

FIRST ASCENT

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EXT. BIG ROCK WALL - DAY

Chalk-stained fingers crimped in tiny rock holds.

Climbing shoes smeared against granite.

Blaze blue eyes seething with obsession.

HILLARY HALL (35) is climbing a big rock wall. Only two hundred and fifty feet up. Two thousand left to go. She's in her element. No ropes. No protection. No fear. The only thing between her and certain death is the strength of her fingers.

She climbs past a tiny Go Pro camera fastened to the rock. Blows it a kiss. Finds her footing on a nickel sized perch.

Catches her breath. Resting on the face. *Get it back. Breathe.* Music spills out of her wireless earbuds. She glances at the spectacular views. Breathes it in.

Down below, HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE are gathered at the base of the wall. Watching this tremendous feat of athleticism. Satellite news vans. A line of REPORTERS throwing live shots.

REPORTER

Hillary Hall, the Gretzky of Granite, is attempting to break the free solo speed record, climbing all two thousand feet of sheer granite without ropes...

TOURISTS with binoculars and cameras. Everyone trembling with suspense. Filming with their iPhones.

High above, Hillary takes out her phone to check the timer: *thirty two minutes and counting.* She's making good time.

She tries to put the phone away, but it slips through her fingers.

Tourists GASP as the phone bounces down the wall and is swallowed by the canopy of trees below.

Hillary laughs it off, pebbles rain. The music in her earbuds turns choppy and dies. She plucks them out and lets them fall, too. They're a crutch anyway.

She gives the MINIATURE SILVER PITON she wears on a cord around her neck a good luck kiss and *blasts off!*

CUT TO:

A documentary crew filming Hillary from a parallel summit.

NEIL (30s), a chiseled adventure filmmaker, and JEN (40s), a scrappy cameraperson. Neil is trying to film Hillary with a massive telephoto lens. Jen is flying a drone.

NEIL
I think I'm gonna faint.

JEN
Just pretend she's tied in.

NEIL
I can't believe I let her talk me into this.

JEN
Better it's you. If it wasn't you, it'd be someone else.

NEIL
Where's my Tums, do you have another Tums?

JEN
You ate 'em all.

Neil looks back through the lens. Gets on his walkie.

NEIL
Ernie. She's coming. Are you set?

ERNIE (WALKIE)
Not gonna lie, I'm nervous as hell.

NEIL
Good. You stay nervous. Once you're not nervous, you're fucked.

BACK TO:

HILLARY. Stemming up the corner, smearing toes against granite. She knows this rock by heart, she's rehearsed it a hundred times, and she has the sequence dialed. *Reach left. Toe here. Find the hold. Breathe...*

She climbs up to ERNIE (30s), filming from a fixed line. He's big enough to bear hunt with a branch. She takes a breath.

HILLARY
You want another take? I could make it look like it's hard for me.

ERNIE
(nervous)
You don't have the acting chops...

NEIL (WALKIE)
Are you fucking kidding?! Don't talk to her, don't distract her!

HILLARY
Is that Neil?

Hillary latches on to a crimp, swivels towards Neil's mountain. She can't see him but she knows he's there. Waves. Kodak courage.

NEIL (WALKIE)
Tell her to quit showing off and
climb...

HILLARY
Tell him to take another Tums. I'm
ahead of schedule.

JEN (WALKIE)
You're doing great! Focus!

ERNIE
I'll see you at the top, kid.

He films her as she blasts past him, sprinting up the rock. Giving it all she's got. Climbing higher. Once she gets to the crack, the wall is hers. It's fist jams all the way.

She pastes her foot on to a ripple. Crimping creases with her fingers. Reaching for the hold. Pulling herself up.

Hillary makes her way to the lighting-bolt crack above. It splits the rock and zigzags to the top of the pitch. Passes another Go Pro. They're all over the rock. She perches on a tiny foothold. Takes a breath. Breathes in the world.

It's all downhill from here. She reaches for the crack --

But slips! Gasps. Dangling from one hand. Rock dust rains. Hillary's gasping. Desperate. SCREAMS wafting up from below.

Neil is fumbling with his walkie.

NEIL
Hurry! Go, Ernie!

Ernie chucks the camera, and snaps into action. *Click. Click.* He's jugging up the line, panicking, pulling on a mechanical ascender, thirty feet away.

NEIL
Faster!

Jen snatches the walkie from Neil.

JEN
BE CAREFUL!

All of Hillary's weight on her fingertips. Knuckles whiten. She looks down. And for the first time in her life she's afraid of heights.

ERNIE
I'm coming, Hill!

She tries to pull herself up. Feet scraping the wall for friction. She can hear the fans freaking out down there.

ERNIE
Grab the line!

Hillary's arm is shaking. Pumped and flushed. Fear pops out her eyes. Grasping for Ernie's fixed line. But it's just too far. She's searching for another hold. Anything. Reaching.

Fingers slipping. Lactic acid humming in her forearms.

Ernie's working the rope. *Click. Click.* Twenty feet below. But Hillary knows it's over. She can't hold on anymore. Tears fall down her face and sting her eyes, extinguishing the fire within. She screams. More rage than fear.

NEIL (WALKIE)
Ernie! Climb!

Hillary finds the grace to close her eyes and breathe.

HILLARY
(resigned)
I can't.

Her eyes SNAP OPEN. And instead of being evicted...

She lets go. Falling on her own terms.

Ernie kicks off the wall. Tries to catch her and -- *WHAMMM!!*
The impact snaps his arm like a stick.

Jen screams in horror as Hillary falls into the void. Like the statue of a climber, gripping the wind, the forest growing beneath her feet. This is when the rope would catch her. But the tug never comes. Because there is no rope. There never was.

Neil is screaming. Veins bulging. Split flying. The free fall reflected in the lens of HIS CAMERA.

Tourists turn away in horror. Mothers shielding the eyes of screaming children. Live newscasts cutting to commercial.

Gray rock blurs by. *WHAMM!!!* She catches an outcrop, shattering both legs. Bounces off the wall. Falling still. Seconds left to live. She surrenders to gravity. To nature.

As the forest rushes up and eats her alive.

CUT TO:

T W O Y E A R S L A T E R

INT. VAN - DAY

Hillary opens her eyes. Shooting confused looks around. Wipes the sleep from her eyes. The old sizzle is gone.

She sits on a small cot in a dark, cramped Ecoline van. She kicks her feet over the side. Breathes. This is a mobile climbing base camp. Built-out. Even a small kitchen. She rises. Stiff as a board.

Her piton necklace is dinged and scratched. She gives it a good luck kiss. The first of many morning rituals. Next, she pops her pills.

And then she's doing pull ups on a crimp training board. Angry purple surgery scars bisect her neck. Fleishy bumps from the metal screws tent the skin in her knees. A screw is loose again. She fingers it. Winces. Pushes it back into place. Continues with her set.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - YOSEMITE VALLEY - DAY

Buttes and spires soar in the background. Hillary throws open the door of her van. Emerges into the light. We finally see the hardened skin graft that traverses her brow and descends to her ear like a little mask.

She limps up her driveway and into her small house on a secluded cul de sac. Shuffles past the trash can where THE BROKEN CEILING FAN has been haphazardly discarded. Strange.

She's about to open the door. Stops. Looks up at the second story window. Smiles. Jumps on to the portico, shimmies up. Leaps on to the awning. Pulls herself up on to the roof, enters through the window.

INT. HILLARY'S HOUSE - DAY

Sleek, clean edges. Cold and empty. No decorations. Nothing on the walls. Like she never bothered to move in.

Hillary moves quickly to the bathroom, passing framed magazine covers leaning against the wall. Action shots of Hillary on rock walls. *Climbing Magazine*. *Hillary Hall: "The Gretzky of Granite."*

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Hillary takes a shower. A ROPE BURN wrings her neck. Fresher than the surgery scars.

On the floor, a waterlogged magazine. *Rock & Ice*. A photo of a broken Hillary with a cane at the hospital rehab, staring into the camera. *"The High Cost of Vertical Living."*

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Hillary pulls her clothes out of the suitcase on top of her empty dresser and gets dressed. There's an old wheelchair tucked in the corner.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Two frayed photos on the fridge. Hillary, Neil, Jen and Ernie on a snowy mountain peak. Like family. Happier times. On the counter, a haunting pile of medical bills -- *PAST DUE*.

Hillary sits sipping hot tea. Pulls out her atlas. Her dining room table is covered with maps of China. Topos. Photos. A leather bound climbing journal. Months of planning.

Research. Scattered news articles. Old and yellowed. "*LOCAL ROCK CLIMBERS MAKING 'FIRST ASCENT' IN CHINA.*" Under the headline, a photo of two men -- MARK HUDSON and PAUL HERNANDEZ. Climbing partners. Arm-in-arm. Big smiles.

Hillary grabs the phone. Trying to work up the courage.

EXT. DARRAN MOUNTAINS - NEW ZEALAND - DAY

Neil stands on a mountain peak. The stunning view of the New Zealand surrounds him. Ernie and Jen are checking their equipment. A CLIMBER is harnessing up.

Neil's phone rings. Unknown number. He answers.

NEIL

Hello?

INTERCUT: Hillary grimaces, and hangs up on him. She throws her phone. It skips across the carpet. She looks at it.

Picks it up again, and dials. Neil answers.

NEIL

Who is this?

HILLARY

It's Hill.

Neil sucks in a surprised breath. Hillary bites her lip.

NEIL

Jesus. Hill. How are you?

Neil's team is ready to shoot, and calling for him. He holds up a finger. He's been waiting for this call for a long time.

HILLARY

I'm great! I'm good! I'm okay. Hey, it's windy, are you--

NEIL
 --Darran Mountains. We're on a
 shoot for Patagonia.

HILLARY
 I realize this is out of the blue.
 I was meaning to call you back.

NEIL
 You changed your number.

HILLARY
 I changed a lot of things.

NEIL
 Are you okay?

HILLARY
 One hundred percent.

NEIL
 You disappeared.

HILLARY
 ...I'm back.

NEIL
 What do the doctors say?

HILLARY
 They say what doctors say. It's all
 good now. I'm climbing again.

NEIL
 Of course you are.

Ernie is watching Neil. He's put on some weight since we last
 saw him. His eyes have dulled. Jen nudges him.

JEN
It's her.

Ernie shudders. Neil moves away for privacy.

HILLARY
 Listen, I'm calling cuz I found an
 epic. A four thousand foot big wall
 in China. This beautiful crack
 system. It's a legit first ascent.
 Virgin rock. No one knows about it.

NEIL
 You're bouncing off the walls,
 aren't you?

HILLARY

They said I'd never walk again let alone climb.

NEIL

That's the price to play when you climb without ropes.

HILLARY

You can say *I told you so* if it will make you feel any better.

She takes a sip of hot tea. A SHARP PAIN rockets through her body. Her hand goes limp, and she spills the tea down her shirt. She jumps up, swallowing a scream.

NEIL

What do you want, Hill?

She pulls out a bottle of pills. Chews one down.

HILLARY

...I want to finish the film. We can pivot, we'll make it an against-all-odds type thing.

She's pacing, flapping her numb hand, trying to get it back.

NEIL

Hillary Hall's fall and rise?

HILLARY

See?! You make me better. I need my old climbing partner. You're the only one I trust on my rope...

NEIL

Pitch it to the North Face, they got a million guys.

HILLARY

I don't want to sell anything, I don't want to answer to anyone. I want you and Ernie and Jen and that's it.

NEIL

Who's gonna pay for it?

HILLARY

You. I'm selling you my life rights.

Neil is hesitant. But the wheels are turning.

NEIL

One condition.

HILLARY

Anything.

NEIL

I'm the filmmaker, you're the subject. I'm going to ask you questions and you're going to answer them. Nothing's off limits.

She GUFFAWS obnoxiously. Her hand is finally back to normal.

NEIL

I'm serious.

She hesitates. This is scarier than a 200 foot free fall. She looks up at a hole in the ceiling. RED WIRES DANGLE.

NEIL

Are you there?

She looks over at the wall. A homemade poster tacked up.

A GIANT BIG ROCK WALL printed on several sheets of paper to form a collage. DÌYÙ SHAN. Four thousand feet of sheer granite. A cave one thousand feet near the summit, like a screaming mouth. Cracks like wrinkles. Spires jut up on either side like horns. *If the devil has a face, this is it.*

NEIL

Do we have a deal or not?

HILLARY

(terrified)

I'm an open book.

CUT TO:

F I R S T A S C E N T

EXT. SICHUAN PROVINCE, CHINA - DAY

Rural China. Steep terraced rice fields. Limestone landscapes filled with toiling farmers and lumbering water buffalo. In the distance, mountain peaks stretch into heaven.

WOOSHH!!! A small battered van roars past.

INT. VAN - DAY

LI (70s), a chain-smoking local with leathery skin, is driving the crew through the stone slab streets of his ancient mountain village. The van screams and wheezes.

Neil, Hillary, and Ernie are squeezed in back. A little too close. It's a bumpy ride. Jen's in front readying her camera.

Hillary studies satellite images of the mountain, making notes in her journal, oblivious to the beauty that surrounds. Her jacket is hiked to hide her rope burn.

NEIL
Aren't you hot?

She shakes her head, no. Ernie has got his ear buds in, leaving a voicemail.

ERNIE
...Hey, babe. It's me again. We landed. The turbulence was crazy. I thought we were gong down for a minute. Anyway. You should be home from work by now. Just... I'm calling. Call me back. Can we talk about this? Please.

He hangs up, rips his earbuds out. Solemn.

Hillary looks up. Surprised to find a camera in her face. Jen is swiveled in the passenger seat, shooting.

HILLARY
Do we have to film everything? I look like shit...

NEIL
Camera never turns off.

Neil swipes her hair away from her face. It was hiding her skin graft from the camera. She rips away from his touch.

HILLARY
Stop. What the are you doing?

She quickly covers it back up with her hair.

NEIL
Relax. It makes you look badass.

She considers. And then pulls back her hair, revealing the skin graft for camera. She glances at Ernie. He's texting madly, thumbs flying across the screen.

NEIL (CONT'D)
What is it about a first ascent?

Hillary spikes the lens. On edge.

HILLARY
You don't waste time, do you?

NEIL
Deal's a deal.

HILLARY

Well. For one thing. A first ascent
is hard to come by these days.

ERNIE

(sighs)

Yeah, you gotta go to China.

LI

You're not the first.

They all look at Li. Jen is filming him now.

NEIL

...What?

LI (CONT'D)

Men came. Americans. Years ago.

NEIL

Are you sure?

LI

I drove them myself.

ERNIE

Uhhhh... Hill?

NEIL

You said this was virgin rock...

HILLARY

No. I said it was a first ascent.

LI

They were arrogant men.

NEIL

Did they make it to the top?

LI

There was a bad storm. They were
never found.

HILLARY

See? Still a first ascent. The fact
that people have tried and failed
is all the better.

ERNIE

Wow.

HILLARY

I didn't mean it like that. I mean.
You know what I mean.

(to Neil)

Don't put that in.

NEIL
 (to Li)
 Hold on, but is it safe?

HILLARY
 Of course it's safe. They made a
 bad call, these guys. I mean, check
 the fucking weather. Really.

LI
 Many have tried...

HILLARY
 More the merrier.

Li blows out an angry plume of smoke.

ERNIE
Hillary.

HILLARY
 Relax! It's *five-twelve* climbing at
 best, it's like sending Freerider
 on El Cap, it's our sweet spot.

LI
 They say that mountain doesn't want
 to be climbed.

The team is thoroughly spooked by this. They exchange looks.
WHAMM! They hit a pothole and slam into each other.

HILLARY
 (to Li)
 Listen, we're not like those other
 guys. We climb clean, we keep
 things in balance. Being a good
 steward of the rock is just as
 important as the ascent itself.

Li takes a greedy drag, watching Hillary in the mirror. It
 creeps her out. A sharp pain shoots down her arm. She gasps.

NEIL
 What's wrong?

HILLARY
 Nothing. Just... the altitude.
 We're so high up.

NEIL
 We're about to get a lot higher...

Ernie gasps, remembering something. He quickly rips off his
 left boot and sock, and shakes out a hidden DIME BAG OF WEED.

They all eye him.

ERNIE
(shrugs)
It's medicinal. For my anxiety.

They're heading for an endless gray forest.

EXT. DIRT ROAD - DAY

The road ends at a base of a dark and gnarled forest. A trail. Fenced in. A gate is chained and padlocked.

LI
This is as far as I go.

They all climb out. Li helps them unload their gear.

LI
Just follow the trail. I'll be back
in four days. Radio me when you're
coming out.

Hillary pays him. He counts it. It's a lot of money.

HILLARY
We'll see you in four days.

Guilt flashes in his eyes.

ERNIE
How long's the hike?

LI
Don't know...

NEIL
Sir? Would you mind signing this
release? To use your image in our
documentary?

Neil hands him the release. Li stares at it.

NEIL
It's pretty standard stuff.

Li considers. And then he takes his glasses out, and pops them on. Signs the paper on Neil's back.

NEIL
You're gonna be a star!

Li shoots him a pitiful look, jumps back in the van, and peels away like he can't get out of there fast enough. Hillary watches him vanish over the horizon.

Turns to the hand painted sign hanging on THE FENCE. It has a slew of shouting Chinese characters and a crude drawing of a stick figure with an X through him. It probably says *BEWARE*.

ERNIE
How do we get through?

Hillary opens her backpack full of tools. Pulls out a pair of bolt cutters. Snips the chain right off the gate.

ERNIE
I had a feeling.

The gate CREAKS open. The wind picks up. They look toward the dark forest. It's breathing. Alive.

JEN
Can I just say, before we start,
you know I speak for all of us when
I say that we are honored to be a
part of this. You're so strong.
Everything you went through, you
know, coming back from all that,
it's really inspirational,
overcoming advers--

HILLARY
--Jen. Stop. I love you, but please
don't patronize me.

JEN
Uh.

HILLARY
I'm a rock climber not a little
china cup. I don't want you guys
walking on egg shells around me or
anything like that. Alright?

JEN
Oh, totally, I didn't mean--

HILLARY
--I plan to bust my ass for the
next four days, I expect the same
from all of you.

JEN
Copy that.

Neil chews a Tums. Ernie's cell phone RINGS. He answers.

ERNIE
Hello? Baby-- Hold on. No, hold on.

Distraught, Ernie hurries off for privacy. A frantic, whispering argument.

