

**BOOKWORM**

Written by

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**EXT. SUBURBAN BACK YARD -- NIGHT**

A crackly LP plays on a turntable somewhere. Items in a tomboy's lair as CREDITS roll -- maps on the walls, stacks and stacks of books, folk LP's, framed photos of New Zealand's wilderness, a bonsai tree, well-loved toys...

**MILDRED** (11, red-cheeked, bespectacled) at the window, looks through binoculars, into the backyard:

Where a chunk of raw beef glistens under a BEER-CRATE TRAP, held up by a stick with a rope attached, held by Mildred.

MILDRED

Come on... dinner is served. Come on, you little bugger...

She lowers the binoculars, glancing over to the TV.

**ON THE TV SCREEN**

A NEWS ANCHORWOMAN (20s) sits at a desk, a graphic of a BLACK PANTHER behind her as she addresses camera --

ANCHORWOMAN (ON TV)

*The hunt is on for a mysterious black cat prowling the wilds of Canterbury. This time, the beast was seen by Brian Thomas, a Canterbury farmer. Sarah Bruce reports.*

**MILDRED'S POV** -- through binoculars again -- as a DOMESTIC BLACK CAT is spotted moving slowly against the fence. The view whips to the TRAP, then back to the approaching cat.

**ON TV** -- The image CUTS to rapid-fire shots: a field -- sheep -- a grassy hillside --

REPORTER (V.O.)

*Brian was fixing a fence when he saw the creature, a moment he says he'll never forget.*

CUT to a FARMER (50s) interviewed on camera --

FARMER (ON TV)

*It just looked like a big black cat. Like a normal house cat, but really big, actually huge, just like a really extra-big black cat with big yellow eyes and big teeth. Big, sharp, kind of jagged teeth. My sheep are alright though.*

**MILDRED'S POV** through the binoculars -- the cat creeps towards her trap...

ANCHORWOMAN (O.S.)  
*The reward offered for video proof  
of the mysterious creature is now  
at 50,000 dollars.*

Mildred carefully places the binoculars down, clasping both hands on the rope.

From somewhere in the house, Mildred's mother calls out --

MOTHER (O.S.)  
*Mildred! You want anything to eat?*

Mildred acknowledges this, but her eyes are locked on the cat, calling out in a strained shout --

MILDRED  
Mum, be quiet..!

MOTHER (O.S.)  
*What!? Can't hear you!*

The cat stops still, ears twitching...

MILDRED  
(whisper-shout)  
Can you make me some toast!?

Mildred's mother **ZO** (40) peers around the door, cigarette clenched 'twixt her teeth --

ZO  
Sure, love. I know how you like it.  
Razor-sharp triangles. No crust.

MILDRED  
That's right.

ZO  
One thing though, Mildred...

Mildred looks back at her, patience dwindling --

MILDRED  
What? I'm in the middle of  
something here...

ZO  
What are the magic words?

Mildred hurriedly steals a glance back at the cat --

MILDRED  
Please..?

ZO  
That's the magic *word*, singular.  
What are the magic *words*, plural?

MILDRED

Mum, can't you see I'm busy trying to catch Jonesie in an intricate home-made trap?

ZO

And why in the name of buggery would you want to trap our poor sweet innocent cat?

MILDRED

Practice.

ZO

For?

MILDRED

For the *Panthera Pardus* that's been haunting our wilderness of late. You may know him by his *nom de plume*, The Canterbury Panther?

ZO

*Panthera Pardus*. *Nom de plume*. You sure do know a crapload of words, don't you, young lady?

MILDRED

I'm a card-carrying bookworm. So yes, I sure do know a crapload of words.

ZO

But do you know the *magic* words? Say them and I'll bugger off and make your bloody toast triangles.

MILDRED

(sighs, resigned)

I .. love .. you.

ZO

Go on?

MILDRED

... with all .. my heart.

ZO

There. Was that so difficult?

MILDRED

Yes. It was, actually.

Zo rolls her eyes, and heads off downstairs.

Mildred returns her attention to the action outside. The cat is now sniffing the meat under the crate. Mildred gets ready to pull the rope...

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
*Come on... that's it...*

Right then -- THE TV AND LIGHTS SHUT OFF. A POWERCUT, throwing the room into pitch DARKNESS.

OUTSIDE -- the cat gets spooked, bounding off.

MILDRED (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
 Oh, wonderful. Fan-bloody-tastic.  
 That's just great.  
 (calls out)  
 Mum!? What happened? Mum?!

In the darkness -- drawers opened, rummaged through, and --

A FLASHLIGHT blinks on, held by Mildred. She heads towards the doorway, path illuminated by the light's thin beam.

#### **INT. CORRIDOR**

Mildred steps out of her room, the light's beam sweeping --

MILDRED  
 Mum!?

No reply.

#### **INT. STAIRWAY**

Mildred hurries down a corridor --

MILDRED  
 Mum!? What are you doing?

#### **INT. HALLWAY**

Mildred steps into a cramped hallway, flashlight roaming --

MILDRED  
 Mum, come on. This is not amusing.  
 I am not amused! Let's be grownups,  
 shall we?  
 (then)  
 I swear, if you sneak up on me  
 again... I'll pee myself, and  
 you'll have to clean it up.

The flashlight's beam finds -- In a DOORWAY AHEAD --

ZO'S BARE FEET, twitching, *convulsing* on the floor.

Mildred freezes, face falling in shock and fear.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Mum..?

HARD CUT TO:

**INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR**

Mildred sits outside an operating room. Foot tapping. Eyes wide and scared.

A **DOCTOR** (40s) exits the room, taking a seat beside Mildred.

Mildred looks at them. Fearful, hopeful. The Doctor pauses, choosing the right words. Then --

DOCTOR

It's Mildred, isn't it?

(Mildred nods)

My darling, I have some good news  
and I have some bad news.

Mildred winces, truly scared, bracing herself...

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

The bad news is... you're going to  
need a new toaster.

(smiles)

The good news is... you're *not*  
going to need a new mum.

Mildred just looks at The Doctor, puzzled, petrified.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

Your toaster exploded. An  
electrical malfunction of some  
kind. I'm not an electrician, so I  
can't really go into the specifics.  
You know the button you push down  
to begin the toasting process?

Mildred nods. The Doctor adjusts their glasses.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

That button was faulty, which  
caused your mum to get quite the  
shock, which caused her body to  
become like jelly, which caused her  
to fall backwards, which caused her  
to hit her head against the bench,  
which caused her to go into a coma.

