feet.

EXT. HILLARY STEP - LATER

**Hillary Step 28,000 Ft.**

She ends up at a foot of an impressive set of rocks jaggedly shooting out of the mountain's crest. Harsh winds wildly swing the tattered walk ropes against frozen chunks of stone.

Barely conscious, she looks as best she can through her visor for her husband's famous orange suit. She grips the rope, but is met with pain. Upon taking off her gloves, a few black finger tips are revealed.

Her eyes says "fuck" but she has no words.

After scanning the area a few times she gives up and falls down. Her breath becomes shallow and squeaky as she rolls to her back.

The sun chases the horizon as she makes one last effort, stretching her neck to look over her chest. A faded neon orange patch of nylon puffs up against the brown rock ten feet in front of her.

EMMA  
Oh my god.

She coughs up some bloody phlegm and spits it into the bleached snow.

Her forearms drive her body as she soldier crawls to the corpse. The closer she gets the more unrecognizable her husband becomes. She unclips her mask for a better look.

The frostbite has consumed his face, completely mummifying his features. Her near-empty tear ducts produce streams.

EMMA (CONT'D)

Pat!

Her voice is raspy, almost chain-smoker like.

EMMA (CONT'D)

Why?

She beats his arm. Hard as rock. She kneels by his side.

EMMA (CONT'D)

You left what you had for this!

She looks out toward the horizon. Ice-coated mountains span as far as the horizon, a beautiful display of earth's capability. They appear small from where she sits.

EMMA (CONT'D)

Was this all?

(beat)

You stupid, stupid man.

Emma buries her head into his chest.

She unclips her pack, a million times better. Her knife meets the canvass of the back, and cuts open the frame, which she reassembles to form a makeshift snap-lock sled.

Using her knees, she crawls over to Patrick and grabs onto his shoulder.

EMMA (CONT'D)

I'm sorry.

She snaps his arm from the earth, then his upper back. She yells over the fractures of ice and bone to drown the horrific noises.

Through her exertion her mask starts to freeze over. She throws it to the side, and continues the process with his legs, One leg on the sled, then the other.

His body remains stuck to the crack. Frustrated and exhausted she gets behind him and starts to push. She pushes and pushes, but nothing. On the last push her body gives out, and she takes a break nudged up against him. The wind overbearing, so she nestles into his suit, scavenging any warmth she can.



We hear a familiar crunch of ice. Her eyes shoot open, and we see an orange mountain suited man. He takes off his mask, and it's Patrick.

PATRICK

Come on.

Patrick reaches out his hand.

EMMA

What?

PATRICK

Come home. The kids are waiting.

She takes his hand, and blacks out.

CUT TO:

EXT. SOMEWHERE BETWEEN SOUTH SUMMIT AND HILLARY STEP - LATER

Garrett, buried underneath a heap of climbing gear, including heating pads on his legs and arms, fights through the beginnings of a storm. He audibly grunts with each step, determined not to buckle under all of the weight on top of him.

EXT. HILLARY STEP - LATER

Garrett trudges through the snow falling from the lip of the step, a familiar sight. He wipes at his fogged goggles, struggling to see his surroundings. Out of reflex, he unlatches his mask for a better view, but his face instantly meets the stinging cold.

He spots the sight where he left Patrick, and halfheartedly jogs over. Upon closer inspection he sees Emma's body on top of Patrick's.

GARRETT

God, no. God, god, god. Damnit,  
Emma!

The sight brings him to his knees. After taking off his glove, he puts his finger to her nose, but doesn't feel her exhale.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

This wasn't supposed to happen.

He cries, exhausting his vocal chords. The shrieking wears him out quickly. He looks over to Patrick's body.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

I tried, man. I'm fucking sorry.

Struggling to get up, he sheds his pack, and rolls to his stomach. His eyes widen as he sees his oxygen level is critical. Before he can push up, he sees Emma's pack on the floor, and checks her oxygen tank level. She still has a fourth.

He clips her pack to his chest, and unwinds the oxygen valve full throttle. The wind howls violently, causing him to lose his balance, but he plants his feet and manages to stand.

Tears are still flowing underneath his mask as he looks at their bodies one more time.

He disappears into the storm.

EMMA (V.O.)

February 1st, 2018.

FADE TO: WHITE

FADE IN:

EXT. SENIOR SKARSGARD RES. - DAY

Julianne walks hand in hand with Ronnie toward the mailbox. A thick parcel sticks out of its metal body.

EMMA (V.O.)

Today, I said goodbye to my babies with at least one hundred hugs and kisses, but I don't think it was enough... At least for me.

Julianne retrieves the package, investigating what it might be and who its from. It's a Florida address.

EMMA (V.O.)

I hope they don't grow up the hate the person I've become. I hope they can understand why I feel like this is important. Maybe they won't even remember this whole thing. Or maybe they'll hold it against me until the day I die.

INT. SENIOR SKARSGARD RES. - LIVING ROOM - LATER

Julianne reads Emma's journal on the couch as Andrew and Ronnie watch T.V.

EMMA (V.O.)  
Whatever it is, I'll love them with  
everything I have.

Julianne tries to hold in her tears.

RONNIE  
Do you miss mommy, grandma?

Julianne nods and gives her a hug.

CUT TO:

EXT. MÜLLER RES. - DAY

A lone orange tree stands in front of a modest beach house. Garrett, bags in hand, stands in front of the mailbox admiring the view. He has minor freezer burn across his face.

EMMA (V.O.)  
If there is a God, I want him to  
know that I don't blame him for  
what happened to Patrick. I just  
ask him to take care of my babies  
while I'm gone.

He approaches the door, and gives a hardy knock on the windscreen door.

EMMA (V.O.)  
Give Julianne and Anne strength to  
care and love them just as much as  
I do. Please take care of everyone.

A woman opens it, surprised to see him. He drops his bags, and give her his best "take me back face". A teenage girl kicks down the door, and tackles him to the floor.

The woman in the doorway can't help but laugh. He gets up, and convinces her to give him a hug.

EMMA (V.O.)  
Because life isn't worth living  
without my family.

INT. MÜLLER RES. - KITCHEN - NIGHT

The Müller's gather around a round table for dinner for the first time in years. They have homemade hamburgers with all of the fixings. Garrett stares at his family like he's never had before.

INT. MÜLLER RES. - KITCHEN - LATER

Garrett washes the dishes, similar to a child. We can tell he hasn't done this in awhile, probably from fast-food or T.V dinner habits.

EMMA (V.O.)

Maybe that's the reason I'm really here. Maybe I need to feel whole again. Maybe I need Patrick home, next to his father, with his family. I don't know all the answers.

He looks out of the kitchen window to his daughter and wife walking towards the beach. He looks back to the doorway and sees Emma's ratty climbing pack.

He stops the dishes and bursts out the house.

EXT. MÜLLER RES. - BEACH WALKWAY

Garrett runs up to his girls and hugs them, never wanting to let go.

EMMA (V.O.)

What I do know is despite all that's happened, leaving home was the single hardest thing I've ever have to do in my life--and still I sit in this Chinese airport unsure if I made the right decision. Time will only tell.

CUT TO BLACK.

**THE END**

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Joseph M. Balderas is an alumnus of the University of Texas—Pan American and University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, holding a BA in English and MFA in Creative Writing respectively. Currently he resides at 2905 Oriole Ave, McAllen, Texas. He has published his writings in the local newspaper and various websites throughout his collegiate years.