HILLARY
What's with him?

JEN
Monica broke up with him again.

HILLARY
What'd he do now?

JEN
He went to China.

Hillary messes up her face. Shoots Ernie a look, as if his condition might be contagious.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

The forest is ominously quiet. No breeze. As the team bushwhacks, the path is getting narrower. Straining as they lug equipment. Massive haul bags on their backs. Hillary is limping. Pretending everything is okay.

Jen approaches Neil and Ernie. Hillary's out of earshot.

JEN
And? On again or off again?

NEIL
No. Nothing. I'm the director,
she's the subject. That's it.

ERNIE
Are you sharing a portaledge?

NEIL
Absolutely not.

They look at him. Not buying.

NEIL
Do you know what it's like
competing against a mountain? The
mountain always wins.

Up ahead, Hillary stops to catch her breath.

ERNIE
She's already struggling.

NEIL
Please. She has the most endurance
of any climber I've ever seen.

JEN
I saw her climb a hundred pitches
in a single day.

ERNIE
What about *mentally*? I heard she
lost her vertical hold.

NEIL
I'm keeping an eye on it.

ERNIE
Is she gonna do any soloing?

NEIL
No. I told her... I won't be around it. She's using ropes from now on.

ERNIE
I don't have another El Cap in me, man. I still have nightmares.

JEN
It's a second chance for all of us.

NEIL
It's is gonna be a great film. People might even see it. I mean real people, not just climbers.

JEN
She's a great character.

ERNIE
That's what she is, a character. It's all an act with her.

NEIL
No. This is warts and all.

ERNIE
Does she know that?

Neil shoots them a look. Hillary snaps back into character.

HILLARY
Move out! We're burning daylight!

EXT. RIVER - DAY

A raging, swollen river blocks their path. A fixed line across the river -- the Tyrol traverse.

Jen is filming as Hillary crosses, using her feet to push off the anchor tree. She gains some momentum, pulling herself across, inch by inch. Hair scrapes the raging water.

EXT. STONE FOREST - DAY

The team moves through a stunning forest of rock. Towering stalagmite pillars, 100-feet tall. They stay close, sticking to the trail for fear of getting lost in the rocky labyrinth.

Suddenly, A CHINESE CLIMBER darts out from behind a spire startling the team. Ropes slung over his shoulders. Pitons dangling. Carrying a pack. He looks lost. Sweat-stained.

HILLARY

Are you okay?

The man locks eyes with Hillary. And then he starts YELLING at her in Mandarin.

NEIL

Do you need help?

The man does an about-face, and stumbles away, weaving through the spires, losing himself in the maze. They exchange looks. Shrug it off, and keep moving.

EXT. DÌYÙ SHAN - DAY

They emerge through a clearing to reveal --

The wonder that is DÌYÙ SHAN. A behemoth blade of vertical granite nestled beside a rainbow speckled waterfall. Three quarters of the way up, THE CAVE. Like a ravenous mouth.

They drop their gear and crane in awe of it. A secret rock climber's paradise.

NEIL

It's stunning. Cracks for days.

HILLARY

It's perfect.

JEN

It's a dream.

A sharp gust of wind blasts through the canyon like a moan, swaying the canopies around them. Ernie lowers the camera.

ERNIE

I don't like it.

They look at him.

CUT TO:

They move past an ancient shrine, conquered by moss and vines. A faded YIN YANG symbol carved in stone.

A millennia's worth of OFFERINGS laid on the ground throughout the valley. A plate of old coins, ancient stone votives, clay pottery, carved statues of lions and dragons. Withered silk and jade flapping in the breeze.

The team moves through the vast sea of treasures, trying not to disturb them. Jen is filming it all.

HILLARY
Offerings.

The closer they get to the mountain, the stranger the offerings become.

They navigate small stacks of sun-bleached animal bones. Like trail markers of some kind. Some of them almost look human...

Ernie is creeped out.

EXT. BASE CAMP - DAY

Ernie stands before an old basecamp. A fire ring. Tents collapsed, worn, and withering.

ERNIE
I found their basecamp.

The rest of the team approaches, Hillary taking up the rear.

JEN
I wonder who they were...

HILLARY
Paul Hernandez and Mark Hudson. It happened fifteen years ago. Paul was a first ascensionist, Mark was a sport climber from Yosemite.

NEIL
Hold on. You knew about this?

HILLARY
Sure. That's how I found this place. I mean, what do you think I've been doing for the past two years? Research. Looking for virgin rock...

NEIL
I mean, were you gonna tell us?

HILLARY
(shrugs)
I'm telling you now.

He chews a Tums.

HILLARY
Neil. It's safe. There's nothing to worry about. I'm telling you it was a freak accident with these guys.

ERNIE
Shit. Their portaledge is still up.

Ernie points to an old PORTALEDGE TENT dangling twenty six hundred feet above. Hanging on for dear life. Rusty. Sun-swept and flapping in the wind. A loose pole clanking. A haunted house on a rock wall.

JEN
Must be where the storm hit.

HILLARY
It rained for five days, they were
just stuck up there.

NEIL
Sitting ducks.

HILLARY
Lucky for us it's nothing but sun.

JEN
Should we say a prayer or
something?

HILLARY
Do you know any?

ERNIE
I know grace.

NEIL
Now I lay me down to sleep.

JEN
How about a moment of silence?

HILLARY
Yeah. Good. Silence.

They all hold hands. Close their eyes. Silence. And then a bird of prey SHRIEKS above, murdering their silence, and making them jump. They all laugh at the scare.

EXT. BASECAMP - DAY

Black diamond tents erected. Triple trad racks. All their gear is laid out on blankets for inventory. So much stuff. Endless stacks of coiled rope. Slings, and carabiners. Cams, hexes and haul bags. Solar panels for charging batteries.

Neil is studying the rock through a scope. Checking it against the detailed satellite maps spread out on racks. Their route is planned, and scouted.

Jen films. Hillary hams it up for the camera.

HILLARY

Welcome to Dìyù Shan. Four thousand feet of sheer granite, that's higher than the Twin Towers stacked on top of each other. We're climbing it the purest way. Every pitch blind, with no idea what's in store. Neil and I found the cleanest route with the least amount of interruption.

Jen films Neil, looming over the maps, tracing their route with his finger.

NEIL

We open up here, ninety degrees going up the corner to the crack system. A thousand feet to this ledge. We'll establish the first portaledge camp there.

ERNIE

Looks like good clean rock, too.

Ernie sets his drone free. Zzzzzzzzzzz! It flies up the rock.

ERNIE

Come see. All we gotta do is climb. No real janitorial work.

They all huddle around the monitor watching the drone climb. Checking out the features. All the way to the top.

HILLARY

Yup. Here comes pitch twenty. This is the point of no return. It's two thirds of the way. Once we reach twenty six hundred feet, the only way out is up.

The drone approaches the PORTALEDGE. They all cringe.

HILLARY

Can you get closer, Ernie?

The drone hovers at the entrance. They all look.

ERNIE

It's empty.

But there's something staining the side. A RED SMEAR.

ERNIE

Is that blood?

NEIL

Jesus.

ERNIE

I bet it was an avalanche that
killed 'em. I bet the storm shook
those rocks loose. Look at the
fracture lines, it's a house of
cards...

JEN

Are we taking the trail down?

She shows them THE TRAIL on satellite topo map.

HILLARY

Right down the back, easy.

The drone keeps climbing. Ernie finds the mouth of THE CAVE.

ERNIE

Oh. Hello.

EXT. CAVE - DAY

Zzzzzzzzz. Dark. Drippy. The small white drone buzzing at the
mouth like cicadas. Hovering, as if afraid to enter.

Ernie presses the control. The drone creeps inside the cave.
Zzzzzzzzzzz. Ernie is watching on the monitor. Darkness. He
turns on the drone light, illuminating it.

Swirls of ancient dust. Shadows play on the wall. *WOOSH!*
Something skitters past. He squints. But nothing. A trick of
the light. Zzzzzzz-- The buzzing stops abruptly. The monitor
goes black.

ERNIE

Fuck.

He cranes up at the cave.

ERNIE

Hey, Jen? It cut out. It's in the
cave. I can't get a... I lost
control.

JEN

It's out of range, maybe.

ERNIE

Shit. It's not coming out. I just
bought that one, too.

HILLARY

It's alright, I'll get it for you
when we get up there.

They stare up at the cave. Hillary peels her eyes. Thinks she sees a FIGURE standing in the dark. So high. Watching them. But she blinks it away. Her mind's playing tricks.

JEN
You bring the spare?

ERNIE
Two is one, and one is none.

INT. TENT - NIGHT

Hillary unzips her jacket. Studies her neck in a small compact. She starts applying make up to cover her rope burn.

EXT. BASECAMP - NIGHT

Hillary sits before the fire staring directly at us. It's unsettling. Behind her, the rock glimmers in the moonlight.

HILLARY
A first ascent's about being somewhere no one's ever been. The puzzle of it, having the vision to see the line. Having no knowledge of what's ahead. Pushing your limits. Plus, there's a certain respect involved.

Reveal the lens she's staring at -- like she's a hostage, and it's the barrel of a gun. Neil and the guys behind it. This is an interview session.

NEIL
How so?

HILLARY
It's your route. You name it. There's something about being first. Achieving something no human has. You know, the Taoists thought mountains were a sacred place. A means of communication between heaven and earth. A bridge between the two. They say the rock is a great pillar, holding up the heavens. It's a place where immortality can be found. And that's true in some ways. You're first. You live forever up there somehow. A legacy.

NEIL
Are you looking for something to leave behind?

HILLARY
What do you mean?

NEIL
I mean you're lucky to be alive.

HILLARY
And I just want to be as alive as I
can be from now on.

NEIL
What was it like... when they told
you you'd never climb again?

HILLARY
What do you think it was like?

NEIL
Well, how did it feel?

HILLARY
I've always been climbing... since
you and I were kids in Yosemite. I
never stopped before.

NEIL
Yeah. It must have been terrifying.

HILLARY
I was never scared on a mountain.
Even without ropes. I was scared on
the couch. I'd been going hard for
twenty years without stopping. And
suddenly I'm laid up. Nothing to do
but think...

NEIL
What were you thinking about?

HILLARY
Walking again. And then climbing
again. And if I ever would...

She snaps back into character.

HILLARY
But here I am! Two years later.
Sending an epic. Proving everyone
wrong as usual.

NEIL
What would your life look like if
you weren't climbing?

HILLARY
I hate this.

NEIL
We had a deal.

HILLARY
What would it look like? I wouldn't
look like anything. If I don't
climb, I'll die.

NEIL
I heard you went away.

HILLARY
Went away?

NEIL
Fifty-one-fifty. Committed.

Jen and Ernie's ears perk. Hillary gazes into the camera. Her reflection trapped in the lens.

JEN
We gotta be up, why don't we give a
rest for the night?

NEIL
What happened?

HILLARY
Nothing, that's not... I just-- I
had a reaction to the meds. I had
to get 'em straightened out.

Hillary rubs her cheek against her shoulder to hide her neck.

NEIL
I'm not judging you. I'm just
trying to understand.

She jumps to her feet, knocking over the chair.

HILLARY
There's nothing to understand! I'm
a climber, I fucking climb! That's
all there is! You know that better
than anyone, Neil, fuck!

JEN
Hey, okay, enough. Let's just call
it a day...

NEIL
What are you climbing away from?

It hits a nerve. In a huff, Hillary hurries away from the cameras, into the darkness. Ernie and Jen look at Neil.

JEN
Warts and all.

Neil pops on a Tums. Hurries after her. Jen turns to Ernie.

JEN
It's like she's his mountain. Only he's
trying to get to the bottom of her.

Ernie shoots her a look. Jen makes eyes at him.

CUT TO:

Hillary stares up at the rock. It looks like a giant tombstone in the night. Perched at the mouth of the cave is a BLACK VULTURE. A grotesque, razor-beaked predator, always watching. It spreads its wings like the angel of death, and blasts off with a shrill shriek, flying against the moon.

The bigness of it terrifies her. She has to look away. Neil approaches. She hides her tears.

NEIL
I'm sorry.

HILLARY
What the fuck are doing with those
questions?

NEIL
I'm just trying to figure out what
this movie's about.

HILLARY
You're not Werner Herzog, you shoot
climbing porn.

NEIL
Whoa. Okay.

HILLARY
If you make me look like an
asshole, I swear to Christ I'll
burn down your life.

NEIL
I'm just trying to make you look
like a human being.

HILLARY
Well, stop.

Hillary storms off.

CUT TO:

Jen is packing up the gear. Ernie is frantic. On the phone.

ERNIE

Honey, listen, answer your phone, will yah? Please. It's expensive to leave these. Okay? Um, listen, I'm not gonna have service on the rock up there, can you call me, please? I love you. Okay! Love you, bye.

He drops the phone. The world ripped out from under him. He's ghost white, and has to take a knee.

JEN

Are you okay?

ERNIE

She's with Albert, I know it.

JEN

I think that's in your head, you know? I don't think that's real.

ERNIE

I got fat. I know that. I'm depressed, I don't know--

JEN

--You're perfect. You're Ernie. Everybody loves you, ya big galoot.

She puts a hand on his shoulder. He pulls away. His gaze shifts back to the rock wall. Moonlight catches the cracks just right and illuminates the granite. It's glimmering like a starry night. A hypnotic optical illusion.

He has tears in his eyes, staring transfixed. A low hum emanating from the rock. The sound washes over him.

ERNIE

Look at the granite.

JEN

Yeah.

ERNIE

How it shines. It's so beautiful.

The rock is calling him. He rises and goes to the wall. Jen watches him, a little worried.

EXT. THE BASE OF THE WALL - NIGHT

Ernie stands before the wall, wide eyed. It SHIMMERS, diamond-like. His eyes glaze over. He is compelled to touch the rock. Feels the warmth. Beating like a heart of stone...

He looks down at his hand, and the granite sparkle has rubbed off. He blows the residue off. It swirls into the wind like pixie dust. He inhales it, and sneezes.

He tries to wipe off the sparkle, but it's sticky and doesn't come off. Crystals absorbing into his skin. The shimmer is hypnotic. He stares at his hands like an infant discovering them for the first time.

INT. TENT - NIGHT

Hillary is cutting tape with a small knife. She tries to calm the tremor. Her hand is shaking violently, and she hasn't even started climbing yet.

NEIL (O.S.)

Hill?

She hides her hand, looks towards the flap. Takes a deep breath, fighting tears. Playing strong.

EXT. TENT - CONTINUOUS

Neil sees her shadow play on the tent wall.

NEIL

I just don't want you to feel like you're stuck. We can leave anytime. And I'll eat it. You don't owe me anything. No one even has to know, I promise...

INTERCUT: They speak through the closed flap.

HILLARY

(not selling it)

Nothing's gonna stop me.

NEIL

Just promise me if it gets to be too much you'll tell me.

HILLARY

I promise.

NEIL

Why don't I believe you?

HILLARY

Because I'm lying.

NEIL

Thanks for being honest.

HILLARY

Make sure you're dialed tomorrow.

NEIL
Of course.

HILLARY
Also... I want to say... thanks.

NEIL
For what?

HILLARY
Coming. Everything. I don't know...

NEIL
(smiles)
Let's do something great.

He goes. Hillary collapses with exhaustion. Closes her eyes.

CUT TO:

*A FLASH OF HILLARY FALLING HEAD OVER HEELS -- WOOOOSH!!
HURDLING RIGHT AT US -- WE BRACE FOR IMPACT!*

INT. TENT - NIGHT

Hillary snaps awake, bolts up. Sucking a massive breath. Covered in sweat. She hears a rustling outside. And then a shadow falls over her tent.

HILLARY
Neil?

The shadow moves around the tent. Slow, lumbering steps. Muttering in Mandarin. Hillary's eyes bug.

HILLARY
Hello?!

The shadow grows larger and then it melts away. She turns on her lamp, and jumps out of the tent. Nothing but the screaming night song. Everyone is asleep.

EXT. THE WALL - PRE DAWN

Headlamps pierce the dark. Four dusty beams walking to the start of the climb. Trail finally meets the wall.

The sun starts to rise. Hillary cranes in awe of the monolith. The first rays of morning spill down the face, making the granite glitter. It's magical.

CUT TO:

Hillary and Neil step into their harnesses. They tie into each other, connected by a life line.

Ernie has the camera on a gimble getting shots of the process. Hillary and Neil fasten their shoes, and chalk up. Wires and cams dangling off their harnesses.

NEIL
Where's your helmet?

HILLARY
I don't have one.

NEIL
You forgot it?

HILLARY
I don't own a helmet.

ERNIE
I mean, that's just so you.

NEIL
You're wearing a fucking helmet.

HILLARY
Still the safety Nazi, I see.

NEIL
Ernie, you got an extra?

ERNIE
Two is one, and one is none.

He hands Hillary his helmet. She takes it reluctantly. Looks at it like some revolting artifact.

NEIL
You put it on your head and you push the clip in. You want me to show you how?

She huffs, puts it on. Checks her knot.

NEIL
The first lead is yours.

HILLARY
One pitch at a time.

NEIL
(into his walkie)
Standby, Jen.

CUT TO:

Jen is perched on a ledge on the other side of the valley filming with a long lens.

JEN
 (into walkie)
 Copy that.

BACK TO SCENE: Hillary takes a deep breath. Kisses her necklace. And then --

NEIL
 It feels good. Being tied to you again.

HILLARY
 On belay?

NEIL
 Belay on.

HILLARY
 Climbing.

NEIL
 Climb on.

She smiles at him. Touches the rock. Looks up. It seems infinite, and it makes her dizzy.

HILLARY
 You're mine.

Feet push off and she starts climbing. Testing the friction of the granite with her shoes. Finding holds. Fingers trace rock. A slow start, but she's trying like hell not to appear gun shy for the cameras.

Neil belays, feeding her rope. Nervous. Biting his lip. She's placing gear to protect against falls.

Up she goes. Supreme concentration. The meat of her hand swallowed by cracks. A perfect fit, like they were made for each other. The wind whips through Hillary's hair. Trees crack in the distance. Ravens circle. Cawing. She looks up at the bigness of the rock. The endless up.

Suddenly, the birds fly at breakneck speed towards the wall like heat seeking missiles, and break their speed at the last second, vanishing into the cracks where they nest.

HILLARY
 Did you see that?!

NEIL
 Beautiful!

HILLARY
 Did you get it, Ernie?!