MILDRED

(stunned)

A coma..?

DOCTOR

She's not dead. But she's not fully alive either. She's in a kind of dreamlike netherworld between life--

MILDRED

I know what a coma is. Can you save her?

DOCTOR

Now you listen to me carefully, Mildred. I'm not talking as doctor to child right now. No. This is Woman to Woman. Sister to sister. Soul to--

MILDRED

(impatient)

Can you save her? Yes or no.

DOCTOR

Yes. We can, and we will. But she has something called a brain bleed. So we're going to keep her under for a at least a week until she stabilizes.

MILDRED

A week? She's supposed to be taking me camping tomorrow. She finally took some time off work, she... she *promised*...

The Doctor shakes their head sadly. Mildred sighs.

DOCTOR

My poor darling. I'm afraid camping will have to wait. But first things first... Where's your dad?

Mildred looks mortified. From somewhere, a DOORBELL CHIMES "Somewhere Over The Rainbow" as we --

CUT TO:

**INT. HALLWAY -- DAY**

A middle-aged woman with very curly red hair, **DOTTY**, opens a front door to reveal --

**STRAWN WISE** (40), Mildred's father, on the doorstep. He's an illusionist with a dated look. Leather jacket, trilby, eyeshadow, black fingernails, reptile-skin suitcase.

STRAWN

Hi. I'm Strawn. Strawn Wise. Mildred's... biological father.

DOTTY  
The magician.

STRAWN  
Illusionist.  
(beat)  
Magician sounds... cheap?

Silence. Dotty eyes Strawn up and down.

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
Can I come in?

DOTTY  
Can I see some I.D?

STRAWN  
I.D?

DOTTY  
It stands for Identification  
Document.

Strawn considers this, lips curling into a knowing smirk.

STRAWN  
I'd love to show you some I.D, but  
there's a problem. You see, *you*  
currently have my I.D.

DOTTY  
*I* have it?

STRAWN  
That's right.

DOTTY  
What do you mean, mate?

STRAWN  
You have my I.D.

DOTTY  
I do? Where?

Strawn reaches out towards her hair -- he yanks his hand away fast, revealing his PASSPORT. Dotty looks at it, impressed --

DOTTY (CONT'D)  
I have to say. Normally I find  
magicians skin-crawlingly  
embarrassing, but you're actually  
half decent.

Dotty takes the passport, looking at the photo, satisfied.

DOTTY (CONT'D)  
Access granted. Shoes off!



**INT. HALLWAY**

Strawn enters, setting his suitcase down, kicking his platform boots off. Dotty looks to him, suddenly serious --

DOTTY

Look, mate. Just so you know. I didn't hug the girl. Even though Lord knows she needs one.

STRAWN

I'm sorry, what?

DOTTY

Your daughter. I specifically *didn't* hug her.

STRAWN

Why?

DOTTY

I just... I've heard so many horror stories. You can't be too careful, with other peoples' kids, these days... Touching them. Even hugs are a no-go.

STRAWN

I guess so.

DOTTY

My cousin Geoffrey was a teacher at the local school here. One day he hugged a little girl who'd grazed her knee. Guess what?

STRAWN

What?

DOTTY

The girl's parents pressed charges. Old Geoffrey lost his job. He'll never teach again.

STRAWN

That's awful.

DOTTY

Yeah, he went downhill after that. Ended up putting both barrels of a shotgun in his gob.

STRAWN

Jesus. I'm so sorry.

DOTTY

It's alright. He didn't pull the trigger.

STRAWN

Oh. That's good.

DOTTY

No it's not. He hung himself after that.

STRAWN

Oh no. Oh, I am so, so sorry.

DOTTY

It's okay. The rope broke.

Strawn cringes, awaiting more horror.

STRAWN

Is he...

DOTTY

Dead?

(Strawn nods)

No. He's very much alive.

STRAWN

Okay. That's great.

DOTTY

No it's not, mate. He's in jail for 20 years.

(whispered)

They found his hard drive. And let's just say there's no smoke without fire.

Strawn shakes his head, depressed. Dotty claps her hands together, forcing a smile.

DOTTY (CONT'D)

Right, mate. I'm off. Take care of the girl. She's in there, glued to a book as always. I'm next door on the right if you need anything.

STRAWN

Yeah. Thanks.

Dotty slips her flip-flops on, and leaves.

Strawn inhales sharply, steeling himself, heading into --

#### INT. LIVING ROOM

Strawn steps into the room, looking at Mildred, who's slumped on the sofa, engrossed in a Willard Price book.

STRAWN

Mildred. It's me. Strawn. Your Dad.  
I just flew across the world to be  
with you, little lady.

(silence)

I'm sorry about your mom. But she's  
going to be okay. It's official.

Mildred looks up at last.

MILDRED

A licensed medical professional has  
*officially* told you she's  
*officially* going to be okay? Is  
that what you mean by official?

STRAWN

Well... no, what I mean is... you  
know, she's going to be okay.

I'm sure she is.

(unsure)

I'm pretty sure.

Mildred raises an eyebrow... and returns to her book. Strawn  
just stands there, thinking.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Hey. Want to see something amazing?

Mildred turns a page, ignoring him.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

I said, do you want to see  
something amazing?

Mildred sighs. She sets her book down on the sofa. She looks  
up at Strawn, wearily.

MILDRED

Does it take a long time?

STRAWN

No.

MILDRED

Fine. Show me something amazing.

Strawn steps towards Mildred, pulling a deck of cards from  
his back pocket. He shuffles the cards, fanning them out.

He extends the cards, faces down, towards Mildred.

STRAWN

Pick a card. Go on.

Mildred selects a card with the minimum enthusiasm possible.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Look at it. Don't show it to me.

Mildred looks at the card. She nods.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Now, put it back.

Mildred returns the card to the deck. Strawn shuffles the cards, theatrically. With great ceremony, he picks a card - 3 of Diamonds - showing it to Mildred with smug triumph.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Is *this* your card?

MILDRED

No.

STRAWN

What? For a second, it sounded like you said no.

MILDRED

It sounded like I said no because I did, indeed, say no.

STRAWN

No..?

MILDRED

Yes. By which I mean no. As in: No, it's not my card.

Strawn looks confused. He shuffles the cards again. Mildred watches, nonplussed, losing patience.

Strawn takes another card - Queen of Clubs - from the deck, presenting it to Mildred with a satisfied grin.

STRAWN

Okay. Is *this* your card?