ERNIE
I got it.

HILLARY
Good omen.

Hillary chalks up. And climbs on.

CUT TO:

One hundred feet up. Working the rock. Slow and steady. Still getting her bearings.

NEIL
That's it! You got this!

The sun is on the rise, and so is she. Confidence building. She has a unique climbing style, a *singular voice*, even at half speed, no one climbs like her.

CUT TO:

Two hundred feet up. ZZZZZZ. The drone's constant buzz. Hovering. Always watching.

HILLARY
Don't get too close with that thing!

ERNIE
Copy!

Dopamine kicking in. The higher she climbs, the higher she gets -- it's a drug for her. The dull twinkle of obsession. Ever so often snapping protection into the cracks.

She sprints up the rock like a maniac. In her element. *The Gretzky of Granite*. This is where she belongs.

Neil belays, watching her like a hawk. And now she's going too fast. Flying.

NEIL
Slow down! You're not placing enough pro!

Climbing with her entire being. Straddling the wall. Faster. She's got something to prove. To herself, to the world.

NEIL
Hillary! Efficacy not speed! You gotta hook your heel on that--

HILLARY
(spit flying)
--SHUT THE FUCK UP, NEIL!

NEIL

Copy that.

Hillary hooks her heel anyway, and flies down the corner. It's getting harder now. Spread-eagled on the blank face, she can feel the cool stone against her cheek. She can hear that eerie rhythmic beating.

She pumps her fist. Her hand is flaring up. No matter. She gives it a good shake, and fights through the pain. Fingers press gently into the crystals. Her feet dance along the micro-ripples. She's slowing down. It doesn't come as easy like it did, she has to work twice as hard.

Breathes in. The smell of chalky dolomite. It gives her power. She releases the rock, pulls herself against the edge.

Grabs a hold, TWEAKS HER NECK. A sharp stab of pain rockets through her body. Her hand dies. The rock spits her off.

HILLARY

FALLI--ugh!

She plummets. Neil braces on belay. The rope goes taut. She falls and her CAM POPS OUT of the crack.

WOOOOSSSHHH!!!! She takes a whipper. Plummeting fifty feet. Stomach in her throat.

Neil reels in the slack through the belay, the force of the fall slams him into the wall. The last nut arrests her fall and she crashes into a ledge. WHUMP!!! Neil holds the rope taut, bleeding from his head, a bad rope burn on his arm.

Ernie drops the controller in fear. He can't look. The horrible memories flooding back.

Hillary's yanked up by her harness and CRACK!!! BASHES HER HEAD ON A LEDGE AND --

BLACK.

Wind. A shrill ringing in her ears. A creaky rope.

NEIL (O.S.)

Hill?!

CUT TO:

HILLARY'S EYES flutter open and she sucks in a breath.

She's hanging upside down in mid air. In and out of consciousness. Her piton necklace dangles across her face.

Neil's voice is getting clearer now --

NEIL (O.S)
Talk to me! Are you okay?! Are...

Neil's voice is consumed by the RINGING in her brain. A tiny avalanche of pebbles bouncing off her head. Swinging and dazed, she looks up to see --

TWO BLURRY MEN CLIMBING FIFTY FEET ABOVE HER. Tied together. Trying to get to the top. Hillary's upside down so they're climbing the wrong way.

CLIMBER #1
Something's wrong... I think we should head down...

CLIMBER #2
I'm getting to the top. There's only up from now on!

Climber #1 turns and looks Hillary dead in the eyes.

It's MARK HUDSON. He's long dead. In the throes of rigor mortis, leathery and decomposing, but always climbing.

His JAW DETACHES from his skull, and comes hurdling down at her.

Hillary gasps, and shields her face. But there's no impact. When she opens her eyes, the climbers are gone.

Hillary conjures a scream so loud it snaps her back to reality. She kicks at the wall like she hates it, and turns herself right side up. She shoots woozy looks around.

Ernie is queasy. He takes a knee. Touches the ground. Taking deep breaths, trying not to let the memories overtake him.

HILLARY
Is someone else here?!

NEIL
Are you okay?! You hit your head!

She checks for the Climbers one last time.

HILLARY (CONT'D)
I'm fine...

She looks down at her hand. It's dead. She sways back and forth, balling it into a fist.

HILLARY
 (to herself)
Fuck. Don't do this to me. Not now.

She reaches into her pocket, grabs a pill and chews it up. She has tears in her eyes. She bats them away before the drone can see. Her hand is limp and worthless.

NEIL

Are you--

HILLARY

--I'M FINE I SAID!

She slaps it against the wall, trying to get feeling back. She hides her hand from his view.

HILLARY

C'mon, fucker. Fuck. Fuck.

Neil tries for a better look. Worried as she flaps her hand wildly. Rubbing it. Scraping it against the stone. She's trying like hell to hide her plight from the cameras.

NEIL

You're okay, you're just... you're going way too hard, you gotta take it slow, you're rusty!

Hillary's eyes sizzle with hate. She's massaging her hand, pumping it like a resuscitation.

JEN (WALKIE)

What's wrong with her hand?

Finally, Hillary's hand comes back to life. She explodes up the rock. Climbing lizard-like. Pushing and pulling. Her eyes pulse with grit. A woman possessed.

Three hundred feet. Higher than Lady Liberty's torch. And Hillary is floating up with ease.

Down below, Neil is on his walkie talkie.

NEIL

Are you getting this?

JEN (WALKIE)

I got it.

NEIL

What'd I tell you? She's a madman.

Sprinting up a few more moves, perfect climbing. She pulls herself up to the base, and clips into the anchor.

NEIL

Jesus! That was amazing.

Huffing and puffing. She smiles.

JEN (WALKIE)
Hilly! Yer back baby!

Down below, Ernie sits on the ground, hugging his drone. He's ghost white and sweating. Trying to keep the memories at bay.

ERNIE
 It's happening again...

CUT TO:

Hillary builds her belay. Neil climbs. He follows her route, and her every fluid move. He pulls himself up to her.

NEIL
 Is your hand okay?

HILLARY
 I slept on it wrong. Your lead.

They changeover. Another sharp blast of wind. And then a WHIZZING sound. Getting louder. Hillary looks up to see THE LOOSE POLE FROM THE PORTALEDGE spiraling towards her from above like a spear and --

WHAPPP! Catches her across the face before sailing to the ground. It knocks her off the perch. She plummets, tangling in the rope, and slamming into the wall.

NEIL
 Shit, are you okay?

Her lip is bleeding as she swings there in the breeze.

HILLARY
 Perfect.

EXT. VALLEY - DAY

Ernie is filming Hillary with the drone. He flies up to the perch where the pole fell from. The broken tent sways in the wind. Hanging by a thread. The drone moves closer to the opening. Movement inside.

The drone gets closer. Someone moving in the sleeping bag.

Ernie falls back. Looks with his own two eyes. He can't see anything. Looks back through monitor, spooked.

JEN
 What's wrong?

ERNIE
 I saw... there's someone... I...

Jen peeks at the monitor.

ERNIE
In the tent.

JEN
I don't see anything.

ERNIE
There's someone in there! Fuck.

A sharp gust of wind and suddenly the tent starts slapping against the rock.

ERNIE
I don't know... I thought...

He ZOOMS IN a little more. And then A MASSIVE MONITOR LIZARD POPS out of the tent! Ernie screams, and clutches his heart as the lizard skittles up the wall like nothing, and disappears into a large crack. Jen bursts into wild laughter.

ERNIE
Fuck! FUCK! IT'S NOT FUNNY!

Jen laughs even harder. Ernie has tears in his eyes.

ERNIE
STOP LAUGHING AT ME!

Jen stops laughing abruptly.

EXT. WALL - DAY

As Hillary and Neil climb, the sun sinks behind soaring mountains. Blood red hues explode across the world. Van Gogh would be proud. Hillary doesn't notice. She's too busy getting to the top.

She reaches a perch. Wedges a cam in a crack and tests the hold. Perfect. She clips in. Last anchor of the day.

Neil ties his harness to the rope. Hillary belays from above. He climbs. Hillary pulls him up, and hooks him in.

NEIL
Don't forget to take a look around.

And she does. Breathes it in. Loses herself in the glorious, otherworldly sunset. Heaven on earth.

HILLARY
It's beautiful.

She's crying happy tears. Neil takes out his camera. Framing her against the glory. A stunning image.

NEIL
Good first day. How do you feel?

HILLARY
Back.

NEIL
You look "back."

HILLARY
Thanks.

She laughs. She can't contain it. Her eyes are glittering. So is her face from the smear of sticky granite.

NEIL
Hell of a whipper though.

HILLARY
I needed to get it out of the way.

NEIL
How's the rock feel to you?

HILLARY
I can't get a read on it.

NEIL
I know what you mean.

HILLARY
One minute it's choss, spitting me off, the next it's pristine. It's got a mind of its own.

NEIL
Yeah, like it's climbing us.

She shoots him a look.

NEIL
You found the great white wall.

HILLARY
Nah, she's just a crag.

They hear a low hum as hundreds of wingless silverfish scurry out of a crack in the wall and crawl upwards, scaling the rock with ease.

HILLARY
Show offs.

Neil laughs. They sit on the perch. Legs dangle. The beauty around them is overwhelming. Miniature old growth forest below. A chorus of wind.

NEIL
You're a long way from that fucking wheelchair anyway.

She laughs. Neil stops smiling. The sweat has melted the make-up off on Hillary's neck. And for the first time, Neil sees her ROPE BURN. It clicks for him. She feels his stare. Moves away to get to work. Neil's heart breaks for her.

EXT. BASECAMP - MAGIC HOUR

Jen and Ernie are carrying their stuff to camp.

ERNIE

This place is all wrong. The energy. Bad fucking juju, it just feels so fucked. I feel it in the air. Like humidity. Everywhere. I'm telling you I got second thoughts.

JEN

Are you high, Ernie?

ERNIE

Yes.

JEN

I'm not having this conversation.

ERNIE

I got such a headache, you it's throbbing big time. I'm nauseous, I'm all screwed up.

JEN

It's altitude sickness.

ERNIE

I don't know what I'm doing here. What am I doing here? Fuck, I want to bail...

JEN

You can't bail. We're in China.

ERNIE

I know, but I can want to can't I?!

He's overcome with emotion. Has to sit.

JEN

Look around. It doesn't get any better than this. The band's back together. And Hillary's the best in the world. We're here, we're a part of this amazing project, we get to climb virgin crag, and you're missing it. Just be here.

ERNIE

I'll kill that fucking Albert, too.
With my hands. He works for
Farmer's Insurance, the fuck. What
does she see in him? He's not me.
That's what.

JEN

You're scaring me. Seriously.

ERNIE

No, it's all my fault. I was never
there, I was always here or
somewhere else.

JEN

This is the life we chose, it's all
or nothing. All the time.

ERNIE

Nothing. I choose nothing then.
This is it for me. I'm done. I miss
her so much I want to die.

JEN

Please don't say that.

ERNIE

(sighs)

Two is one and one... is none.

She sits next to him. A little too close.

JEN

You love climbing. You need to find
someone who lives in our world and
understands the sacrifice...

She smiles. Takes his hand.

ERNIE

Yeah, cuz it worked out so great
for Neil and Hill.

Jen's smile vanishes.

EXT. WALL - SUNSET

Hillary is wearing a jacket now, zipped up to her neck. She
and Neil anchor in. Hillary pulls off her gear, and gasps.
Massive slash marks on her haul bag. She frantically wades
through it. Pulls out her portaledge. Slashes through the
nylon, too. Worthless.

HILLARY

Fuck!

NEIL
What happened?

HILLARY
Must have caught a razor flake.

They stare each other down, nervously. Neil swallows.

NEIL
Well. Uh... I have plenty of room.

Hillary shudders at the thought.

NEIL
Head to toe. It's either that or
one of us is on the ledge.

Neil goes back to erecting his tent. Hillary fingers the slash marks. And then she chucks the worthless tent, and watches it fall forever.

EXT. WALL - NIGHT

The wall bathes in blue moonlight, casting a ghostly glow.

A hanging tent dangles off the rock -- twelve hundred feet up now. The height of the Empire State Building. A red dot against an ocean of granite. The wind picks up, shaking it. It doesn't look very secure. Fuck.

INT. PORTALEIDGE TENT - NIGHT

It's cold. The wind howls through the tent and plays the face of the rock like a broken flute.

They're strapped in. Neil finishes eating. Hillary is nursing the skin on her fingertips. Applying cream.

NEIL
I want to talk about the accident.

She looks over. Neil is aiming the camera at her.

HILLARY
Jesus, Neil. Give it a rest.

NEIL
Tell me what happened.

HILLARY
Now that you have me captive.

NEIL
Deal's a deal.

The wind shakes the tent. Hillary holds her breath as they sway and rock, trying to steady herself.

HILLARY

I was trying to break the speed record, I broke everything but the speed record. I hit a branch on the way down, it saved my life.

NEIL

Why do you climb?

HILLARY

I like being high. It's church. It feeds my soul.

NEIL

Without ropes, I mean.

HILLARY

You know why.

NEIL

Tell me for the camera.

HILLARY

(rote)

I'm closest to nature. I'm one with it. The purest form of climbing. Complete surrender to what I love most. I can give it my whole self. And I can do it on my own. I'm by myself. I don't need anyone.

NEIL

Some people say it's Russian Roulette...

HILLARY

Some people say global warming isn't real. Some people say a lot of dumb shit.

NEIL

Do you have a death wish?

HILLARY

You don't get it. It's about living. It's zen. I feel the most alive without ropes. Everything is perfect and always was, and there is no fear, and everything is heightened and there's nothing but right now. This moment now.

NEIL

You're not afraid of falling?

HILLARY

I'm not afraid of anything.

NEIL

There's only one way that ends. All
the great free soloists are dead.
John, Eric. Mike. My friends...

HILLARY

I'm not gonna die. But if I do,
I'll die doing what I love.

NEIL

What about the people you'll leave
behind? The people who love you?

HILLARY

They'll get over it.

NEIL

Tell me about the scar.

HILLARY

What scar? I'm made of scars.

She feels the gaze of the lens. Violating.

NEIL

The one you're trying to hide.

HILLARY

Cut.

NEIL

That's my line.

Suddenly, her guard drops a little. She gets quiet.

NEIL

"If I don't climb, I'll die?" What
kind of bullshit is that?

HILLARY

Turn the fucking camera off.

NEIL

You've been trying to do it for
years up there without ropes. It's
the slowest suicide in history.

HILLARY

(dark)

Wrong. Climbing is what stops me...

A blast of wind rattles tent. The portaledge lifts,
undulating in the wind, like they're on the high seas. They
hang on. The wind stops and the straps tighten.

NEIL
 You never tell me what's going on.
 I feel like I know nothing about
 you. Really.

HILLARY
 We're not talking about this.
 That's not what this movie's about!

NEIL
 What's it about?

HILLARY
 Getting to the top!

NEIL
 What if we don't get to the top?
 What is it then? A snuff film?

Hillary rips the camera out of Neil's hand.

NEIL
 Hey!

She opens the flap and chucks it out. The camera falls into the abyss.

She just stares blankly at Neil. Wind blasts her hair. Crazy dances in her eyes. He's stunned.

NEIL
 Wow. I mean... it's so fucking
 crazy, I'm not even angry...

HILLARY
 I'll sleep on the ledge.

She crawls out of the tent.

EXT. WALL - NIGHT

Hillary is crying on a narrow ledge under the portaledge. It barely fits her. She's so high up, and it's even more vertigo-inducing at night. She's strapped into a harness, secured by anchors. Still, the wind is whipping and it's nerve wracking. For us, not her.

She's trying like hell to muffle her tears so Neil doesn't hear. Covering her face. Silent screaming sobs. Veins bulging in her face, covered in snot. Burying her face in her shoulder. She gasps for air. Tears stain the ledge.

The night sky is brilliant above her. A blanket of shimmering stars. Her beam of light illuminates BATS stalking bugs. They dive bomb and screech. One of them perches above her as if standing sentry. She shudders. 1,000 feet up on a ledge is one thing, but bats...

Down below, we see Ernie's fire. A small orange twinkle, 1,200 feet below.

EXT. BASECAMP - NIGHT

The fire smolders. Jen goes over their equipment, cross checking everything on her list.

Ernie sits by the fire, smoking a weed vape. He's lost in the flames. He stares at his cell phone, swiping through photos of him and MONICA. He enlarges her face with his fingers.

He hears the mountain's windsong behind him. He turns around, and gazes up at the glittering monolith. Campfire playing on his face like he's in hell. A ground mist at the base makes the rock look sinister.

Granite starts to sparkle on Ernie's forehead in harmony with the rock itself. Bits of mica and feldspar. Connected somehow. His eyes glaze. He stares up at the cave above.

Sees the black vulture perched at the mouth. He stands like a sleepwalker. His mouth curls into a snarl.

His gaze shifts to Hillary's headlamp. Just a yellow dot above, but she's there. His eyes narrow with hate. He clenches his fists into a tight ball. Chewing on his lip.

ERNIE

I was always there for her.

There's something sinister in Ernie's kind eyes.

JEN

ERNIE!

Jen comes barreling over and beats the fire off him with her jacket. He's standing too close, and his leaping flames are traveling up his pants.

JEN

Ernie! You were on fire!

ERNIE

What?! I--

He shoots nervous looks around the camp. He didn't even notice. He's scared. Confused. He looks back to the wall. The pull is strong.

ERNIE

(dark)

I feel like I've been here before.

JEN

What?

ERNIE
I've dreamed about this place. I
feel like I know what's coming.

JEN
ERNIE!

He snaps out of it. He's Ernie again.

ERNIE
Huh?

JEN
What are you talking about?!

ERNIE
Deja vu. You know? I don't know.

JEN
Enough with the weed. You need to
start taking care of yourself.

She grabs his vape and throws it in the fire.

JEN
And the other one.

She puts out her hand. He reaches into his pack and hands her
the second weed vape. She chucks that in the fire, too. Two
is one and one is none.

ERNIE
She might as well have died.

JEN
Who?

ERNIE
Hillary! I mean, she ghosted us,
after everything we went through!
She just disappeared! And I was
just getting use to her being gone
and poof, she's back with a fucking
epic. And now it's all happening
again. History repeats.

JEN
Listen. This is good for you. Being
here. It's time you talked to her.
About everything. You need closure,
you both do...

ERNIE
Closure. Yeah. Yeah...

He looks at his sparkly hands. Balls them into sparkly fists.

EXT. WALL - NIGHT

Hillary is perched off the ledge, holding on to a rope. She pulls down her pants and starts to pee.

The wind changes direction, and some of it splashes back on her. She cringes. Stops. Waits for the wind to shift. It does, and now she's urinating down the wall. Staining it. It's awkward, but this is how it's done.

Finished, she pulls up her pants. And then she hears the clap of SHOES against granite. Moving up the wall. Something's climbing below her.

She bolts upright. She sees a something moving in the dark. Shadows crawling up the wall. She shines her headlamp.

Nothing but a vertical mile of rock and the floor below. Her headlamp starts to flicker. Heavy breathing. Shoes scraping. Closer. Her lamp dies.

PITCH BLACK. She gives it a hard swat. Hears someone close. Getting closer. Slaps it harder. No light.

HILLARY

Hello?

Nothing. A blast of wind almost knocks her off the ledge.

She unhooks, and climbs over to the portaledge. Sees something moving out of the corner of her eye. She turns. Right behind her --

THE OUTLINE OF TWO CLIMBERS. Tied together. Questing up the wall beside her. Backlit against the grapefruit moon.

They stop and look at her. Lost in shadow. Cold plumes of breath are the only indication of a face. Hillary's eyes bug out of her head.

HILLARY

Ernie? Jen?

She knocks the headlamp back on and there's no one there. Nothing but sheer granite. Her mind is playing tricks on her. The light dies for good.

HILLARY

Fuck.

She pulls a lighter out of her pocket. Sparks it. Choking flame. It's sticking. She finally gets it to spark and --

THERE'S A MAN'S FACE INCHES AWAY FROM HER!

PAUL HERNANDEZ. Covered in blood. Dead eyes looking right through her. A guttural croak escapes his lips.

The second climber scurries up the stone like a spooked reptile. It's almost acrobatic, like some sick ballet.

Hillary screams and drops the lighter. It skips down stone.

BLACK. Just her deep breaths. Somewhere, a bat CHIRPS.

Suddenly, her head lamp TURNS BACK ON! Paul is gone. She's alone. She lights up the ledge. Nothing.

Terrified, she unzips the portaledge and pulls herself in.

INT. PORTALEGE TENT - NIGHT

Neil is asleep and snoring. Hillary is trying not to wake him up. She lies down. Head to toe. She touches the piton around her neck, and counts to ten. Shadows play on the wall of the tent. The wind is screaming outside. It's bad music.

NEIL
You're back.

HILLARY
Yeah.

NEIL
Are you okay?

HILLARY
I'm sorry.

NEIL
Me too.

They don't look at each other, just stare ahead. Hillary's eyes pulse with fear.

EXT. WATERFALL - NIGHT

Ernie is perched by the stream behind the waterfall, washing the sparkle off his hands. The ground mist simmers.

He's scrubbing. Harder. It won't come out. He's muttering to himself. Scrubbing harder. Harder. Scrubbing his skin raw.

ERNIE
C'mon. Fucker. Mother fucker.
Mother fuck. Whore. Fuck.

He stops scrubbing when he sees a reflection in the water.

THE CHINESE CLIMBER standing on the rock wall. The man from the stone forest. Even more lost now. He's perpendicular. Perverting the laws of nature. Gravity has no hold.

Ernie whips around.

There's no one there. There's no one anywhere.

ERNIE

Hello?

He looks back to his arm. The sparkle is spreading. It burns. Scrubbing too hard. Blood trickles down arms and drips into the water. He scrubs and scrubs. The granite won't come off.

ERNIE

GET OFF ME, YOU FUCK!

INT. HILLARY'S APARTMENT - DREAM

Hillary sits at her kitchen table tying her climbing rope into a noose with one hand. The other one is dead. Flopping.

CUT TO:

Hillary limps into the kitchen with her cane. Climbs on to a chair. Ties the rope to the ceiling fan.

Wraps it around her neck. Kicks off the chair.

Her eyes flutter. Rolls back in her head. Her feet kicking at the air as she slips away.

SNAP!! The force of her neck rips the fan out of the ceiling, EXPOSING RED WIRES, and she crashes to the floor. It breaks, but instead of hitting the floor... SHE FALLS THROUGH IT!

FALLING DOWN THE BIG ROCK WALL FROM THE OPENING. Like the statue of a climber, gripping the wind. The forest grows below her feet.

The ceiling fan is falling with her.

Neil is screaming. Veins bulging. Split flying. The free fall reflected in the lens of HIS CAMERA.

Tourists turn away in horror. Mothers shielding the eyes of screaming children. Live newscasts cutting to commercial.

Gray rock blurs by. WHAMM!!! She catches an outcrop, shattering both legs. Bounces off the wall. Falling still.

The ceiling fan catches on a ledge. Wedges between the rocks and -- THWACK!!!! THE ROPE GOES TAUGHT AND SNAPS HER NECK!

She slams into the wall and swings like a 1000-foot gallows.

INT. NEIL AND HILLARY'S PORTALEDDGE - DAY

Hillary snaps awake, screaming. Stuck between memory and dream. She has no idea where she is. It's morning in the portaledge. Reality slowly dawns on her.

Neil stirs. The dream residue still clouding Hillary's eyes.

NEIL
You okay?

HILLARY
Yeah.

NEIL
Falling dream?

HILLARY
Um... yeah. The worst.

NEIL
I'll make you some coffee.

She kisses her piton necklace. Opens the flap and sees the mountain -- DIYU SHAN. A mile away somehow.

HILLARY
What the fuck?

They are suspended in mid-air. Twisting. The world turning around them in 360 degrees. Whatever is holding them lets go.

And they fall. *WOOOOSHHH!!!!* Plunging into the abyss. Like a meteor to earth. They tangle in the tent, crashing into each other. An endless free fall!

CUT TO:

Hillary wakes up for real. Screaming! Neil goes to her.

NEIL
Hey, hey, it's okay.

She catches her breath. Looks around. Giggles. Guffaws.

NEIL
Falling dream?

HILLARY
The worst.

NEIL
I'll make you some coffee.

She shudders at these words. Deja Vu.

EXT. PORTALEDDGE - DAWN

Hillary emerges from the tent with her coffee. Traverses on to the ledge. She's alone. She takes out her compact and starts covering her rope burn. Her eyes widen when she sees --

HER LIGHTER perched on a rock. As if back from the dead. Spooked, she winds up and hurls it back into the void.

EXT. BASECAMP - DAY

Jen emerges from her tent. She finds Ernie perched on the rock. Staring at the wall. Watching Hillary begin her climb. She looks like a speck from down here.

JEN
Hey. Did you sleep out here? I was looking for you.

Ernie looks at Jen. Exhausted. His skin is raw.

JEN
Where were you?

ERNIE
Here.

JEN
Are you okay?

ERNIE
I was just trying to remember this dream I had. It was right there and now it's gone. I hate that...

JEN
We should get going.

But Ernie is just staring at the wall. Angry.

JEN
What are you looking at?

ERNIE
Hillary.

A mosquito bites him. He SLAPS his neck hard.

ERNIE
Jen?

JEN
Yeah?

ERNIE
Am I okay?

JEN
Ernie.

ERNIE

I mean, I'm fine. I just mean... do you get the feeling like we're not supposed to be here? Like something doesn't want us here?

JEN

No. I don't.

ERNIE

...Me either.

Ernie starts chewing on his nails, confused. The sleeves of his long shirt are stained with blood. He looks back at Hillary.

EXT. WALL - DAY

Hillary and Neil climb. She has steel fingers now. Getting into a flow. Confidence returning. They have a shorthand and make a great team.

Hillary is in the lead now. She stuffs her hand in a crack, feels something weird inside. Wet and callous.

HILLARY

There's something in here.

NEIL

Shhh. Do you hear that?

A shrill SHRIEK. And then -- WOOOOSH!!! A COLONY OF SCREAMING BATS EXPLODE OUT OF THE CRACK! They crash into Hillary's chest, hundreds of them, and they keep coming like the rock is vomiting them out.

Hillary cries out as they tangle in her hair, screeching, scraping her scalp. A horrible geyser of leathery wings slapping against her face like they hate her guts.

The force of impact sends her falling, but the rope catches her, and she swings in the air, watching the last straggler flutter out of the crack.

Hillary catches her breath. Neil climbs over to her. Sees that she's bleeding, and scratched. Tries to help her, but she pulls away. They look up, spooked. Watching the bats circling the above the rock.

HILLARY

I fucking hate bats.

NEIL

Looks like it's mutual. I want Ernie and Jen up here before we go any further, I'm really fucking pissed I didn't get that on film.

She shoots him a look.

NEIL

You owe me a camera by the way.

EXT. WALL - LATER

Ernie and Jen join them on the mountain, jugging up. Jen on camera, Ernie on drone. It's easy for them. They're using ASCENDERS not ropes, scaling the rock in half the time.

They get into position. Jen hangs from an anchor at the end of each pitch. Her rope allows her to track directly behind Hillary and Neil as they climb. They are masters of rigging.

Ernie readies his drone. Watching his shadow out of the corner of his eye. Hillary shakes her head, and climbs.

NEIL (WALKIE)

Stay at 50 mill... We'll shoot a couple verticals... Save the horizontals.

JEN (WALKIE)

God wasn't messing around when he made this place, every shot's the money shot.

They're always hovering. Dangling with cameras. Their ropes are clipped and coiled so they won't fall into the frame.

CUT TO:

They are filming Hillary move up the rock. Jamming her fingers. Widening into fists. This perfect crack is like a ladder to heaven.

We BOOM above her to see inch-tall trees sway two thousand feet below. More than the length of five football fields. Hillary's reaching for her chalk bag. Chalks up. When she turns back --

The crack she's been following is gone. In its place, a blank swath, devoid of weakness and slick as porcelain. As if the mountain has somehow altered itself.

HILLARY

What the fuck...

She messes up her face. Searching for the crack. Whipping around, dizzy.

HILLARY

It's gone. It's a runout! I thought it went another hundred feet.

NEIL

You must have got turned around!

She's searching for it. Wiping the sweat. Woozy.

HILLARY

(to herself)

I could have sworn it...

(to Neil)

Alright, I'm looking for a new sequence!

She traces her dusty fingers along the blank face. Hunting for holds. Feeling for secrets. Perched on one toe. Just friction. *There must be something. Anything.*

NEIL

You got it?!

She's hugging the corner. Hand is slipping. Her knee quivers against the rock. The sun comes out from behind a cloud, revealing the shadow of a micro-hold above her.

HILLARY

Gotcha.

She reaches. Further. Praying to the stone gods. But gravity has other plans. She slips, and takes a whipper, plummeting, stomach in her throat, swinging in the wind like a hypnotist's watch.

HILLARY

FUCK!

NEIL

It's alright.

She kicks off in frustration. She tries again. Fumbles. Recovers. Shoes dance up granite. Again, she falls. Sailing over the world.

HILLARY

Damnit!

NEIL

We got all the time in the world!

(to Jen)

You getting this?

Jen nods from behind her lens.

Ernie lowers the drone controller. Staring at his shadow on the wall. Something's off.

His shadow is slightly out of synch with his movements.

HILLARY
What's wrong?

He looks at Hillary. Suddenly -- HER SHADOW FALLS OFF THE WALL WITHOUT HER! Ernie gasps. Watches her shadow fall down the rock.

HILLARY
Ernie?

ERNIE
Nothing.

HILLARY
Are you fucking high right now?

ERNIE
No. Of course not, no. Sorry.

HILLARY
Focus.

CUT TO:

Hillary falls again. Jen kicks off the wall, using her rope as a dolly track for better shots. Ernie is manning the drone. Keeping his distance. Zzzzzzzzz. Hillary tries a different approach. Calculating. Visualizing.

She falls. Tries again. Putting the puzzle together. Drenched in sweat. Broken. She sees the cameras trained on her and shudders.

HILLARY
This rock is slicker than snot on a frog.

NEIL
You'll get there.

HILLARY
Please... don't film this.

NEIL
This is the good shit.

HILLARY
You're distracting me.

NEIL
Ignore us. We're flies on the wall.
You'll get it next time.

CUT TO:

It's late afternoon now and Hillary's been at it for hours. Neil is holding the rope. Tired. Trying to stay focused.

Jen changes her lens. She looks at Ernie across the way. Narrows her brow. He's scraping his fingers against the stone. The glitter caked into his fingernails. He rubs his face against it. It feels cool against his skin.

Jen looks worried, goes back to her lens. Ernie hears the rhythmic humming. Turns to the rock. The brilliant granite sparkle. Like a million shimmering stars.

A darkness falls over him. It's taking hold. His gaping mouth curls into a teeth-gnashing snarl. *His kind eyes turn bitter.* He glares at Hillary. Hate pulsing. The sparkle spreads down his arms, to his hands. His hands hold the drone controller. Zzzzzzzzzzz...

Hillary falls again. She's airborne and --

WHAM! Slams into the wall. She screams in frustration. It echoes throughout the canyon.

Hillary's shaking. The skin on her fingertips peeled and bleeding from the razor stone. Sweat and blood and chalk.

ZZZZZZZZZ!!! SUDDENLY, THE DRONE POPS OUT OF NOWHERE, too close. Scaring the shit out of her and us. She screams as it CRASHES INTO HER AND REELS BACK FOR MORE!

In a blind rage, she winds up and -- *WHAPPP!!!* Punches the drone as hard as she can. She nearly loses her balance. The drone sways drunkenly, and squeals away like a spooked animal. ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ -- crashes into the wall.

JEN

ERNIE!

Ernie snaps out of his murderous trance. Blinks a billion times. Gasps in horror.

ERNIE

Oh fuck. I'm so sorry. I lost control of it! I--

He watches the drone plummet to ground, bouncing the rock as it goes. He looks down at the console, horrified.

HILLARY

You're fucking me up, Ernie! You're not paying attention! Get your head out of your ass!

ERNIE

No, it-- I don't know what happened. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it... I just got... I don't know...

HILLARY
You're moping around thinking about
Monica! Get out of your head, man!
You're a liability!

ERNIE
I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

Hillary's hand is sore. Bleeding. Spent. She hangs there,
creaking in the wind. A dead weight. Broken.

NEIL
Why don't we call it for the day,
get a fresh start to--

HILLARY
I'm climbing.

Ernie is so confused.

JEN
Ernie, what the fuck was that?

ERNIE
I'm such a fucking idiot.

CUT TO:

Hillary falls even earlier this time. It's bad.

HILLARY
FUCK! FUCK! FUCK! FUCKING PATHETIC!

She kicks off the rock like a petulant child. It's making Jen
and Ernie uncomfortable. Neil sighs.

HILLARY
Piece of shit... you fuck...
(to Jen)
Don't you film this! You're right
there for all the bullshit and
everything I do great you fucking
miss! Fuck!

Jen and Neil exchange a look.

CUT TO:

Hillary's clinging to the wall. Breathing heavy. Eyes
fluttering. Sweat pouring down her brow.

She closes her eyes. Swinging. The breeze feels good on her
face. Takes a deep breath. Squeezes out a pesky tear that
gets lost in a sea of sweat.

Creeeeeeeeakkkk... Something twisting above. A tiny avalanche of pebbles bouncing off her head. A fly buzzes around. She wrinkles her nose. The stink.

Creeeeeeeeakkkk... Her eyes snap open. She looks up and sees --

A vision of HERSELF, LONG DEAD. Ten feet up. Swinging in the wind. Her climbing rope tied around her neck like a noose, dangling from the wedged ceiling fan. She's stiff. Grayish blue. Tongue jutting and swollen. Fear frozen in her popped out eyes. She's been here for weeks. Flies feasting on her rot. Wind banging her against the rock.

NEIL

Hill? Are you--

--Suddenly, Hillary lets out a bird scattering scream of rage. An exorcism of anger. Wafting over China. She screams the vision away. Nothing there.

She starts to laugh at the rock like an sheer arch nemesis.

NEIL

Alright. We're calling it.

HILLARY

FUCK THAT!! WHERE'S THE DRILL?! I'M
BOLTING THIS FUCKER!

CUT TO:

Hillary rips her bulky power drill out of its case like a gunslinger on a quick draw. She lets it rip --

REEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!! It echoes throughout the valley.

CUT TO:

The wind picks up as Hillary starts drilling. Dust flies. A creaking sound undulates up the rock, as if it's settling.

Ernie takes his video camera out of his bag. Fires it up. Starts filming.

CAMERA POV: He zooms on Hillary as she sticks a tube in the hole and blows out dust. She starts hammering in the bolt, taking her anger out on it. *WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!*

A rain of pebbles from above. Ernie pans up the rock, following the pebbles. Up. Up. Too fast. Whips past two climbers. Stops. Pans back down to reveal --

MARK AND PAUL QUESTING UP. Tied together. Forever climbing to the top, and never reaching it.

Mark turns and stares into the lens. Jawless. Rotten. Sadness in his sunken eyes.

BACK TO:

Ernie almost drops the camera. Looks with his own eyes. There's no one up there. He looks back through the lens. No climbers. He rewinds the footage. Nothing but smooth rock. He looks around, so confused.

CUT TO:

Hillary hammers the bolts flush. As she grabs her socket wrench, the wall cracks, and SPITS the bolt back out. It bounces off her chest and falls.

A small trickle of GRAY WATER fall out of the hole she just drilled, like the rock is alive and crying. It's unsettling.

HILLARY

Shit.

NEIL

What's wrong?

HILLARY

I don't know. It won't take.

She picks up a chunk of granite. The sparkling stone turns to black dust in her hand and flies away in the wind. She inhales some, and sneezes.

HILLARY

Mother fucker.

She drills a bigger hole, but the drill gets stuck. *GZZZZZT!* She tries to rip it out. It won't budge.

HILLARY

It's shit rock. It's rotten.

With a grunt, she pulls the drill as hard as she can, and as if the rock just lets go, the drill flies out of her hands.

JEN

Air mail!

NEIL

What happened?

HILLARY

I don't know, I--

--Hillary finally notices her blood soaked hands. Too much.

HILLARY

What the fuck--

She looks back at the rock and *BLOOD!* Gushing out of the hole where the gray water was. Like a severed artery.

She cries out. Loses her grip. The rock spits her off and she plummets. Neil braces on belay. The rope goes taut. Hillary SLAMS into the wall -- *WHUMP!!* Bounces off.

NEIL

Hill?!

She sways back and forth, moaning in pain.