MILDRED

I'm afraid it's not.

STRAWN

What?

MILDRED

I'm afraid it's not... *sir*?

Strawn takes another card from the deck - Six of Diamonds - and raises it to Mildred, confidence dwindling...

STRAWN

Is *this* your card?

MILDRED

I can lie and say yes, if that helps? I understand if you're feeling... a little fragile...

Strawn picks another card, frustration simmering...

STRAWN

This?

MILDRED

No. I'm sorry.

STRAWN

Jesus. *This?*

Strawn pulls another card, jaw clenched.

MILDRED

Look, Mr. Wise, you just got off an eighteen-hour flight, and I'm sure you're--

STRAWN

God damn it!

Strawn THROWS the deck of cards at the window -- they bounce off, fluttering to the floor... and we now see --

A single CARD - Ace of Hearts - stuck to the OUTSIDE of the window, as if by magic.

Strawn smiles, his frustration just an act after all.

He looks to Mildred, who regards the card on the window.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Now... kindly remove your jaw from the floor, and tell me. Is *that* your card?

Strawn smiles, expectantly. Mildred' brow furrows. Silence.

MILDRED

Right. Before I get to whether that was or wasn't my card, let me get one thing straight.

STRAWN

What's that?

MILDRED

Am I right in assuming you snuck into the back garden to glue that card to the window, before scrambling back around to the front of the house to ring the doorbell?

STRAWN  
 What? No, it's... it's called  
 magic. I used the power of magic.

MILDRED  
 (ignoring that)  
 Did you, or did you not?

Savage silence. Strawn's cheeks redden.

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
 Come on, I won't be angry with you.  
 I just want you to tell me the  
 truth.

STRAWN  
 (admonished)  
 Fine. Yeah. I did.

MILDRED  
 How did you get back there?

STRAWN  
 I went round the alley at the end  
 of the street. Then I had to climb  
 over two garden fences.

MILDRED  
 So... you trespassed on private  
 property?

STRAWN  
 I mean... I guess I did? I didn't  
 really think of it that way, but...

MILDRED  
 I'm struggling to comprehend why  
 you'd think that was acceptable  
 behavior. I can only assume the  
 trespassing laws in America are  
*considerably* more relaxed than they  
 are here.

Strawn looks to the card on the window, then back to Mildred.

STRAWN  
 That *is* your card, though.  
 (unsure)  
 Right?

Strawn sags a little. Mildred looks at him, with pity.

MILDRED  
 No.

STRAWN  
 It *is* your card.

MILDRED  
No, it's not.

STRAWN  
It is.

MILDRED  
You appear to have misheard me the previous two times, so I'll say it again: It. Is. Not. My. Card.

STRAWN  
Of course it is.

MILDRED  
Fine. I give up. It's my card. Spectacular magic trick. Bravo. Does that make you feel better?

STRAWN  
Are you being sarcastic?

Strawn looks confused. Painful ugly silence befalls them.

Mildred returns to her book. Strawn scratches his head, defeated. Then, after some pause --

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
How about you show me your room?

#### **INT. BEDROOM**

The door opens. Mildred steps in, followed by Strawn, who takes in the decor --

STRAWN  
I can't say I spend much time in eleven year-old girls' bedrooms, but this isn't what I expected.

MILDRED  
What *did* you expect? A pink dollhouse? Pictures of princesses and palaces and horsies?

STRAWN  
Basically.

MILDRED  
What was on *your* walls when you were eleven?

STRAWN  
A lot of David Copperfield posters.

MILDRED  
 (surprised)  
 Wait. You like David Copperfield?

STRAWN  
 Like? More like love.

MILDRED  
 Same. I'm borderline obsessed, to tell the truth.

STRAWN  
 David Copperfield was my *life* growing up.

MILDRED  
 (warming)  
 Okay, so we have something in common. This is a good start.

STRAWN  
 (smiles)  
 A really good start.

MILDRED  
 What are the odds of us having the exact same favorite book?

Strawn frowns, confused.

STRAWN  
 No, no. I'm talking about David Copperfield... the illusionist from the 1990s?

MILDRED  
 Oh. I'm talking about David Copperfield, the Charles Dickens novel from the 1840s.

STRAWN  
 Oh. I have no idea what that is.

Silence, as if the very air has been sucked out of the room.

MILDRED  
 I guess we don't have anything in common, after all.

Strawn squirms. He looks around, noticing --

An area of the wall covered in news clippings, depicting the mysterious PANTHER. A prominent headline: "REWARD FOR PANTHER PROOF NOW \$50,000".

He steps closer, taking in the deluge of information she's compiled: photos, clippings, maps with triangulated red pins.



STRAWN

What is this?

MILDRED

The Canterbury Panther. Something of an obsession lately. There have been sightings for decades, but nobody's ever caught it on camera. They're offering fifty thousand for actual video proof of its existence.

Strawn nods, impressed.

STRAWN

I don't really understand New Zealand money. Is that a lot of money?

MILDRED

Yes. It's a lot of money. Money mum and I could *really* use right now.

(sighs)

She was supposed to take me camping tomorrow. I had it all worked out. I've gone through all historical data, studied the weather patterns and the terrain, and calculated the most likely location for an appearance from the mysterious beast.

Mildred looks gloomy. Her finger traces an area of desolate wilderness on the map.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Oh well.

Strawn thinks. He sees the real sadness, fear and disappointment in Mildred's eyes. He speaks up --

STRAWN

I mean... I could take you, maybe?

MILDRED

Really?

STRAWN

Sure. It might your mind off everything happening with your mom. Not that I know the first *thing* about camping. I've never been. But maybe we could go, just quickly..?

MILDRED

(brightening)

Are you sure?

Strawn notices more NEWS CLIPPINGS, about missing campers who have vanished in the NZ wilderness. Newspaper headlines:

*"HIKER IN HORROR FALL FROM CLIFF", "CAMPERS WASHED AWAY IN FLOOD", "VANISHED: 700 MISSING IN NZ WILD THIS YEAR".*

He suddenly looks scared, backtracking...

STRAWN

You know... now that I think about it, I don't know if it's such a great idea.

Mildred looks at him, intense.

MILDRED

We leave at first light.

Strawn looks anxious.

CUT TO BLACK:

**EXT. REMOTE BUS STOP -- DAWN**

A bus pulls up at a desolate stop. The door hisses open. Strawn and Mildred, carrying large back-packs, step off.

The bus door shudders closed. It drives off, kicking up dust.