NEIL

You're bleeding!

Dizzy, she looks back at the blood on her hands. But it's not quite as red as she thought.

HILLARY

Relax, it's not blood!

She looks up at the red liquid oozing out of the hole above. Staining the wall. It slows to a trickle, and stops.

HILLARY

It's just iron oxide! I hit a deposit with the drill!

But she's not so sure. She wipes it off on her pants.

NEIL

You're pushing too hard, you always push it too hard...

JEN (WALKIE)

Should we should call it?

NEIL

(into walkie)

We have to have a safety meeting. Pitch Twenty's coming up.

(yelling up)

Hill, why are you bolting?! There's a crack right there!

Hillary looks up. The crack system has miraculously returned!

HILLARY

What the fuck?

Confused, she looks around, trying to orient herself.

NEIL

What's wrong?

HILLARY
Nothing, I just... I thought... I
must have been turned around.

She takes off, climbing up the crack with ease.

NEIL
There you go! You got it!

She can't be stopped.

Dìyù Shan has met her match. THE BLACK VULTURE is circling above. The sun sneaks behind a cloud creating a play of eerie shadows that stalk down the wall, predator-like.

EXT. BELAY STATION - DAY

They're gathered for the safety meeting. Jen is filming. Hillary is taping up, pretending everything is cool.

Ernie is quiet, holding his head. Deep in thought.

NEIL
Hill. Listen. We're worried here.
We got pitch twenty next.

HILLARY
So?

NEIL
So? It's the point of no return.
It's forty repels down, and we're
short on gear as it is and--

HILLARY
--I'm not turning back.

JEN
But, are you sure you're up to it?
There's no shame in turning around.

HILLARY
I'm climbing, Jen. Up.

NEIL
If we go any further we won't have
enough gear to downclimb. The only
way out is up.

HILLARY
It was always only up for me.

NEIL
I'm gonna be honest. I'm not sure
you're ready. You're not at your
max. You gotta be at your max to
pull this off.

HILLARY

Look, here's the deal. I'm not turning back. If you want to leave, leave. All of you, I don't need you. I'll solo the rest of the way if I have to. If it takes a month, I don't give a fuck. I'm getting to the top with or without you. I'm climbing pitch twenty. That's it.

She pulls out a cam. Sticks in a crack. Starts up without him. They watch her go.

JEN

Wait. Are you sure?

HILLARY

I'm sure.

JEN

Ernie?

ERNIE

(snapping out of it)
Huh?

JEN

Are you okay to keep going?

ERNIE

Uh... Yeah, I'm cool.

JEN

What's wrong with you?

ERNIE

Nothing. I remember my dream now. I remember. It was born of fire!

HILLARY

What?

ERNIE

(distant)
I dreamed it was being born. This mountain. Two hundred million years ago the continent collided with a tectonic plate... and woke up the magma down below... Rivers of it. Bursting through the crust... Crystallizing into a perfect granite slab. Four thousand feet up. And then us! So insignificant. Isn't that wild to think about? How it makes you feel small? Like none of this matters, not even Monica? Not even death?

They all look at him.

HILLARY
Ernie? What the fuck are you
talking about?

ERNIE
No, I'm just saying--

JEN
--Can you climb or not?

ERNIE
Of course I can climb! I'm just
saying... isn't that neat? To think
about? I just thought that was a
cool, uh, dream I had... I'm fine.

HILLARY
Climb on.

Hillary starts climbing. They look at Ernie.

ERNIE
What?!

Neil eats a fistful of Tums.

JEN
You need to talk to her.

ERNIE
I will.

EXT. PITCH TWENTY - DAY

A horizontal traverse. The rock is like glass. No features.
No weaknesses. Nowhere to put her hands. It's all about
friction. Balance. Trusting her feet.

She wipes the sweat off her face, smearing blood and chalk
across it. She looks insane, and it's great.

Hillary smears her feet on a flared corner. Impossible
positions. Huge exertion.

We're twenty six hundred feet up now. Nearly the height of
the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world. And only
two thirds of the way.

Hillary is unstoppable. She sets her feet, changes her hands
and cranes her head, scouring for a hold.

The vulture's shadow flies up the stone. As it moves towards
the sun, its SHADOW GROWS LARGER. Menacing. Too big.

As Hillary leans back WE PAN DOWN to her harness.

HER KNOT IS SLOWLY... COMING... UNTIED...

As if invisible fingers are prying it loose.

It's only held in place by a pinch of friction now. She fails to notice as she starts her ascent.

Ernie, Jen and Neil are oblivious, too.

Up she goes. Unprotected. A ticking time bomb. She's free soloing and doesn't know it.

The rope slipping. She jams her fingers hard in a seam.

Ernie and Jen are filming from parallel ropes.

The sun returns from its hiding place, illuminating the rock. It sparkles wildly. We can hear the hum.

Hillary jams her hands into the crack and squeezes her fist into a ball to make it fit. She shimmies up, feet moving up the crack in lockstep. The crack gets wider and she has to contort, using her shoulder and elbow, shoving them in.

She comes to the end of the crack system. Feels for pockmarks like she's reading a Braille thriller. Palming off rough rock, and smearing her toes.

This is the hardest pitch so far, and every time she shifts her weight, the rope is closer to falling.

Now she's splayed across the wall. Full extension. Face smudged flat. Amazing, gymnastic climbing. Unprotected. She's so high up. The rope barely hanging on. Hillary is placing protection, not realizing it's worthless.

She grabs the flake, but it BREAKS, and her legs swing out. Hanging on tight. She maintains her foothold and regains her balance with her right hand, gripping a small hold.

The broken flake is still falling. *Vertigo inducing.* We see her rope slowly slipping out of her harness.

Hillary's life is quite literally in her hands, crimped on a chip of rock the width of a matchbook.

And her hand is slipping. She reaches for a little shelf. Loses her footing, and almost falls. No big deal. She thinks the rope will catch her if she does.

HILLARY

Whoops.

Jen is capturing great action shots. She ZOOMS IN. Sees something strange. Hillary is about to do the six foot double dyno jump. Jen ZOOMS IN on her harness. Gasps.

JEN
HILLARY!!!!

She jumps and lands it, barely. Rocks rain. It's spectacular. She looks at Jen, pumps her fist, victorious.

JEN
YOU'RE NOT--

Neil pulls the rope to pick up slack and the rope FLIES OUT OF HER HARNESS. Whips down past Neil, through the carabiners, flying down like a spooked snake.

JEN
--TIED IN!!!

It lands a thousand feet out of sight. Neil's eyes explode.

It finally dawns on Hillary. She's untethered. Her mouth falls open. She's hugging the wall. Frozen on the tiniest perch. She can see it cracking. Spiderwebbing.

It's going to break. She sees the crack to her right.

And just as she lunges for it -- THE PERCH BREAKS! And she jams her fingers into the crack. And now she's clinging to the wall. Horrificed. Gripped. Trembling.

She looks down. Nearly faints. In the clutches of vertigo.

Ernie's breath is ripped away. He's only ten feet away. He could reach her. But he's glued to the rock.

NEIL
Ernie--

He freezes, wide-eyed. Breathing heavy.

ERNIE
I... I...

Jen unclips her rope and lets it fall. She's juggling down from above. Neil is coming up from below. It's a race. They're far off.

HILLARY
(gritted teeth)
Ernie.

NEIL
Ernie! Do something!

But Ernie is stuck there. Paralyzed with fear.

HILLARY
Ernie, get the fuck over here!

He's whimpering. Horrible memories flooding back. Frozen.

MEMORY FLASH: Hillary breaks Ernie's arm with her body, and falls through his clutches to certain death.

Ernie cries out.

JEN

Don't move, Hill, we're coming!

Hillary hears HISSING above. Wide eyed, she cranes to see --

THE MONITOR LIZARD peeks out of the crack above her. Large and ancient. Beady yellow eyes blinking sideways. Long forked tongue flicking.

Hillary screams as the lizard comes out of its hell hole. Skitters down the wall towards her. Claws scrape stone.

HILLARY

ERNIE!!!

Suddenly, Ernie just snaps, smashing his head against the rock, like he's trying to free himself from the throes of insanity. *WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!* He knocks himself out. *WOOOSH!* Plummets. The rope catches him. Swinging unconscious like a hypnotist's watch.

The lizard is crawling above her head now. So close. She flinches. Holds her breath. Floating above the world with a living dinosaur.

Hillary's slipping. Her fingers whitening. Giving out. There's a perch to the right.

The lizard's tongue flicks her face. She screams. Reaches for the hold. It's just beyond her grasp. Sweaty tears sting her eyes. Arms flushed with lactic acid, pumped and trembling. Her fingers are bleeding from the razor edges.

Neil is jugging closer. The CLICK of the hardware. Shoes against rock. *Click. Click.* But not close enough.

The lizard crawls away, leaving her be. But that's the least of her worries. She's pumping out. She looks down. *Down has never been so far.*

Neil is so close, giving it all he's got. Her grip is slipping. Her fingers are black and blue and red.

Finally Neil arrives. Dangling parallel on a rope, even with Hillary. He kicks off the wall, and swings in.

NEIL

JUMP!

They lock eyes. She trusts him. Just as her fingers give out, she leaps off the wall. Momentarily airborne. He opens his arms for her and *WHUMP!* They crash into each other. The force sends them flying backwards, knocking hard into the wall.

Neil wraps her up, and she slides down his body, planting her face in his navel, holding on for dear life.

She kicks off the wall and climbs up his body like a tree trunk. He's hugging her. Face to face. Total shock.

Neil quickly grabs an ascender from his belt and clips it to her harness, and fastens her to his rope.

Swinging there as one, safe. Hugging in the breeze. So far up. The basecamp below is just specks and dots. She's staining his shirt with her tears. Still in shock.

NEIL

Shhh. It's okay. I got you, Hill.

She calms. Breathes. Looks at him. His eyes sparkle. Swinging in each other's clutches.

They're about to kiss. *HISSESSSSSSSSSSS!!!* It's the giant lizard -- planted on the wall above them.

Hillary screams. The lizard bares it's razor fangs and -- *WHACK!!* It starts whipping them violently with its tail.

WHACK! WHACK!! HISSESSSSSS!! Neil gets a tail in the face, drawing blood. Hillary screams in anger. She pushes off and --

WHAPP!! Kicks the lizard off the wall. It plummets a thousand feet to its death.

Hillary and Neil watch it VANISH INTO THE VOID.

CUT TO:

LATER. It's grim. Hillary and Neil are perched on the belay ledge. Ernie and Jen are on the second ledge. Ernie is bleeding. Jen is nursing him back to health.

HILLARY

I don't know what happened.

NEIL

You didn't check the knot.

HILLARY

I swear I did, I thought I--

NEIL

This is amateur hour, Hill. I
fucking told you, we shouldn't be
here, you're not ready, and now
we're stuck here, and--

HILLARY

--I CHECKED THE FUCKING KNOT!

NEIL

If anything happens to you, I'll
never forgive myself!

HILLARY

I FUCKING CHECKED IT! I CHECKED IT!

JEN

Can we please... just calm down and
try and keep it together. We're
here. Now let's try and make the
best of it and stay safe. Please.

ERNIE

It was the mountain.

They all look at him. He's trembling. Forever changed.

ERNIE

It's alive. It has a spirit. The
mountain untied her rope. I know it
did... I know it...

NEIL

You're still in shock, Ernie.

ERNIE

No! It doesn't want us here! It
doesn't want us to get to the top!
IT WAS THE ROCK, I KNOW THAT NOW!

Hillary shudders. Because she knows it's probably true.

ERNIE

(breathless)

This mountain... is haunted...

HILLARY

Every mountain is haunted. And
every climber, too.

ERNIE

You've seen them. Haven't you? Mark
and Paul. They're still climbing...

NEIL

What are you talking about?

She looks away.

ERNIE

I know you saw them. And you don't even care. You don't even care...

HILLARY

I forgot to tie my rope, Ernie! I fucked up, okay?! I was embarrassed! It was a noob thing to do, but I did it, and that's it. Now let's move the fuck on, and set up camp before we fuck anything else up!

She climbs away.

JEN

What do you mean? Mark and Paul...

ERNIE

We're all gonna die and she doesn't care!

JEN

Ernie stop! Stop!

ERNIE

We're never leaving!

He bursts into tears, and hugs her. She loves it. Neil watches Hillary climb, worried.

ERNIE

I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

CUT TO:

They climb to the end of pitch twenty. Twenty-seven hundred feet. More than half a mile up the mountain.

Hillary pulls herself up on to the ledge. But then she feels something. A pebble maybe. Looks at her hand. A HUMAN TOOTH stuck to her palm. She gasps, slaps it away. Climbs to her feet. Gasps. A DECAYED HUMAN JAW rests on the ledge.

NEIL (CONT'D)

He must have landed a whipper wrong...

HILLARY

Real wrong.

Hillary kicks the jaw off the ledge. She looks up. Just above is Mark and Paul's ghostly portaledge.

EXT. MARK AND PAUL'S PORTALEIDGE - DAY

They climb up. The remains of the tent look sinister up close. Windswept and sunburnt. Shredded by time. Their old tent flapping in the wind like a white flag of surrender.

Ernie jugs up. Stares at the tent. Terrified.

ERNIE
Something horrible happened in there.

They look at him.

INT. MARK AND PAUL'S PORTALEIDGE - DAY

Hillary and Neil peek inside the abandoned tent. It's musty and dusty. Like a monument erected to a tragedy. Sleeping bags. Food wrappers. A Nokia cell phone.

NEIL
Imagine being stuck in here for
five days. Can't go up or down.

He shakes his head, and leaves. Flies buzz around. Hillary sees the dried blood splatter above the flap. The gore caked rope tooth knife.

And then she sees Mark's old CLIMBING JOURNAL. She grabs it.

JEN (O.S)
Hill?

HILLARY
(jumps)
Jesus fuck. You scared me.

JEN
Sorry. Listen. Would you do me a
favor and talk to Ernie?

HILLARY
About what?

JEN
Everything that happened.

HILLARY
Everything what?

JEN
I mean, the accident. His arm. The
trauma. It really messed him up.

HILLARY
It did?

JEN
(surprised)
Well... yeah. Clearly...

HILLARY
Why? I'm the one who fell.

JEN
Just. Please. You know, he just
admires you so, so much. He looks
up to you, really, and... It would
mean a lot...

HILLARY
Yeah.

EXT. THE ROCK CEILING - MAGIC HOUR

The sun sets. An explosion of color. Hillary powers up the crack toward the overhanging rock ceiling. It's a flat, horizontal ledge that juts off the rock enough for them to walk on it. A beautiful feature.

She surges over the 90 degree lip of the roof, and latches on to the edge. Dangles for a beat on one arm.

Starts to pull herself up. Stops when she hears Ernie muttering. She peaks over the edge she sees --

Ernie standing on the ceiling before the rock. Resting his head against it. His finger tracing the cracks, lovingly. He leans in slowly, and smells the stone. Breathing in a long, dusty whiff.

HILLARY
Ernie?

He reels back like he's been caught. He's slowly coming back to reality. A tear falls down his face. She pulls herself up and now they're on the ledge, face to face.

HILLARY
Are you okay?

ERNIE
I did the best I could. I tried so
hard to get there. I really did.

HILLARY
Look. I wanted to tell you. You
know, it wasn't your fault. I mean,
if you think it was, stop.

ERNIE
I dream about you, Hill. I dream I
caught you and everything is
perfect and I'm a hero.

SLOW MOTION FLASHES OF ERNIE'S DREAM: Hillary falling from the ledge. Ernie getting there just in time. Catching her in his burly arms. Crowds cheering him down below. Neil and Jen jumping for joy. Ernie smiling so big. Hillary gives him a kiss on the cheek for saving her life. He smiles bigger.

ERNIE

I like those dreams best. But mostly it's just falling dreams and I wake up screaming. No wonder Monica peaced.

HILLARY

You did nothing wrong. It was my fault. I was arrogant. I thought I knew that wall by heart. I didn't rehearse enough. I thought I could just do it. I was wrong. And I'm sorry I put you in that position.

He's so broken. She hugs him. The granite catches his eye. Ernie's nose starts bleeding.

ERNIE

She feels us climbing on her face.

HILLARY

Ernie, your nose...

She wipes it for him.

ERNIE

We're not supposed to be here. She doesn't want us here.

HILLARY

It's a hunk of granite. It doesn't want anything.

ERNIE

They're a part of her now. And there are others, too. They're all here. And we're next. We'll be here forever. You and me, and Jen and Neil. We'll live here, too. Climbing forever. Climbing and climbing and never getting to the--
(gasps)
Oh fuck. What is happening to me?

HILLARY

It's okay, you're just--

ERNIE

What is happening to me?!

He wipes the blood off his face, and then he winds up and PUNCHES the stone, snapping himself out of a trance. He screams in pain, his hand is fucked. Crying.

ERNIE

See?! It's getting into me! It gets
is into things! It's not a bridge
between heaven and earth, it's
goddamn purgatory!

His blood drips down the rock. He looks down at his bloody
fist, and then he looks at her. Rage lights up his face.

It makes her shudder.

HILLARY

Ernie, you're my family. You guys.
I want you to know that...

ERNIE

You're right. This is your fault.

HILLARY

C'mon, let's go down.

ERNIE

IT'S YOUR FAULT!

HILLARY

Ernie--

ERNIE

(growls)
I wish you died that day.

He starts walking towards her. Slowly. Snarling.

The VULTURE shrieks above. She looks up. It's circling. He's
itching his arms. Harder. Walking closer.

ERNIE

I wish you never hit that branch. I
wish you were dead.

Now they're face to face. He wears hate like a mask. He cuffs
his hand around his own neck. It makes her jump.

ERNIE

I wish the ceiling fan never broke.
I'd be home now with Monica!

HILLARY

How did you... know that...

ERNIE

I dreamed that, too! I saw it!

He balls his hand into a fist. And then it dawns on her.

HILLARY

Where's your harness?

She sees it in a heap on the rock. His rope coiled. And then he walks past her towards the edge.

HILLARY

Ernie.

ERNIE

We'll never get off this rock!

He's about to jump. Hillary tackles him, pulls him back. They crash on to the rock. She lands on her back, Ernie on top.

ERNIE

I WANNA GO HOME!

He's trying to break free. She won't let go.

HILLARY

NEIL! NEIL! HELP ME!

Ernie is struggling. They're rolling around. Reaching for the edge. All he wants is to get to the bottom.

ERNIE

GET IT OUT! GET IT OUT!

Ernie punches her, trying to get free. She clamps down tighter. Bleeding from her lip. They're close to the edge. Infinity below.

ERNIE

GET IT OUT OF ME!!!!

Ernie is screaming tears. With all the strength he can muster, he breaks free from Hillary's grasp and takes off for the edge, and just as he's about to jump --

Neil POPS over the edge and tackles Ernie backwards. Jen follows. Pile on. The three of them hold him down. He screams. Spit flies. Chest heaving.

EXT. THE ROCK CEILING - LATER

Ernie is tied in to the rock with double protection. They've tied up his legs to keep him from jumping. He's shivering. White. Sweating profusely. Feverish. Muttering. They stand around him, hooked in.

HILLARY

I didn't know. I didn't know he was
in so much pain...

JEN

Did you ever ask?

(off her look)

It didn't just happen to you. It
happened to all of us.

(MORE)

JEN (CONT'D)
You vanished. And left him to live
with that guilt. Well, he couldn't.

HILLARY
I didn't know.

JEN
You're not a good friend.

HILLARY
I don't know to say...

JEN
We have to go. He's delirious, he
doesn't know what's going on. We
have to go now, we'll climb through
the night. We need to get him help.

Ernie is shivering. Shooting confused looks around.

NEIL
It's too late... We're too tired.
We have to rest.

JEN
What if he tries it again?

Ernie screams. Eyes vacant.

NEIL
We just have to watch him, there's
nothing else we can do right now.
We can't risk anymore mistakes.

HILLARY
We can do it, Neil. We can climb
up. Jen, you can stay with Ernie,
we'll give you all the supplies,
there's enough for three days. And
then Neil and I will send the last
thousand feet in one push. If we
climb straight through, we'll get
to the bottom by midnight.

THUNDER ROLLS ACROSS THE SKY. Lightning streaks above them
like picky fingers. Black clouds unfurl. A vomit of rain.

Hillary can't believe her eyes.

JEN
Sunny skies for a week?

HILLARY
I checked four reports.

Jen shoots her a look.

NEIL

Does anyone have service? Can you call our guy? What's his name? Li?

They all check their phones. No service.

NEIL

What about the walkie? See if you can get someone.

JEN

It's a walkie, not a radio. It's only us...

Hillary gets on the walkie.

HILLARY

Hello? Is anyone nearby?

GZZZZT. Silence.

HILLARY

Anyone?! SOS. Emergency. Come in.

GZZZZT. Nothing. Jen tends to Ernie. Neil turns to Hillary. She looks away, and stares at her shoes, soaking wet.

NEIL

I hope the top is worth it for you. Because it's lonely up there.

THUNDER. Hillary looks at the rock above Ernie. The cracks look like a SCREAMING FACE in the rain.

Spooked, she gets back on the walkie.

HILLARY

IS ANYONE THERE?!!!!

Nothing but a wheeze of static. A blast of THUNDER.

EXT. PORTALEGE CAMP - NIGHT

Blinding rain. Two portaledge tents hanging on the wall. One above the other. Haulbags and supplies dangling.

Fifty feet above -- Mark and Paul's old haunted portaledge.

INT. NEIL AND HILLARY'S PORTALEGE - NIGHT

Hillary is huddled in her sleeping bag, reading through Mark Hudson's climbing journal. Neil is cooking their dinner on the small propane burner.

MARK HUDSON (V.O.)
*Eleven pitches in one day.
 Beautiful here. Nothing but sun.
 5.7 to 5.11A climbing.*

Turns the page.

MARK HUDSON (V.O.)
*Pitch twelve insane. Swear I
 thought crack system disappeared.
 5.14 climbing. Tried bolting.
 Chossy. Bolts won't take. The
 blood. Fuck.*

Her eyes are widening with fear. Her hand trembles.

MARK HUDSON (V.O.)
*Rope untied. Free climbing and
 didn't know it. Am I losing it?
 That fucking lizard...*

A shot of pain. She drops the journal, massages her wrist.

NEIL
 What's wrong with your hand?

She jumps at his voice. THUNDER LAUGHS.

HILLARY
 What do you mean?

NEIL
 I've been watching you. Sneaking
 pills. Tell me what's going on.

HILLARY
 It's fine.

NEIL
 You're lying.

HILLARY
 It's a side effect from the fall,
 it's nothing. Just a little sore.

NEIL
 I saw your hand go limp.

HILLARY
 It fell asleep. It's fine. The pill
 clears it up.

NEIL
 What aren't you telling me?

HILLARY
 Nothing.

NEIL
Did you... see something, Hill?

HILLARY
What do you mean? You mean what
Ernie said? Ghosts? Are you fucking
kidding? Neil!

She slaps the journal shut. Dust makes her sneeze.

INT. ERNIE AND JEN'S PORTALEIDGE - NIGHT

Ernie is in his sleeping bag, shivering and sweating. Ghost white, dark circles under his eyes. Jen is feeding him bits of salami. She washes his face with a damp cloth.

Ernie starts wildly scratching his arms.

ERNIE
Get it off me. Get it off.

JEN
Get what off?

ERNIE
The mountain! Get it off me!

He shows her his sparkling arms. She lifts a brow.

JEN
It's just granite. It rubs off.
See? It's nothing, we all have it.

Jen puts her arms beside his in compassion. Shows him her dull granite sparkle. Same as his.

JEN
It's normal.

Ernie looks down. HIS POV is different -- *The glitter is wilder and brighter. A trippy tattoo. Shimmering and humming like it's alive -- and permanent.*

ERNIE
NO! IT'S NOT NORMAL!!! IT'S IN
ME!!! THE MOUNTAIN'S INSIDE ME!!!

Jen takes his arm. It's a dull sparkle again.

JEN
It's just residue!

Ernie gasps. He starts scratching violently.

ERNIE
NO!!

Ernie's eyes bug when HE SEES --

THE SPARKLE GETTING BRIGHTER, HUMMING LOUDER -- PETRIFYING BEFORE HIS EYES -- TURNING HIS HANDS TO STONE! CRAGGILY ROCK SNAKING UP HIS ARM LIKE A SPREADING INFECTION!

Ernie is screaming wild honking screams. Desperately scratching at his ROCK HARD SKIN, tearing his nails and making his fingers bleed.

ERNIE
GET IT OFF!!!!

Jen grabs him. Shaking him back to REALITY.

JEN
There's nothing there!

Horrificed, Ernie looks back down at his arms. No stone at all. Nothing but raw skin and the sticky granite. He's so confused. Whimpering. Struggling to catch his breath.

Jen is scared for him. Hugs him tight.

JEN
Shhhh... It's okay. We're gonna get you home...

He cries on her shoulder.

INT. NEIL AND HILLARY'S PORTALEDDGE - DAY

They've been in the tents for TWO DAYS. Rain pelting the nylon, trying to break in. Leaking into the tent. Neil and Hillary work hard to patch it up.

CUT TO:

Neil is napping. Hillary stares ahead. Deep in thought. She glances down at Mark's climbing journal. Picks it up.

Flips to where she left off. Page is dried up and swollen. Mark's voice is weakening... growing fearful...

MARK HUDSON (V.O.)
Pitch twenty tomorrow. Point of no return. I want to turn back. Paul says no. He needs the top. This mountain doesn't want us here. I feel it in me. It's doing something to me. Something bad...

Something falls out. Hillary picks it up. It's a bookmark photo of MARK HUDSON and his FAMILY. A BEAUTIFUL WIFE and three daughters. Back to the journal. The handwriting is frantic. Stained with blood. The last two sentences:

She feels us climbing on her face.

I will be a good steward.

She lowers the journal and covers her mouth. She opens the flap, and throws it out. It falls to its death. She gets on the walkie.

HILLARY
Hey, Jen?

JEN (WALKIE)
Go for me.

HILLARY
How's Ernie?

INT. ERNIE AND JEN'S PORTALEIDGE - DAY

Ernie is sleeping soundly in Jen's arms. She caresses his hair. She loves it. He purrs.

JEN
(whispers)
His fever is breaking. He's better.
Sound asleep.

INTERCUT:

HILLARY
Is he, uh, tied up?

JEN
What do you mean?

HILLARY
I just mean, maybe we should keep him tied up. You know, in case he tries to jump again or something.

Jen looks at Ernie. He shivers.

JEN
I don't think he's gonna try again.

HILLARY
Better safe than sorry.

JEN
I don't think that's necessary.
I'll keep him nice and safe.

HILLARY
Tie him up. Would you just tie him up please? Thank you. Over and out.

Neil is stirring.

NEIL
Are you okay?

HILLARY
I'm perfect!

Jen looks at the rope. Considers. And then she snuggles up to Ernie, the big galoot. She can't bring herself to do it. He moans in his sleep. Jen smiles, her eyes swell with love.

JEN
It's okay... everything's okay...

EXT. DÌYÙ SHAN - DAY

ANOTHER DAY. The rock looks menacing in the storm. Like the rain is washing away the veneer and only the bad remains.

INT. NEIL AND HILLARY'S PORTALEIDGE - DAY

Thunder. Neil has their food and supplies splayed. Inventory.

NEIL
We have two days of food left.
We're depleting everything. We
really have to ration. Full on.
Couple tablespoons of the trail
mix. Couple slices of salami a day.

Hillary grabs the walkie.

HILLARY
How are you on propane, Jen?

INTERCUT WITH JEN AND ERNIE'S TENT:

JEN
I have half a jug.

HILLARY
Copy that.

NEIL
(to Jen)
Don't toss your cheese rinds. We're
eating everything we have left.

Ernie groans in his sleeping bag. Shivering.

NEIL
How's he doing?

JEN
He's in and out.

She's wiping his face with a damp cloth.

JEN
How long do you think this rain
will last?

NEIL
It's already been three days. It
can't go on much longer like this.

JEN
Copy.

Neil puts the walkie down. Leaves it on.

HILLARY
(mutters)
Two more days maybe.

NEIL
Huh?

HILLARY
Just a guess.

Neil shakes his bottle of Tums. He's all out. GZZZZT. A
STATICKY VOICE over the walkie.

HILLARY
Did you hear that?

More clear. A VOICE SPEAKING IN MANDARIN!

HILLARY
You heard that right?! That
happened?!

NEIL
What? Yes. Of course. Answer.

HILLARY
(on walkie)
HELLO?! COME IN?! EMERGENCY! SOS!

GZZZZT. They wait. Ears perked. Eyes wide.

HILLARY
Come in! We're stuck on the
mountain, Dìyù Shan! We're rock
climbers and our friend is injured!
Send help. Do you copy?!

Silence.

HILLARY
HELLO?!!!

Static.

Ernie shudders. Chewing on his lip. He hears a tiny avalanche of rock. An then he starts to shudder and wince. He sees a shadow of a MAN circling the tent in the rain. Walking around the entire perimeter, like they are on the ground.

ERNIE

...No.

The shadow melts into nothingness. Ernie huddles up, afraid.

ERNIE

Leave me alone...

Jen just look at him.

INT. NEIL AND HILLARY'S PORTALEIDGE - LATER

The rain is deafening. Beating the tent into submission. The leak is worse. Hillary is getting sprayed. It's such a small space and yet somehow they keep their distance. Hillary facing away, staring up. Bored.

Neil is meditating. She looks at him. He's all zen and she rolls her eyes. She hears A MOAN outside.

HILLARY

What was that? Did you hear that?

Neil doesn't respond. Deep in his trance. Very slowly... Hillary unzips the flap.

HILLARY

Ernie? Is that you?!

She opens it. Expecting a face, but instead -- *CRASHH!!* A brilliant streak of lightning illuminates the valley. And then back to the dull night.

Neil opens his eyes, coming back to planet earth. Calm.

NEIL

It's only the wind.

Hillary huffs, zips the tent back up. Burrows into her bag, and tries like hell to sleep. But who is she kidding? Something isn't right. She feels it in her broken bones.

The walkie is still on. Every so often a BLAST OF STATIC.

INT. NEIL AND HILLARY'S PORTALEIDGE - NIGHT

ANOTHER DAY. The rain is an infinite drone, maddening and wrong. Too loud to be real. Neil and Hillary are asleep. Neil has his earbuds in, listening to sleep meditations. Positivity spills out of his ears.

The walkie SQUELCHES. *GZZZZT*. A WHISPER cuts through static.

VOICE
...Hello?

Hillary's eyes snap open. She bolts up. Neil just snores.

HILLARY
 (on walkie)
 Hello?! Are you there?

The voice is distant, detached.

VOICE
Hello...

HILLARY
 You speak English?

VOICE
...Yes.

HILLARY
 Oh thank God. We're stuck, we're
 stuck on Dìyù Shan...

Silence. And then a scream of static.

HILLARY
 Hello?!

VOICE
I need... help. Please...

HILLARY
 What? No, we need help, our friend
 is sick!

VOICE
No. That can't be it...

HILLARY
 Please, we need help, we're stuck!

VOICE
*We're stuck. We're here on Dìyù
 Shan. We've been here for so long.*

HILLARY
 Who is this?

VOICE
I... I don't know... I...

HILLARY
 Ernie?

VOICE
 (choking up)
 Oh God... I don't know... I'm so
 confused...

HILLARY
 Who is this?!

VOICE
This is Paul.

HILLARY
 Who?!

VOICE
 I THINK HE WANTS TO KILL ME!

The voice starts to cry... SCREAMING TEARS...

HILLARY
 Hello?!

Suddenly, THE WALKIE FADES AWAY. Static. And then silence.
 And then we hear THE CRYING RIGHT OUTSIDE THE TENT!

Hillary gasps. Wind picks up. The crying stops. Hillary looks
 at Neil sleeping like a baby. She grabs her knife. Snuggles
 into her bag. High alert.

INT. ERNIE AND JEN'S PORTALEIDGE - NIGHT

Jen is sound asleep. Ernie is all huddled up. Sweating.
 Rocking. Muttering. He peeks out the mesh vent hole. He sees
 MARK HUDSON'S PORTALEIDGE ABOVE. Lights are on inside.
 Flickering. A low hum emanating from it.

Ernie's staring transfixed. A darkness falls over him. His
 gaping mouth curls into a teeth-gnashing snarl. Kind eyes
 turn bitter. The tent is calling him.

He looks down at the walkie talkie next to Jen. Picks it up,
 and throws it out of the tent. Gone. Jen snores.

Suddenly, his nose starts bleeding again.

INT. NEIL AND HILLARY'S PORTALEIDGE - NIGHT

Hillary hears the SCRATCHING. Looks to her right. The outline
 of A FINGER being pressed. Slowly. Into the flap. Hillary
 freezes. The finger rips itself away.

HILLARY
 (breathless)
 Neil.

Neil snores. A hand is pressed into the nylon. Two hands.
 Pressing. And then a FACE, smushed against the tent.

HILLARY

Neil...

We see the indentation of a moving mouth. Rubbing a cheek up and down the nylon. Moaning with the wind.

HILLARY

NEIL!!!!!!!!!!!!

She can't stop screaming. Neil bolts up. Rips out his earbuds.

NEIL

Hillary?!

Her headlamp flickers. She looks back at the flap. The indentations are gone.

NEIL (CONT'D)

Hill, what's wrong?

She's gasping for breath. Shooting confused looks around.

NEIL (CONT'D)

Hill?!

HILLARY

I want to climb.

NEIL

What?

HILLARY

We should leave. We should climb now. I want to climb now.

NEIL

What are you talking about, we can't climb now. It's raining.

HILLARY

I don't care. Big whoop. I love rain climbing, we're climbing. Get ready.

NEIL

You always push it too far. You always have.

HILLARY

I gotta get the fuck outta this tent! I'm losing my mind! I'm seeing shit! I can't be in here!

NEIL

You shoulda learned to meditate like I said.

HILLARY
Fuck you!

NEIL
It really helps.

HILLARY
I'm so scared.

NEIL
Scared of what?

HILLARY
Everything.

She hugs Neil. He holds her, calming her down. They're face to face.

HILLARY (CONT'D)
I don't want to die.

NEIL
You sound surprised.

It's true. She does. As if it's a revelation even to her.

NEIL (CONT'D)
There's nothing to be afraid of. We
are alone. We're all alone.

THUNDER BOOMS. *WHOOSH!!* A blast of wind shakes the tent, the wind sends them crashing into each other. MORE THUNDER.

Hillary gets lost in his eyes. The baby blue kindness. And then she kisses him. He pulls her close and they start to make out. She jumps on him. She can't take her hands off him. They devour each other, smearing chalk on each others faces. And then --

HILLARY
No.

Pulls out of his arms, and pushes away. Harder. Too hard. Breathing heavy, snarling at him. The frustration is palpable. Neil sighs. Wiping chalk away.

NEIL
I'm getting mixed signals here.

She catches her breath. She can't look at him.

HILLARY
Where's your camera?

NEIL
You threw it out.

She digs through his bag. Pulls out her iPhone. No service. Turns on the camera, and hands it to him.

HILLARY
Here. You got ten questions.

NEIL
What do you mean?

HILLARY
Anything you want.

Neil looks at her.

HILLARY (CONT'D)
Ten questions.

He considers. Looks down at the iPhone in his hands.

EXT. OUTSIDE - NIGHT

Ernie is questing through the rain. Obsession twinkles in his eyes. Moving towards the old portaledge. A moth to light. Shadows play inside. A blast of STATIC.

INT. MARK AND PAUL'S PORTALEGE - DAY

Ernie opens the flap. Peeks inside. His eyes light up when he sees -- MARK HUDSON, covered in blood, kneeling over PAUL HERNANDEZ. Mark's nose is bleeding too. The old walkie talkie thrown beside them. Hissing. Getting louder.

Paul was just stabbed thirty times. Blood spills down his heaving chest. The life fading from his eyes.

A GORE-CAKED ROPE TOOTH KNIFE in Mark's hand. His skin glitters with blood and granite.

The granite sparkle dances in Mark's eyes. He smiles and offers Ernie the knife. Ernie grips the knife tight and looks at it with reverence. He knows what he must do.

The torch is passed.

INT. NEIL AND HILLARY'S PORTALEGE - DAY

The storm screams. Neil is aiming the iPhone at Hillary. She braces herself. And then she unzips her jacket to reveal her ROPE BURN for the camera.

NEIL
Where did you move?

HILLARY
Back to Yosemite. I got a place. I wanted to be closer to El Cap.

NEIL
You left all your stuff in my
apartment.