Strawn looks down at Mildred, unsure. But she nods sagely.

MILDRED

Stick with me, you'll be fine.

She sets out across the road, determined. Strawn calls out --

STRAWN

You know where we're going, right?

No answer. Strawn hurries across the road, following her into

**EXT. HIKING TRAIL**

Mildred, map in hand, marches ahead.

Strawn lags behind, struggling under the weight of his backpack. Suddenly, a woman's VOICE calls from somewhere --

VOICE (O.S.)

*Hey! I know you!*

Strawn and Mildred stop, turning to see a smiling HIKER (20s) approaching. She wears an old-style fisherman's hat and spiky-soled boots. This is **ANNE**.

ANNE  
I know you!

MILDRED  
Who, me?

ANNE  
(to Strawn)  
No, you. You're Strawn Wise. The  
magician.

Strawn smiles, trying to hide the thrill of being recognized.

STRAWN  
Illusionist. But yes.

Anne moves closer - boundaries *schmoundaries* - arriving at  
uncomfortable proximity to Strawn.

ANNE  
I just knew it was you. And who's  
this cute little nipper?

STRAWN  
This is my biological daughter,  
Mildred.

ANNE  
Biological daughter, is she?  
(to Mildred)  
Hi there Mildred. I'm Anne.

MILDRED  
You look like an Anne. That name  
suits you. You have a perfect name-  
to-face correspondence.

Anne smiles faintly, confused. The three of them stand there,  
in awkward silence. Strawn and Mildred edge away from Anne.

But Anne steps forward, maintaining proximity.

ANNE  
I used to watch your show when it  
was on the telly.

STRAWN  
Oh, thanks. Thank you. Really, that  
means a lot.

ANNE  
I used to watch it after my night  
shift. It was on at 4am.

MILDRED  
(interjecting)  
Real prime-time stuff, then.

ANNE

It's such a shame we don't get it here anymore.

STRAWN

(hurt)

Nobody gets it anymore.

ANNE

What?

STRAWN

It's no longer running, here or anywhere else. It was cancelled. The network cancelled it. Halfway through season one, actually. So... I don't have a show any more.

ANNE

I guess that other guy sort of hijacked the spotlight, a little bit? Is that fair to say?

Strawn looks embarrassed. He glances at Mildred, who's studying her map.

STRAWN

Who, David?

ANNE

Yeah. Never liked him, myself. Up his own arse, from the looks of it.

STRAWN

Thanks. That's kind of you to say, in a strange way.

Mildred yawns.

ANNE

Can you still levitate?

STRAWN

I certainly can.

ANNE

What are you waiting for? Go on.

STRAWN

What? Now? Here?

ANNE

Yeah, go on Strawn. Levitate for an old fan.

Mildred folds her map up, pocketing it. She looks at her watch, then at Strawn, patience dwindling.

MILDRED

(to Strawn)

Is levitation a lengthy process?  
I'm asking because we've got a lot  
of ground to cover today.

STRAWN

(ignoring her)

Okay. Here we go...

Something seems to shift within Strawn -- some new persona  
summoned, a surge of cocksure assurance...

STRAWN (CONT'D)

I feel the power, specifically in  
my feet. I'm talking about the  
power of levitation. Specifically.

Strawn closes his eyes, face solemn, concentrating. Mildred  
looks at him, skeptical. Anne looks excited. Then --

Strawn's body begins to rise slightly. One of his feet does,  
indeed, appear to be lifting off of the ground.

ANNE

(thrilled)

Holy crap..! Whoa. Is this actually  
happening?

Strawn, eyes still closed, face clenched in determination,  
seems to rise slightly higher.

ANNE (CONT'D)

He's actually bloody *levitating!*

Mildred looks at Strawn's feet, then to Anne --

MILDRED

No, he's not.

ANNE

What do you mean?

MILDRED

He's put all his weight on his back  
foot, and he's lifting his front  
foot off the ground, thus creating  
the illusion of levitation from  
your vantage point.

Anne walks around to Strawn's side, crouching down, leaning  
close to inspect the position of his feet.

ANNE

Oh yeah. You're right.

Strawn opens his eyes and stops "levitating". His showman's  
swagger crumbles. He looks at Anne with sheepish deflation.

She looks back at him with disappointment and resentment.

ANNE (CONT'D)

Cheers, Strawn. Cheers for single-handedly destroying my belief in the power of magic. Much appreciated.

STRAWN

Do you... want an autograph?

Anne looks utterly repulsed, but then relents.

ANNE

Yeah, go on.

CUT TO:

**EXT. HIKING TRAIL**

Mildred and Strawn trudge along a weathered path between large overgrown bramble bushes. Mildred looks up at Strawn, who looks vaguely upset.

MILDRED

Something on your mind?

STRAWN

No.

They walk on. Strawn thinks.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Okay, yeah. There actually is something on my mind.

MILDRED

I thought there might be something on your mind. It's why I asked if there was something on your mind.

STRAWN

You didn't have to, you know... shatter the illusion back there.

MILDRED

You were conning her with fake magic. It was painful to watch.

STRAWN

You're a child, so maybe you can't understand this, but people need magic. It helps them cope.

MILDRED

Hate to break it to you, but putting all your weight on one foot while raising the other foot slightly off the ground isn't helping anyone.

Strawn tries to think of a comeback.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

You'll have to pardon my bluntness. I'm what's commonly referred to as a "brutal realist".

STRAWN

A brutal realist who actually believes there's a real giant panther out here.

MILDRED

Panthers exist. Levitation doesn't. That's the long and short of it, I'm afraid.

Stalemate. They hike on in silence.

**EXT. HILLSIDE**

Mildred marches up a steep hill. Strawn lags behind, winded. She turns, calling to him --

MILDRED

You alright there?

Strawn doubles over, gasping for air.

STRAWN

I just need to rest for a while.

He staggers to a rock, sitting, sighing. Mildred approaches.

MILDRED

When you're out of breath, the key is to breathe.

STRAWN

Thanks. I had no idea.

MILDRED

In through the nose, out through the mouth. There you go.

STRAWN

(winded)

Sorry. It's been a while since I walked this much.

(MORE)

## STRAWN (CONT'D)

Back at home, I usually get around on an electric scooter. It's gold. The wheels light up. I'm sorry.

## MILDRED

That's quite alright. But I'm going to impose a five-minute cap on our breaks, going forward. We've got a lot of terrain to cover today.

Strawn takes a swig of water from his bottle. Mildred looks at the map, then at the sky, ruminating...