HILLARY
I got new stuff.

NEIL
I still have the old stuff.

HILLARY
I don't need stuff. I live in a
van. In the driveway of an empty
house.

NEIL
That's sad.

HILLARY
I know.

NEIL
Part of me was relieved when you
fell. It's sick, I know. But I
actually thought we'd finally have
a chance. You'd finally slow down.
We could have a life somehow.

HILLARY
That's not a question.

NEIL
It was always about the next big
climb for you. And once you got to
the top, you'd be all in on me.
Until you got the itch. And then it
was the next epic. And suddenly I'm
just your belay.

HILLARY
You were a great belay.

NEIL
Why did you push me away?

HILLARY
I don't want to be tied down.

NEIL
Tied down? What am I, ropes?

HILLARY
Yeah, Neil. You're ropes.

WOOSH! Wind blast the tent so hard it knocks them into each
other. They reel away. Hillary stares at the camera. Like
it's trying to catch a glimpse of her soul.

NEIL

Why did you bring me here? Really.

HILLARY

The North Face dropped me. I was always bad for the brand. I was desperate. And I knew you'd say yes. I'm broke. I figured it would get me a sponsor. I need a sponsor to keep climbing.

NEIL

You're the most self obsessed person I've ever met.

HILLARY

And you're the most selfless, maybe that's why we lasted so long.

NEIL

You gotta know there's nothing at the top but more mountain. It'll never be never enough for you. The top will keep getting higher, and the world below will just keep getting smaller. There's nothing up there that's gonna fix you.

HILLARY

Not a... that's not a... question.

NEIL

No. But it's the truth.

And it hits her hard.

NEIL

What are you climbing away from?

She won't answer.

NEIL

You're not the climber you were. And you'll never be that again. The sooner you accept that, the sooner you'll be happy.

She looks at him. Thunder rattles the tent.

HILLARY

It's not my hand it's my spine.

NEIL

Tell me.

She glances at the iPhone. Nervous. Her guard goes back up. Neil stops filming, puts the iPhone aside.

HILLARY
No. Keep filming.

He does.

HILLARY
I'm not supposed to be here. I can't solo, I can't climb. It's over for me. If my doctors knew I was climbing now they would all freak. It's the same thing Bader had after he fell in Joshua Tree.

NEIL
Cervical Myelopathy.

HILLARY
It's degenerative. It's gonna get worse. I tweak my neck the wrong way, and my hand dies. Worthless. In a year I'm going to lose my fine motor skills. Coordination problems, vertigo. Atrophy. And then... down the road, any kind of stressful activity will put me at risk of paralysis. I could sneeze and die...
(beat)
This is my last trip. I wanted it to be... I wanted it to...

Hillary bows her head, ashamed.

HILLARY
It's my whole life. It's all there is for me. This is what I was put on this earth to do. If I don't climb I'll die.

She touches her rope burn. Neil lowers the iPhone.

NEIL
You're gonna take us all with you.

HILLARY
I... I need to get out of here. I have to get out of here, I'm losing my fucking mind. I'm losing--

Thunder roars back. She snaps, starts punching him, kicking him, screaming with the storm, the tent shaking rattling the world. He tries to subdue her but she's a feral beast.

HILLARY
 GET ME OUT OF HERE!!! FUCK! FUCK!
 AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. NEIL AND HILLARY'S PORTALEDEGE - NIGHT

Hillary is snuggled up in a hammock dangling underneath the portaledge. Crying. Rain blasts around her. Lightning explodes around. The portaledge roof keeps her dry.

Swinging in the wind, Hillary stares down into the abyss. Watching how the rain falls forever.

It's such a long, and beautiful way down. Calling her.

INT. NEIL AND HILLARY'S PORTALEDEGE - NIGHT

Neil is huddled up. Destroyed. He's talking to her through the floor.

NEIL
 Come on! Get back in here! You're
 nuts to be out there! Hill!

EXT. NEIL AND HILLARY'S PORTALEDEGE - NIGHT

Hillary huddles up for warmth. Listening to Neil pleading, ignoring him.

Her rope dangles. She watches it swinging in the wind. But it's not the wind. Her mouth falls open as the rope starts to pick itself up, rising up from below. Its frayed tip turns and looks at her, like it's the head of a snake.

The rope starts slithering towards her. She's paralyzed with fear. She turns away from it.

But it twists and curls and hovers above her now, serpent-like. Hillary shudders as it drapes itself across her chest.

She yelps, and slaps it away. The plastic tip nudges her. Taps her shoulder like a horrible black finger.

HILLARY
 Oh god, oh god, oh god...

It slithers across her, nuzzling. She pushes it away, but it reels back, angry, and stares her in the face. Dangling before her eyes.

It starts to tie itself into a noose for her. She gasps, closes her eyes. Grips the piton tighter.

INT. ERNIE AND JEN'S PORTALEIDGE - NIGHT

Jen opens her eyes. She sees Ernie kneeling over her in his harness. Watching her sleep. His face is lost in shadow. Rain drips from his chin.

JEN
What are you doing? You're wet.
Ernie?! You have a fever, you're
gonna get pneumonia!

Ernie's face tilts into the light. Eyes pulsing with rage. Hair matted by rain.

JEN
Your nose, you're bleeding. Come
here, honey. You're sleepwalking.

She hugs Ernie, holding his head. Nothing but love. He freezes. Stiff.

JEN
What? You got to lie down, and try
to get some sleep.

She finally notices the rope-tooth knife in his hand. He's trembling with hate. Repressing murder. Jen looks nervous.

Jen shudders at the words. Lightning explodes behind him. Rain screams. He chokes up on the knife.

JEN
Ernie?

The veins in his temple throb. It's taking every ounce of strength he can muster to not stab Jen in the throat.

JEN
I love you. I have to tell you
that. I've loved you since K2.

He grips the knife tighter. A war is waging inside.

JEN
You're my ideal.

He looks at her. Nothing.

JEN
Every time I see you I just want to
hug you, I want to be with you all
the time and...

He chokes up on the knife. These words cut through the granite madness. A tear rolls down his face.

JEN

Ernie, please. Put down the knife.

Jen's fingers travel over to the propane tank.

ERNIE

AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!

He rears back to stab her and -- WHAPPP!!! She cracks him on the face with the tank.

INT. NEIL AND HILLARY'S PORTALEDDGE - NIGHT

Neil is lying there, sound asleep. The sound of the tent flap unzipping stirs him awake.

NEIL

(groggy)

Hill? I'm sorry, I--

We see the shadow of Hillary climbing into her sleeping bag. Head to toe.

NEIL

I'm sorry about what I said. There's something I gotta tell you, I'm... shit. Your toes are freezing.

He looks over. He sees the bulge in Hillary's sleeping bag.

NEIL

Hill?

THE DEAD CHINESE CLIMBER BOLTS UP SCREAMING!

Neil screams, starts kicking at him, freaking out. The Climber's mouth falls open even wider and a BABY LIZARD crawls out. The reptile scales the climber's face, and summits on top of his head.

EXT. HAMMOCK - NIGHT

Hillary hears Neil's screams above.

HILLARY

Neil?!

She looks up, sees the shadow play. The tent shaking. She starts climbing up there, but --

THE NOOSE CUFFS HER AROUND THE NECK and pulls her back. She gasps, it yanks her hard, and tries to pull her off the ledge. But it won't work, she's harnessed in. The rope pulls tighter, she's turning blue. Grabbing at her throat.

She tries to pry her fingers into the noose. It's too tight. She reaches for her knife. Her eyes fluttering. Hands weakening. The world is starting to slip away from her.

THUNDER CRASHES around her as she chokes to death. Streaks of fire turning night into day for a split second. Blood vessels explode in her eyes like crimson fireworks.

She slashes at the rope above, but it's a slippery snake and she's losing consciousness. She tries cutting the noose around her neck, clumsily stabbing her own throat. Blood spilling down her neck. It's no use. Fading.

NEIL (O.S)
AHHH GOD!!!!

Neil's screams SNAP HER BACK. Invigorate her. With a choking wail, she reaches up, snatches the rope and saws herself free. The rope breaks and falls into the void.

Hillary catches her breath in the rain, climbing to the wall. The color returning to her face. Her voice is a wet rasp --

HILLARY
Not... today.

INT. NEIL AND HILLARY'S PORTALEDDGE - NIGHT

WHAPP!!! Hillary bursts into the tent, soaking wet. She has a fresh, horrible rope burn.

She scares the shit out of Neil. The Chinese Climber is gone, and Neil is still reeling. Relieved, Neil hugs her, holds her close, freaking out.

NEIL
Ernie was right! The mountain is
haunted! We have to climb!

HILLARY
(rasp)
Let's get... the fuck outta here.

NEIL
What happened to you?!

She ignores this, grabs the walkie.

HILLARY
Jen? Are you there?

GZZT. No response. Just static.

HILLARY
Jen? We're leaving. Now.

They look at each other. And then A BLOOD CURDLING scream from above. They gasp. He starts out. She grabs him.

HILLARY
Hold on. Helmets.

She hands Neil his helmet. He nods. She puts on her own.

EXT. WALL - NIGHT

Hillary and Neil cling to the wall. They place pro, and start climbing toward's Jen's portaledge. Rain hammers them. Jen's screams wafting out.

INT. ERNIE AND JEN'S PORTALEDEGE - NIGHT

Hillary opens the flap to see a naked and blood-stained Ernie kneeling over Jen, holding the knife. She's fighting him, gasping, covered in blood. *SLISH!!* He stabs her again.

NEIL
Ernie?!

Ernie looks at her. Eyes dripping with wet madness. Full surrender to the rock.

HILLARY
Ern. You gotta drop the knife, bud.

But there's no Ernie left. He starts to scream, and takes a swipe at Hillary. Neil tries to grab him, but Ernie slices him across the cheek, drawing blood. Neil reels back in pain.

Ernie falls on top of Hillary and she grabs his wrist. The knife inches from her face. He's drooling on her. Screaming.

WHAM!! WHAM! WHAM!! Neil starts kicking him. He falls off Hillary. She joins in and they kick him out of the tent.

He falls. The rope catches him, fifty feet below. He slams into the wall.

They go to Jen. She is sweating. Suffering. Holding her side.

JEN
He... snapped...

Hillary rips up a towel and ties it around her waist.

JEN
It's the trauma... it's the altitude... it's--

HILLARY
--It's the mountain. It's alive.
It's controlling everything.

NEIL
(dark)
Ernie's a force of nature...

They hear Ernie SCREAMING below. Obscenities and nonsense.

JEN
We gotta get the fuck out.

NEIL
Can you climb?

She snaps out of it.

JEN
I don't know. I think so...

Suddenly -- WOOWOOSH! The tent starts shaking violently.

WHAMM! They slam into each other. But it's not the wind. It's something else. Impossibly strong. An unseen force, shaking them up like a cocktail. WHACK! They slam against the rock. WHACK! WHACK! Tangling and falling all over each other. Pure screaming chaos. Supplies fly. The stove burner cracks Hillary on the head.

And someone else is screaming with them. We catch BRIEF GLIMPSES OF PAUL HERNANDEZ. Covered in blood. He's screaming, too. Crashing into them. Just as petrified as they are. Screaming like he's being stabbed thirty times...

A force is slamming them into the wall like a tetherball.

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! You can hear the avalanche -- rocks catapulting down, whizzing by.

Paul is gone. WOOWOOSH!!! They're dropped from the sky. Up and down, plummeting, and rising. Down is up and up is down --

The portaledge base snaps and now they are dangling off their anchors in a bag. No floor. Tangled in nylon. Like three sick cats in a burlap sack. And then the madness just stops. They look around. Creaking ropes. They catch their breath.

JEN
Holy fuck!

NEIL
Come on, we're leap frogging it.

EXT. PORTALEGE - NIGHT

Torrents of rain. They emerge, and start climbing. Hillary shines her headlamp down the wall.

Ernie is fifty below, and getting closer. Climbing at them. Knife in teeth like some deranged, bloodthirsty pirate.

EXT. THE WALL - NIGHT

They blast up the slick rock. It's about getting to the top and nothing else.

Their headlamps cut through the dark. Placing protection. This is the best climbing we've seen yet. Their lives depend on it. Battered by rain. No thinking. Just up. She looks down. Her light illuminates Ernie. A feral beast. Getting closer.

The shrieking vulture circles. The wind shifts. Neil leads. Jen in the middle. Hillary brings up the rear. Jen's blood is leaking from her side and staining the wall as she goes. She twists wrong, and cries out in pain.

Slips. Falls. Her cam pops out and she takes a whipper. WOOOOSHH!!! Slams into the wall, a foot above of Ernie.

AHHHHHHH!!!! He lunges and grabs on to Jen's legs. Climbs up her. Hillary is down climbing to her rescue.

Jen is screaming. Crashing into the wall. Ernie starts stabbing as he climbs her like a tree -- *SLISH! SLISH! SLISH!* Stabbing her all over, moaning and crying. Jen is trying desperately to kick Ernie off.

He hugs Jen like some horrible leech, and starts frantically CUTTING HER ROPE.

JEN
ERNIE! ERNIE!

She's screaming, trying to fight him off, but she's so weak.

Hillary pops her cam out of the rock and plummets. Dropping on to Ernie's back like a superhero, knocking him off Jen.

They slam into the wall together. Tangling in each other's ropes. He stabs at her, but she hits him in the face with her chalk bag. It explodes, blinding him. She starts elbowing him in the head.

He cuffs her around the neck. Hard. Tighter. Clamps down. Hillary turning purple. Choking. Slapping at his hands. His face white from chalk like a fucked-up clown.

He clamps down tighter. Tighter. Her eyes fluttering. A blood vessel erupts like a little crimson firework.

Above them, THE VULTURE SHRIEKS. Hillary is fading to black.

WHAMMM! Neil appears out of nowhere, cracking Ernie on top of the head with a rock so hard it sends him plummeting.

He hits the wall and starts to convulse. A SEIZURE on the rock. He is flopping spastically like a fish out of water. Foaming. Gurgling in the rain.

Suddenly, the seizing stops. Ernie is slowly coming back to lucidity. And wishes he wasn't. Eye fluttering, he looks up.

He's Ernie again. And sees what he's done to Jen. He looks at Hillary. At Neil. He starts to cut his own rope.

HILLARY

Ernie, no!

But his knife is sharp and he falls. And we're falling through the rain with Ernie. He's scared at first but then he stops fighting, and gives himself over to the terminal velocity. Surrender.

Twenty-six hundred feet in twelve seconds. The wind carrying him home. *WHAMM!!!* He hits a ledge. His head explodes like a ripe watermelon. Still falling. A headless body. Swallowed by the abyss.

CUT TO:

Jen is hanging there crying. Fear, and sorrow and more confusion than anything else.

HILLARY

Can you climb?!

JEN

AHHHH GOD! AHHH GOD!! ERNIE!!!

HILLARY

Try the crack, the crack!

JEN

I dunno... I... God, it hurts...

She sticks her fingers in a crack system. Starts climbing up. It hurts but up she goes.

HILLARY

There you go, you got it!

JEN

I can do it... Hill. I can do it!

Hope flashes in Jen's eyes. Hillary watches her climb the crack and -- *SLISSSHHH!!* The crack vices together like a guillotine, slicing Jen's fingers clean off! And she plummets, screaming.

Watching her fingers bounce off the rock and fall. Blood sprays out of her nubs. A finger bounces off Hillary's head.

HILLARY

Jen?!

A razor flake is cutting through Jen's rope. The mountain is finishing what Ernie started. It tears. She falls.

But instead of falling down -- Jen is falling up. *Bizzaro gravity*. Like the world is upside down and she's falling through it. Up, up. Screaming as she goes.

Falling higher and higher in the rain. Up through the storm clouds, lightning pulsing around her. Wind beating her, and stealing her breath.

And suddenly Jen's looking down at the tiny world below. At her fingerless hands.

The vulture flying past. A little too close. So high above the summit of Dìyù Shan. Neil and Hillary are wet specks of barnacle on the rock.

And then... Like Wiley Coyote... Jen stops dead in mid air. Another thousand feet above the summit. Swollen storm clouds. Dangling there, kicking at the sky. Sucking in breaths.

Suddenly -- Gravity kicks in. And now she's falling the way God intended. Down. And we're falling with her. A five thousand foot free fall.

She can't scream because her stomach is lodged in her throat. Wheezing. Desperate to breathe the air that rushes by. It rejects her needy lungs. Down. Fifty feet a second.

And there's the summit of the mountain below her shoes. Small and pointless from up here. Falling. Choking on rain. It's taking such a long time.

WHACK!! Clipping the top of the wall. A munch of bones. Bouncing off an outcrop and somersaulting down. Past the screaming blur of Neil and Hillary. Falling through the storm. Her screams are musical. In key. Falling. Falling.

And then the ground rushes up at 300 MPH!

CUT TO:

DÌYÙ SHAN. A giant monster in the rain. The spires look like horns. The cave looks like a mouth. Gluttonous.

God turns off the faucet and the rain stops a little too abruptly. Clouds part too quickly. Day breaks like a femur. The sun is on the rise. An explosion of golden light climbs up the wall. It doesn't need a belay.

We climb with the light. Rising with the sun to join Hillary and Neil so high above. Neil is screaming in shock. He can't move he's frozen. Staring down.

And then the screams stop abruptly. Hillary touches him, he jumps. Looks at her. Horrified. He's trying to speak the words die on his tongue.

HILLARY

We have to keep climbing. Don't look down. Keep climbing, no matter what.

NEIL

They're my family.

HILLARY

Neil. We have to go. The only way off this mountain is up.

She touches him warmly. Birds chirp. The mist melts away to reveal the green shag carpet of trees twenty seven hundred feet below their dangling shoes.

They look up at the rock. It glistens. Clean and washed. And the most perfect rainbow she's ever seen. It's horrible.

CUT TO:

They climb on. The sun growing larger in the sky. Hillary is exhausted, Neil is fueled by adrenaline. Working together. Connected by an nylon umbilical chord. Placing cams, nuts, and hexes. Ascending fast.

The vulture soaring over head. Hillary looks around. It's very familiar terrain. She pulls herself up. But then she feels something. A pebble maybe. Looks at her hand. There's A TOOTH stuck to the bottom.

HILLARY

No.

Pulls herself on to the ledge. Standing in dried blood. And there's the HUMAN JAW. She gasps, and kicks it off.