## MILDRED (CONT'D)

We've got approximately four hours til sundown. That ridiculous "levitation" business cost us time.

Strawn looks self-conscious.

## MILDRED (CONT'D)

I'm not having a go at you. You weren't to know. But let's not make a habit of levitating for every Tom, Dick and Harry we stumble across.

Strawn doesn't know how to respond.

## MILDRED (CONT'D)

Right, sounds like your respiration is more or less regulated. Let's get a move on, shall we? As I said, we have a lot of ground to cover today, much of it quite hilly.

Mildred sets off again, up the hill. Strawn gets up, deeply regretting this whole enterprise.

**EXT. VALLEY**

As if from a hidden POV, through branches and shrubbery:

From afar, Strawn and Mildred make their way through a verdant valley, like tiny ants.

**CLOSER**

They trudge along. Mildred is deep in a lecture.

## STRAWN

Are there toilets here? You know, the portable kind?



MILDRED

No, Strawn. There are no toilets here.

(then)

Wee-wees are a relatively simple affair. But if you need what the Germans call a Scheisser, I do ask that you dig a hole.

STRAWN

Okay.

MILDRED

It's a delicate ecosystem out here, and human feces can really throw things off balance for the flora and fauna in the area.

She admires the terrain, with a flicker of sadness.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

This is one of the last places on Earth our species *hasn't* crapped all over. I'd like to keep it that way.

DISSOLVE TO:

**EXT. HILLTOP**

Strawn and Mildred sit on the grass overlooking the valley below, eating sandwiches wrapped in tinfoil.

STRAWN

Peanut butter and jelly. What do you think? Old Strawn's got some sandwich-making skills?

MILDRED

Must be an American delicacy. Can't say I'm a fan, myself. But calories are calories, and they're in short supply out here.

Strawn looks at her strangely.

STRAWN

You know, you don't talk like a...

MILDRED

Like a normal child?

STRAWN

I wasn't going to put it *that* way, exactly... but yeah.

Mildred raises an eyebrow, looking out at the vista beyond.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

My point is: you don't have to dress everything up to sound more sophisticated than you are.

MILDRED

Says the magician who *insists* on being called an illusionist.

Strawn tries to think of a comeback. He can't.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Cheer up. We'll be home soon. You can bugger off back to America, and be free from your "biological daughter" and her insufferable verbal tics for another half-decade.

Strawn looks deeply hurt.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Right. Let's move.

She gets up, heading out. Strawn watches, calling to her --

STRAWN

Do you even know where we're going?

**EXT. HILLSIDE**

They walk on. Strawn thinks a moment, debating whether or not to ask... but does it anyway --

STRAWN

How are you finding school?  
(delicately)  
Are you... having a hard time there?

MILDRED

(sharp)  
Why would I be having a hard time there, Strawn?

STRAWN

No, no, I didn't mean any--

MILDRED

If you must know, I'm top of my class. Straight A's all the way. I'm captain of the netball team, and I've got so many trophies our mantelpiece literally collapsed under the weight. And believe it or not, I was officially voted Most Popular Girl In School last winter.

Strawn's eyes widen slightly, impressed, relieved.

STRAWN

Wow.

MILDRED

My boyfriend, Clarence Hargreaves, is the dreamiest guy in the entire school - making *me* the envy of all and sundry. He looks like Hercules and his hair smells like apricot jam.

(smiles)

"A hard time"... a *hard time*? I have a hard time staying away from the place. School is absolute *Heaven* for me, academically, athletically, and socially.

STRAWN

(surprised)

What? Really?

Mildred smirks bitterly, darkening.

MILDRED

No. Not really. I despise school and everyone in it.

Mildred speeds up, *itching* to escape this conversation.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

We're bleeding daylight faster than I'm comfortable with. Let's pick up the pace, shall we?

Strawn watches her traipse off, suddenly gripped by sadness.

**EXT. WOODS -- DUSK**

Mildred and Strawn trudge through deep woods. The sun is sinking through the tree-line, bathing them in amber half-light. Strawn freezes, gasping when he sees --

A DEER CARCASS on the ground before them.

Mildred approaches the carcass -- nervous, glancing around.

STRAWN

Jesus...

Strawn notices deep bloody claw-marks on the deer.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Do you think--

MILDRED  
 (whispered)  
 Yes, I do.

They eye the carcass, real shock and fear between them now.

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
 One false move out here, and that  
 could be us.

They both stand there, glancing around fearfully. Mildred carefully reaches into her rucksack, taking out her camera.

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
 (whispered)  
*He's here... he's watching us.*

STRAWN  
 Oh god...

Strawn edges closer to her, fear rising. As he does --

He steps on a twig, snapping it --

BUSHES rustle in the distance, the sound of paw-pads receding, as an animal flees.

MILDRED  
 Bugger.

STRAWN  
 Sorry.

She lowers the camera, fuming. The woods fall silent.

**EXT. LAKESIDE -- DUSK**

The sun sets over a glorious glistening lake, shrouded by snow-capped mountains.

At the lake's shore, Mildred works to erect a tent. Strawn just stands there, uselessly. Mildred looks over to him --

MILDRED  
 Having fun? Must be nice, just  
 standing there idly like that,  
 soaking it all in.

STRAWN  
 Do you... want me to help?

MILDRED  
 I thought you'd *never* ask.

STRAWN  
 What can I do?

MILDRED  
You can start a fire.

Strawn looks lost.

STRAWN  
How does one... do that?

MILDRED  
It's shockingly simple, really.  
You gather a load of dry wood, you  
put it in a big old pile, and you  
set it alight.

Strawn grits his teeth.

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
I'd give you a tutorial, but, at  
present, I'm slightly in the middle  
of putting up our bloody tent.

Strawn sighs.

STRAWN  
I have an idea.

MILDRED  
I bet you do.

HARD CUT TO:

**EXT. STREAM -- NIGHT**

The stream shimmers in the moonlight. Crickets chirp. The tent is up and a campfire burns, sparks spiraling skyward.

Mildred and Strawn sit by the fire, eating beans from cans. Strawn looks exhausted.

MILDRED  
Long day, right?

STRAWN  
Long day.

He looks out at the gleaming rushing water.

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
How's your mom doing?

MILDRED  
She's in an induced coma, hovering  
between life and death. Thanks for  
asking.

STRAWN

No, I mean apart from the whole  
coma thing. You know, generally.  
How is she?

MILDRED

She smokes too much, drinks too  
much, and has *terrible* taste in  
men.

(Strawn squirms)

But she means well. She tries her  
best.

Mildred looks into the campfire's flames, fear in her eyes.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

You could say she's struggling.

STRAWN

With?

Mildred looks up at him, eyes shining in the firelight.

MILDRED

What do you *think*?

STRAWN

I don't...

MILDRED

The *debt*, Einstein. She's  
struggling with all the debt.

STRAWN

What debt?

MILDRED

She didn't tell you?

STRAWN

No. She never said anything.

Mildred sighs.

MILDRED

Her sister - my aunt's - afflicted  
with a bit of the old substance  
abuse nonsense.

(shakes head)

No, no, it's not nonsense. That's  
not fair. It's a disease.

Strawn nods, understanding.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Mum took out a bunch of loans to  
put her into rehab.

(MORE)

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Now, Auntie Rita's clean and serene, loving life, never felt better.

(darkening)

Meanwhile, mum's loans are gaining interest. She's in the hole. Owes 50 big ones.

STRAWN

50 *thousand*..? Jesus.

MILDRED

Why'd you think I'm on the hunt for this panther? The reward is fifty K for a video of the thing. Problem solved, right? Mum'll be off the hook, clean slate, not having to juggle three stupid jobs.

She smiles, for the first time since we met her.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Plus, you know... between you and me, I do *really* want to see a bloody great panther.

Strawn smiles weakly back.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Right. I don't know about you, but I'm tuckered. I'm turning in.

She gets up, stretching, heading to the tent. Strawn gets up, following her.

Mildred crouches, unzipping the tent's entrance. She looks up at Strawn, serious --

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Before we go in, I want to make one thing perfectly clear.

STRAWN

What's that?

MILDRED

I know you have a belly full of beans, but this tent is a fart-free zone. If you feel any bum-blasters brewing, kindly take them outside. Are we clear on that?

STRAWN

Sure.

**INT. TENT -- NIGHT**

A small electrical lamp illuminates the tent. Strawn and Mildred lie in separate sleeping bags, next to each other.

Strawn looks at the roof of the tent. He thinks. He sighs. Then --

STRAWN

I'm sorry things never worked out with your mom. I did ask her to stay in Vegas with me, you know. When she told me she was... when you... when she was pregnant, you know. I did offer, but she wanted to stay here. I don't want you to think I didn't want you. Or anything like that... It's just... it's a lot.

(then)

I only met your mom once, for a couple of hours. It's such a complicated situation. You're not the average child, so I feel like I can say...

He turns, noticing -- Mildred is asleep, breathing heavily.

Strawn regards the sleeping girl, with sadness.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Goodnight, Mildred.

Mildred' eyelid twitches slightly. Then --

STRAWN (CONT'D)

You're not really asleep, are you?

Mildred' lip quivers a little. She closes his eyes tighter.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

You just wanted to shut me up, didn't you?

MILDRED

Goodnight, Strawn.

Strawn smirks. He switches the lamp off, throwing the tent into darkness.

FADE TO:

**EXT. CAMPSITE -- NIGHT**

As if from a hidden POV:

The tent, small, isolated in the vast moonlit wilds.



A twig SNAPS somewhere, as we --

SMASH TO:

**INT. TENT**

Strawn wakes, reacting to the sound. He sits up, listening.  
Rustling from outside...

His eyes gleam with terror. He turns, shaking Mildred -- she stirs awake, looking up at him, bleary-eyed.

MILDRED  
Jesus. What? What is it?

STRAWN  
I...

MILDRED  
You..?

STRAWN  
(sheepish)  
I heard a scary sound.

MILDRED  
Am I still dreaming, or did a forty-  
one year-old man *really* just wake  
an eleven year-old girl to tell her  
he heard a scary sound in the  
night?

He looks self-conscious.

STRAWN  
I'm sorry. Never mind. Go back to  
sleep.

She lies down, turned away from him. She listens. Her eyes can't hide the fear she, too, is feeling.

Strawn listens to the scary sounds outside, nervous.

FADE TO:

**EXT. STREAM -- DAWN**

Sun rises over the mountain range. Birds chirp in the woods. Steam coils off the lake's glassy surface.

**INT. TENT**

Strawn wakes, sitting up with a weary groan. He sees Mildred's empty sleeping bag beside him.

**EXT. CAMPSITE -- DAWN**

Strawn emerges from the tent, to see --

Mildred, seated on a large rock, drinking coffee, consulting maps and books. She turns, seeing Strawn --

MILDRED  
Sleep well?

STRAWN  
No, not really.

MILDRED  
Ready to cover some of New Zealand's most unforgivingly treacherous terrain?

STRAWN  
My stomach feels weird and bubbly.

MILDRED  
I know. I'm super excited too.

Mildred nods at a cup of coffee beside the campfire.

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
Get some caffeine in you, and let's move. Come on, Strawn.

Strawn picks the coffee up, taking a sip.

STRAWN  
You know, you *can* call me dad.

MILDRED  
Why would I do *that*?

STRAWN  
Normally, daughters call their dads "dad".

Mildred turns to look at him.

MILDRED  
Normally, daughters see their dads more than twice a decade.

STRAWN  
Maybe oneday you'll actually call me dad.

He does a flourish with his hand, making his coffee cup disappear. She looks on, nonplussed.

MILDRED  
Maybe oneday you'll actually do a magic trick that impresses me.

**MONTAGE:**

The unlikely duo venture further into the wilderness.

Crossing meadows and streams. Climbing perilous hillsides.  
Traversing a rope-bridge above a vertiginous chasm.

**EXT. MOUNTAIN RANGE -- DAY**

You're gliding over a jagged mountain range.

You see Mildred and Strawn, tiny creatures that they are,  
marching through wild terrain beneath cobalt sky.

**CLOSER**

Mildred stops, looking around, disturbed.

STRAWN

What is it..?

MILDRED

We need to find shelter. It's going  
to rain very heavily, and very  
soon.

STRAWN

What? The sky is spotless.

MILDRED

That's what concerns me.

STRAWN

I don't--

MILDRED

It's spotless. What's missing?

STRAWN

What?

MILDRED

What's missing from the sky?

STRAWN

Clouds?

MILDRED

What else?

STRAWN

Planes?

Mildred looks around, thinking.

MILDRED

*Birds*, Strawn. They make themselves scarce before a big old downpour. I don't want to pitch a tent here on this soft terrain. We'll have to find a cave.