It's that ledge. PITCH TWENTY AGAIN. They see their portaledge camp slapping against the rock. Mark and Paul's tent looming above it. Neil pulls himself up. They look around.

HILLARY

Pitch twenty? How--

NEIL

How did we get here? We're back...
Did we downclimb? How did we--

She's trying to orient herself. All the climbing they just did for naught.

HILLARY

It's fucking with us. It's fucking
with our heads.

Hillary looks up at the old portaledge. Neil's ears perk. His eyes flash. He looks down at his ankles. He doesn't see it. He feels it.

NEIL

Something... Something is--

THE INVISIBLE FORCE. Cuffing his ankles. We see the indentation on his pants. Two invisible hands gripping him.

NEIL

What the fuck?!

And he's slowly pulled away from the wall.

HILLARY

No.

She grabs him, but he's yanked out of her hands by the invisible force. Getting pulled further away from the wall.

HILLARY

Neil!

He's kicking and screaming, trying to free himself from the horrible grasp. Hillary bends and kicks off the wall as hard as she can, grabbing on to his shirt. Clutches her arm. And now he's pulling her too, both off the wall. Peeling away.

But the force YANKS HIM HARD, breaking them apart. Hillary SLAMS into the wall. And Neil is kicking at the evil air. Twenty feet off from the wall.

His rope stretching as he's pulled away. Growing taut. Fifty feet away, on his back in the air, facing heaven. The lead up to of some deranged amusement park ride.

Arching upwards into the air. Hundred feet away from the wall now. A rope's length. The FORCE FLIPS HIM OVER. And now he's looking straight down at the eternal below. It would give Hitchcock vertigo. A warm patch of urine stains his pants, and rains.

A little to the right. Like he's being lined up. Hillary looks to her right and sees it -- The sharp ledge. The force is lining him up for the bullseye.

HILLARY

No.

And Neil is pulled higher. Screaming tears. No more slack left on the rope. You can hear it creak.

Hillary gains momentum, running across the wall, back and forth like a trapeze artist.

The force lets Neil go and he is flying through the air like a pendulum. She runs across the wall to break his fall. Dives for him but, misses and -- WHACKKKKK!!! Neil slams into the ledge and his leg instantly SNAPS. The tibia BURSTS through the skin.

NEIL
FUCK!!!!!! OH GOD!!!!!!

Spitting. Moaning. Seething. Hillary climbs over to him. Horrified. He's incoherent with pain. Swaying on the rope. Blood falling down and riding the wind, pecking her face.

NEIL
I'm dead. I'm fucked. It hurts so bad. I'm gonna pass out. It hurts so bad. It's bad.

HILLARY
Breathe. Just breathe. I'm getting you off this rock, I promise.

NEIL
I can't. How am I gonna climb?

HILLARY
I'll climb for you.

She looks up. And there's THE CAVE above. She grabs his rope, and snaps into action -- blasting up the rock. Climbing up to the cave. Three thousand feet up now, three quarters of the way, and higher than anything made by man. The earth is like a living map below.

INT. CAVE - DAY

Hillary leaps to grab the branch on the lip, and pulls herself in. She looks around. It's dark. Dank.

She throws her light around. The cave is smaller than it looks. Like a stuffy crypt. Her light is dull so it's hard to get a feel for the place. It looks empty. But it isn't.

She follows the wall, fingers tracing the rock, looking for another way out. Feeling her way. Cobwebs. Massive bugs skittering everywhere. A stray bat.

CRUNCH. She steps on something. Looks down. It's HER LIGHTER.

Weird. She picks it up. *How the fuck did it get up here?* She sparks it. It works. Plays on her face. She illuminates something else in the dark. We don't see it yet. But she drops her lighter as pure horror deforms her face.

Her SCREAMS are swallowed by the cave and vomited back out in echo, so loud they shake the dust loose from the ceiling.

She turns away from the horror, towards the bright light of the entrance, and collapses on her hands and knees.

HILLARY
(muttering)
Oh God. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry...

NEIL (O.S.)
Where are you?!!

Neil's voice snaps her out of it. No time for fear and guilt. She has to act. She climbs to her feet. Moves away from the horror, back towards the entrance to the cave. Towards life.

HILLARY
Neil! Listen to me! I'm pulling you up! Climb with your hands! Can you do that for me?!

NEIL (O.S.)
I think. I think so...

The VULTURE lands on the branch at the lip. Staring at her. Hillary picks up a rock, and CHUCKS IT at the bird. It bounces off its beak, and the bird flies away.

CUT TO:

Neil. Hanging there. So broken. Inside and out.

HILLARY (O.S.)
Here we go!

INTERCUT: Hillary wraps the rope around her hands. Braces herself. And starts pulling. Adrenaline coursing.

Neil is using his hands and good leg as Hillary pulls. Up Neil goes, climbing with one leg. Muscles bulging. Closer to the cave. Hillary screams, mustering all the strength she has. And she's suddenly stronger than she's ever been.

HILLARY
Keep climbing! No matter what!

He's so close. She goes to the edge. Grabs his hands. He's screaming in pain as he leg catches the lip. She pulls him up and in and he falls on top of her. Crying. Moaning.

HILLARY
It's okay. It's okay.

He holds her close. And they just lie there on the floor. Breathing heavy. Catching their breath. Safe in each other's arms. Safe for now.

NEIL
Oh fuck. It hurts...

She holds him. Hushes him. He sees something in the shadows.

NEIL
...What is that?

She lets go of him. Looks at him pitifully.

HILLARY
Everything.

And then she shows him. Shining her lamp to reveal: The cave is full of familiar junk. The portaledge pole that almost hit her. Her ripped tent. The climbing journal she threw off. The drill. The rope. Jen's walkie talkie. Neil's camera. The human jaw. The dead lizard. A graveyard of the fallen.

HILLARY
Everything that fell. It's all ends up here somehow. Everything.

And then her lamp reveals the remains of ERNIE AND JEN. Sitting upright. A mess of gore and climbing gear. Jen's face decimated from her free falls. Ernie is headless.

Neil SCREAMS, tries to scoot away, but backs into the shriveled corpses of MARK and PAUL behind him. Worm food. Mark has NO JAW. Neil cries, crawling away, pain stabbing.

HILLARY
Your leg! You gotta stay still!

He crashes into THE CHINESE CLIMBER. A skeleton in a knit hat, covered with ropes. The skeleton falls on top of Neil. He screams and pushes it off, tearing cobwebs off his face.

Hillary tries to calm him down. Holds him. He's gasping.

HILLARY
Stop. It's okay, it's okay. We're gonna be okay.

The corpses are all sitting against the wall, as if they were arranged that way. They see the bones littered throughout the cave. Human remains. Skulls. Ribs. Pelvises. Piles of bones.

NEIL
We're never leaving. We're gonna be like Mark and Paul, like all of them...
(sheer terror)
We're never getting off this mountain!

HILLARY

Neil. Please... Don't move...
(tears)
We gotta splint your leg.

CUT TO:

Hillary's whittled the branch into two flat sides, turned it into a splint. She's removing her rope now. Cuts a small section off. Splits it. She puts her hands on Neil's leg. Swollen and wrong. The blood wet nub of bone jutting out.

HILLARY

It's gonna hurt.

He bites a stick.

NEIL

Okay. Go. Do it.

SNAP! She puts his leg straight. He *SCREAMS* so loud the dirt rains from above.

CUT TO:

They just sit there against the wall. Neil's leg is swelling in the splint. He's groaning. She hands him a couple more pills. He takes them, greedily. She's looking at him with soul piercing eyes. He feels her stare.

HILLARY

You were my rock all along. I really blew it. I could have had a life with you, but I was afraid... And I fucked everything up...

NEIL

We'll be together. One way or another. I love you... Since we were kids, climbing El Cap after school. I love you.

He takes her hand. Hillary's face ignites with a new purpose.

HILLARY

We're getting out of here.

NEIL

The mountain always wins.

HILLARY

Not this time. We're getting off this rock. I'm climbing to the top, no matter what. I'm gonna walk down. Just walk down the trail on the other side like nothing. Li is waiting. We'll get help.

(MORE)

HILLARY (CONT'D)
They're gonna air lift you out and
everything's gonna be okay, I
promise.

NEIL
(smiles)
I believe you.

She kisses her piton necklace.

NEIL
What's with the necklace?

HILLARY
What do you mean? You gave it to
me. Way back. Teaching me how to
fall. Remember?

NEIL
But, why do you keep kissing it?

HILLARY
It's good luck.

Neil smiles. Kisses it himself.

NEIL
Good luck.

HILLARY
Climbing.

NEIL
Climb on.

She starts away -- THE PIERCING SHRIEK OF THE VULTURE! She
turns to find it. Perched on the edge of the cave. It has her
rope in its beak.

HILLARY
No.

Hillary takes a step towards the bird. The soulless thing
just stares at her.

Hillary lunges for the rope. Catches the end, but the bird
TAKES OFF and it slips through her fingers.

HILLARY
FUCK!

The vulture flies away. Soaring over the world with the rope.
It lets it go and the rope falls.

Hillary leans against the wall. Horrified. It's all over now.
Neil is staring at her.

NEIL
We're fucked.

But Hillary knows what she has to do. A beat of silence.

HILLARY
I gotta solo.

NEIL
What? Hill. You can't. Your hand.

HILLARY
I have to. It's the only way.

NEIL
Your hand's gonna tweak! No! I'm not gonna lose you again!

HILLARY
Neil. Listen to me. It's only four hundred feet to the crack. Just a perfect crack all the way to the summit, it's beautiful. If I can get up those four hundred feet we're home free.

NEIL
It's fucking with you. It doesn't want you to get to the top.

HILLARY
I'm not trying to get to the top.
I'm trying to get to the bottom.
(smiles)
I'm climbing towards something now.

NEIL
The purest form of climbing. Right? I guess if anyone can do it, you can. You're a born climber. This is what you were put on this earth to do. Do it.

HILLARY
Climb on.

EXT. DIRT ROAD - DAY

A pile of cigarette butts. Another joins them. A foot stamps it out. REVEAL LI at the trailhead. Waiting by his truck. He looks at the gnarled forest, and the snapped chain. He hears the vulture SHRIEK. Sees it flying overhead. He shudders. Checks the time. He's antsy. He lights up another cigarette.

EXT. THE WALL - DAY

Hillary is climbing up the wall without ropes.

She slots her hands into cracks. Jamming upward. Slow and steady. Supreme presence. It's a beautiful day for a climb.

She's climbing up the crack system. She doesn't look down. But we do. Thirty two hundred feet above the earth. Higher than the World Trade Centers stacked on top of each other.

Hillary dances across a flake like a dirtbag ballerina. Locks off on an undercling. The holds are sharp, like grabbing the tips of tacks.

She comes to the end of the pitch. Pulls herself up on a shelf. *Three hundred feet to the final crack.* She looks across the mountain. The rock is calm. *Too calm.*

INT. CAVE - DAY

Neil sits with his back to the wall, shivering. So much pain. The remains of the dead surrounding him. He looks like he belongs with them. And then his light starts to flicker. And then it dies. He sits alone in the dark.

EXT. WALL - DAY

Next pitch. Hillary steps on to a foothold the size of a pebble. Reaching for a pinch.

THE VULTURE is perched on the rock above, watching her. It SHRIEKS! She cries out. Feet slip, but she catches herself.

Cranes up at the bird. It takes off. So does Hillary. Higher. She kicks over to the ledge. The crack vanishes naturally into a seam. The wall is blank like glass. Nothing to grab on to. A swath of nothing. This is where it gets dicey.

HILLARY

Okay. Okay.

She chalks up. Plants her fingers. Nothing but gravity and a bit of friction holding her up. Like walking on the sky. The toughest kind of climbing. She's making it look easy.

She contorts her body in impossible ways, pressing against corners like she's made of glue.

She reaches for a microhold above, spread eagle across the wall like she's frozen in a jumping jack. The wall is getting steeper now. She's getting tired.

One hundred feet above, the final crack to the top. The vulture SHRIEKS. She sees its shadow and feels it, too.

She pulls herself on to a ledge. She catches a glimpse of the abyss below. Rock dust rains. Best not to look.

Hands gashed and bleeding, she reaches into her pocket and pulls out a small tube of SUPER GLUE. Fills in the cut. *Works like charm.*

The FINAL CRACK above her head. She jams her hands into the fracture. They fit like gloves.

Riding the crack like an escalator. She can see the summit above. The vulture perched, watching.

Hillary reaches the wrong way -- A STAB OF PAIN! And she tweaks out. Her hand goes numb and dies.

Hillary screams. Helpless on the wall. Single handed. She starts flapping her dead mitt wildly. Desperate.

She reaches for the pills in her pocket. Grabs the bottle. But it slips through her fingers. Bounces off the ledge. Pills explode, and fall to earth with the bottle. Only a couple of pills scattered across the ledge.

HILLARY

FUCK!

She presses her head against the wall. Breathes. Looks down at her limp wrist. Jams the worthless, fingery meat into the large crack for balance, all of her weight on her right hand.

She starts to downclimb. Sloppy. A rock cuts her ankle, blood fills her shoes and stains the wall.

Her foot slips, she nearly falls. But she manages to lower herself down onto the ledge. Scoops up the last of the pills and stuffs them in her mouth.

Slides down on to her ass. Just enough room on the ledge to wallow. Pumping her dead hand over and over.

The top seems so far now. As if the rock has grown a couple hundred feet higher. *Maybe it has.* Pumping her fist, her hand slowly comes back to life.

Hillary grabs hold of the crack, and starts back up. A dead sprint to the top. *Fifty feet from the summit now.* She's actually going to make it! It's all downhill from here.

She reaches for the crack -- But slips! Gasps. Dangling from one hand -- *her bad one.* A debris of rock dust rains. Hillary's desperate.

All of her weight on her fingertips. She tries to pull herself up. Feet scraping the wall for friction. She looks up and sees --

A STRANGE CREEPING MIST gathering at the summit, shrouding the world around the top.

It billows down the rock like dying clouds. She closes her eyes. Finds the grace to breath. CLOSE on the piton around her neck.

YOUNG HILLARY (O.S.)
I'm gonna fall!

YOUNG NEIL (O.S.)
The rope will catch you, I promise!
I won't let go of it!

EXT. ROCK - FLASHBACK

YOUNG HILLARY is 12-years-old. Strapped into a harness. In the middle of her first rock wall. A hundred feet up.

YOUNG NEIL is 14. Below on belay. As Hillary climbs, Neil pulls the rope through her device, taking out the slack. Young Hillary can't go on. Her eyes scrunch shut.

YOUNG HILLARY
I'm scared!

YOUNG NEIL
There's nothing to be scared of!
Falling is good! Falling means
learning and pushing your limits!

She looks up. It's so high, it seems impossible from here.

YOUNG NEIL
Don't look down! Only up!

And with that, Young Hillary reaches for the hold above. And takes off. Climbing up the rock. She's a natural. So strong. The rope is taut. Young Neil watches with eagle eyes.

She climbs higher. And then she falls! She's instantly yanked up by the harness as Neil's rope catches her. She swings.

YOUNG NEIL
You did it!

And suddenly -- Hillary is laughing. The thrill of her life.

YOUNG NEIL
You're a real climber now!

These words etch themselves into the wet cement of her soul. She pumps her arms in victory.

THE CRY OF THE VULTURE!

BACK TO:

HILLARY OPENS HER EYES. Nothing's changed, but she's calm now. Hanging. Fingers slipping. And it's all over. A smile of surrender. And instead of being evicted...

She lets go. Falling on her own terms. Falling through the world again. Like the statue of a climber, gripping the wind.

This is when the rope would catch her. But the tug never comes. Because there is no rope. There never was. Gray rock blurs by. She closes her eyes and -- *AND WHAMM!!!* She lands in someone's arms.

Her eyes snap open. IT'S ERNIE. Perched on the ledge. A perfect smiling vision, like a comforting angel.

She looks at him. In total shock. Ernie's smile washes over her like medicine. He's a hero. His dream has come true.

He pushes her towards to the crack. She latches on.

And then Ernie is just gone. Gratitude in her eyes. She even manages a laugh. She kisses her lucky piton, and blasts off!

She climbs up to the final crack to the top. Home free. It might as well be an elevator. The wind-swept slab drops away. The summit comes into view. The top obscured by a sad blanket of fog spilling down. Swallowing the rock.

The vulture is perched on the lip, blocking her way. One last obstacle. Face to face. A long, intense stare down. We see Hillary's reflection in the bird's obsidian eyes. And then --

WOOOOSH!!! The vulture blasts off. Allowing her to pass. As if she's worthy of the top.

EXT. SUMMIT - DAY

Hillary pulls herself up to the summit. Four thousand feet closer to heaven. Wrapped in fog.

Screaming as she reaches the top. Falls to her knees. Sweaty tears rolling down her face. Exhausted, gasping for breath. Finally, she props herself up on one arm, and looks around.

FOG. That's all. Just a bland choke of fog. Dead and gray. No view from up here. The fog has swallowed the world. Even the sounds of nature have been eaten alive.

Hillary starts hacking. Climbs to her feet. Feeling her way through the hungry shroud. And then she stops. Sees A FIGURE standing before her. An outline of person. Coming into focus.

IT'S JEN. Smiling. So warm and kind. She has all her fingers. More people appear obscured behind her. Hillary isn't afraid.

IT'S MARK and PAUL and the CHINESE CLIMBER. They're all smiling. No fear. Everything is perfect.

Others, too. Shadows lost in the fog. Centuries of forgotten climbers. Many have tried and failed. They're all here.

Ernie summits from below. Joins them. A family again. And then the last man comes through the fog. IT'S NEIL. Love in his eyes. Hillary lights up with joy. He takes her hands.

NEIL

We'll always be together.

CLOSE on Hillary's face. A smile breaks across it. So big it tickles her ears. She's finally free. Hillary and Neil embrace and the fog devours them. The world is erased.

INT. CAVE - NIGHT

The leathery corpses of Neil and Hillary sitting side by side. Hand in hand. Hillary's head on Neil's shoulder. Arranged. They've been here for a few weeks now, and they've begun to decay. But they'll decay together. Together forever.

The vulture is perched at the mouth. Watching. The bird spreads its giant black wings like the angel of death --
WOOOOSH!!! Takes off.

And we fly with it. Flying over China as the sun starts to rise and lights up the world. We fly further and further away from Dìyù Shan until it's nothing but a sad pebble on the horizon.

T H E E N D