Strawn looks up at the spotless sky, skeptical.

STRAWN

I think you're mistaken. I'm pretty confident it's *not* going to rain.

HARD CUT TO:

**EXT. CAVE OPENING**

Torrential rain hammers the rock face.

**INT. CAVE**

Mildred and Strawn are crouched in a small cramped cave, eating protein bars in silence. RAIN blasts down outside.

STRAWN

You must go camping a lot.

Mildred chews her bar, sadly.

MILDRED

Believe it or not, this is my first time.

STRAWN

What? But you know so much about... terrain, and rain, and...

MILDRED

Oh, it's all from books. I always ask mum to take me, but you know what *she's* like.

(beat)

Actually you don't. You've only met her a couple of times. I forgot.

She sighs.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

She's got me wrapped in cotton wool. And bubble wrap. She barely even lets me play in the back yard.

(then)

She still walks me to school, you know. Still wants to hold my hand crossing the road.

(then)

(MORE)

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Does wonders for my social life, as  
you can imagine.

Strawn looks out at the rain, pelting down outside.

STRAWN

Does she ever talk about me?

MILDRED

Why would she do *that*?

Strawn smiles, stung. Mildred stares out at the rain. Her thoughts return to her mother, real fear in her eyes. She turns away from Strawn, hiding herself.

STRAWN

She's going to be okay. She's in  
good hands, I promise you.

She nods. He puts a comforting hand on her shoulder.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

It's alright... to be scared. It's  
normal.

Mildred inhales deeply, glancing back at Strawn -- composure regained, guard up again.

MILDRED

She said you used to be on telly.  
You were some big-shot magician.  
Then some other big-shot magician  
came along, and you became a small-  
shot magician.

STRAWN

Illusionist.

MILDRED

Right, sorry. So what does the  
average working day look like for  
you now?

STRAWN

I do appearances. Parties.  
I actually did a major celebrity's  
birthday last week.

MILDRED

Excuse me while I hyperventilate.

Strawn's had enough --

STRAWN

You know, you could try being a  
little more respectful.

MILDRED

Oh, I'm sure I *could*. I can't  
promise I *will*.

She sighs, biting her lip, frustration simmering.

As rain hammers down, ground reduced to mud, splattering --

A glorious chorus of BIRDSONG rises, as we --

CUT TO:

**EXT. WOODS -- DAY**

Bright sunlight slashes woodland. Birds chirp all around.

Mildred leads the way through damp woods, Strawn lagging.

STRAWN

I work hard, you know. To provide  
for you and your mom.

MILDRED

Levitation and card tricks? Back-  
breaking stuff, I'm sure.

STRAWN

What I do is physically and  
mentally exhausting. My wrist  
strength is equivalent to that of a  
professional wrestler. You think  
it's easy making balloon animals  
for Michael Bolton's kids?

MILDRED

Balloon animals. My, oh my. And  
they say air traffic controllers  
have stressful jobs.

(then)

And who the hell is Michael Bolton?

STRAWN

A major celebrity. Anyway,  
whatever. People need magic in  
their lives. I'm doing my best.

Mildred stops, turning to face her father --

MILDRED

And I'm *doing my best* not to punch  
you in the goolies. Wheteve

STRAWN

(piss and vinegar)

What did I ever do to you? Why are  
you so angry with me? What is this?

MILDRED  
 You *really* want to have this  
 conversation? Now? Here?

STRAWN  
 (backing down)  
 Um. I don't know. No. Maybe not.  
 Yeah, let's not.

Mildred is about to speak, but she suddenly freezes, eyes wide. Strawn looks at her, puzzled --

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
 What..?

Mildred stays completely still.

MILDRED  
 Don't move. Stay completely still.

STRAWN  
 Is this a trick so you can punch me  
 in the "goolies"? Whatever goolies  
 are.

MILDRED  
 No.

Strawn turns, now seeing what Mildred is seeing --

In the woods ahead, a PANTHER roams free.

Strawn's eyes bulge in terror --

STRAWN  
 Oh no... oh no oh no...

MILDRED  
 Strawn. Listen to me very  
 carefully. Do not - I repeat - do  
not move.

STRAWN  
 It's the p...p...p...

MILDRED  
 P-p-p-panther. Yes, it is.

Mildred sees real fear in her father's eyes, and now she's even more spooked. She edges closer to him, taking his arm. He stands a little straighter, protective...

STRAWN  
 What do we do?

MILDRED  
 Shh... just be quiet...

STRAWN  
 (whispering)  
 Panthers kill people.

MILDRED  
 I said be *quiet*.

STRAWN  
 Why wouldn't it kill us?

MILDRED  
 (toughening)  
 A) It hasn't seen us. And B) we're going to stay very still, and very quiet, and very calm.

Strawn just stares at the panther, petrified.

Mildred, with incredible care, removes her back-pack, keeping eyes fixed on the panther.

She opens the back-pack, rummaging carefully, pulling out a small VIDEO CAMERA. She switches it on -- aiming it at the panther --

-- hitting RECORD --

#### **AHEAD**

The panther prowls, sniffing the ground. And suddenly --

It STOPS, raising its head --

SEEING MILDRED AND STRAWN.

STRAWN  
 That's not good is it?

Mildred keeps the camera trained on the panther, hand trembling, eyes wide...

#### **IN THE VIEWFINDER**

The panther just stands there, watching Mildred and Strawn with shining yellow eyes.

Strawn dry-swallows, gripping Mildred's sleeve, knuckles white. She grips his wrist with her free hand. Then --

The panther begins prowling TOWARDS MILDRED AND STRAWN.

STRAWN  
 Do we run?

MILDRED  
 Think you can outrun a panther?



STRAWN  
 (unsure)  
 I don't know. Can I?

MILDRED  
 No, Strawn. You can't.

STRAWN  
 Then what do we do?

MILDRED  
 It's alright. I've read all about  
 this. We make ourselves big and  
 loud. Stretch out, and speak really  
 loud.

He stretches his arms and legs out, raising his voice --

STRAWN  
 It's heading towards us!

MILDRED  
 Really? You don't say!  
 Thanks for the update!

STRAWN  
 You're welcome! But it's  
 still coming towards us!

Mildred suddenly freezes, shaking her head.

MILDRED  
 Bugger. Sorry. I was wrong.

STRAWN  
 Wrong?

MILDRED  
 Making yourself big and loud is for  
 bears.

STRAWN  
 Then what about panthers!?

MILDRED  
 Stay really still and don't make a  
 sound.

They both stand completely still, petrified.

The panther prowls closer, eyes on Mildred and Strawn...

*Closer...*

And then, it STOPS -- a mere five feet away from them.

Its ears twitch. It just watches them, motionless.

Mildred keeps filming the beast, hand trembling, trying to keep the camera steady.

Strawn edges a little closer to her, gripping her free hand.

Mildred just stares at the panther, tears welling up in her eyes... child and beast observing each other with curiosity and trepidation. And then --

The panther turns, bounding off into the woods --

Gone.

Mildred and Strawn stand there, shaking, closer than they've ever been. Speechless, adrenal.

Mildred drops to her knees, delirious, delighted, replaying the footage on the camera's LCD screen. It's crisp, clear.

She closes her eyes, uttering a silent prayer...

MILDRED (CONT'D)

(whispered)

*Mum, if you can hear me... it's all going to be okay. I promise. PS. I love you... with all my heart. There. Happy?*

Strawn stumbles back, shock only just hitting him. He gawks at the surrounding woods, adrenaline surging...

STRAWN

Mildred... tell me you got the footage.

MILDRED

I got it. I got the bugger. How you holding up?

STRAWN

That... was a close encounter.

MILDRED

Of the fifty thousandth kind.

The sound of RUSHING WATER echoes from somewhere as we --

CUT TO:

## **EXT. RIVER**

At the banks of a roiling river...

Strawn sits on a rock, still shaken from the panther encounter. He looks at his HANDS, which tremble, adrenaline still surging. He shakes them off, exhaling hard.

Mildred stands at water's edge, foraging in the wild reeds.

MILDRED  
How about some scrambled mallard  
eggs with wild fennel for dinner?

Strawn nods reservedly.

STRAWN  
Hey, look. Mildred. I'm... I'm  
sorry.

She heads towards him, hands full of delicacies.

MILDRED  
For being an absent father?

STRAWN  
What? No. I mean... for doubting  
you about the panther.

He thinks.

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
And the absent father thing, too.  
Sorry for that.

MILDRED  
And I'm sorry about threatening to  
punch you in the goolies. That was  
rude, and un-called for.

STRAWN  
And pretty Freudian, when you think  
about it.

MILDRED  
Yeah. Sorry.

STRAWN  
It's alright. Really.

Strawn gazes at the rushing water, melancholic.

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
Not easy, is it? This whole thing.

MILDRED  
I'm sorry to change the subject,  
but you're being eaten alive.

A mosquito has landed on Strawn's hand. He flinches, flapping his hand to get rid of the bug -- it flies off.

Mildred looks at him, bemused.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Most people just squash the buggers.

STRAWN

Not me. I'm not a murderer. I always used to feel guilty killing bugs as a kid. Made me sad, thinking about their babies wondering where they went.

Mildred begins busying herself with dinner preparation. She notices something on Strawn --

MILDRED

Speaking of bugs... don't move.

STRAWN

Why?

MILDRED

You've got a Weta on your shoulder.

Strawn suddenly stiffens.

STRAWN

A what?

MILDRED

A Weta. Basically a giant flightless cricket that looks like the alien from Alien. They've got razor-sharp mandibles and an agonising bite. Now... slowly turn your head, and behold the beautiful bugger for yourself.

Strawn slowly moves his head and comes face to face with the horrific creature. He yelps --

STRAWN

What is that!? What the--

He bounds up, flicking the Weta off, jumping up and down on it, crushing it underfoot.

He steps back, gasping.

Silence, save for the rushing river.

Mildred looks at him, expression blank.

MILDRED

Think its babies will wonder where it went?

Strawn looks defeated.

**EXT. CAMPSITE -- NIGHT**

Another campsite has been set up near the water. Tent assembled, campfire burning.

Strawn and Mildred sit fireside, eating eggs off tin plates.

MILDRED

Do you miss being on telly?

Strawn smirks, memories flooding back. He sours.

STRAWN

No. It's a horrible business. The people are terrible. Egomaniacs. Bullies. Greedy, soul-sucking vampires, all of them.

He looks up at her, vulnerability in his eyes.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

I miss it more than anything.

He looks into the flames.

MILDRED

Who's David? That hiker lady mentioned him.

STRAWN

Oh. David Blaine. Guy I used to be friends with. Until he stabbed me in the back. He stabbed me, and he stabbed me, and he *stabbed* me -- and just when I thought it was all over, that's when he rolled his sleeves up for some *serious* stabbing.

Mildred warms her hands on the fire, looking to Strawn.

MILDRED

(sardonic smirk)

I sense you want to open up and tell me the entire story, in unflinching detail.

Strawn broods.

STRAWN

We met doing illusions on the streets of New York. We became inseparable. He was like a big brother to me.

(then)

We both landed our own TV shows, him first, then me. His show was called Street Magic.

(MORE)

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Mine was called Twizted Illusions.  
The "s" in Twisted was a "z".

MILDRED

Twiz-ted.

Strawn stares into the flames, painful memories bubbling...

STRAWN

One day me and David went on a ride around Central Park in a horse-drawn carriage. We were both wearing burgundy velvet shorts. I told him I was going to do a series of TV specials. I had them all worked out, and I talked him through the whole thing. I was going to be buried alive for a week in Central Park, the very park we were riding through at the time. Then I'd do one where I'd be frozen in a block of ice for 72 hours. Next, I'd stand on top of a tall pillar for 35 hours.

Something in the fire POPS, sending sparks spiraling skyward.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

David just laughed at me. Said I was crazy. Nobody could ever pull off *one* of those stunts, let alone all of them. And then the little greasy worm goes to HBO and pitches them *my* ideas, like they're his own. Signs a deal worth millions. Then he starts ignoring my calls.

Mildred shakes her head in empathy.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

So I go to confront the bastard. He's at this bar in Vegas. He's there with all his new showbiz buddies. They're all wearing backwards baseball caps and these baggy black suits with one pants leg rolled up. Some weird inside joke, or a ritual, or something. And I try to talk to David, ask why he did that to me, after everything we'd been through. And you know what he does?

Strawn clenches his jaw, memory still raw...

STRAWN (CONT'D)

He smiles, and he slowly pours his drink over my head.

(MORE)

STRAWN (CONT'D)

And then they all start barking at me. Like dogs. Just barking, barking, *barking*. David was barking the loudest. His face was so red and sweaty, his lips were all blue, I thought he was having a seizure or something.

MILDRED

And what did you do?

Strawn closes his eyes, shame washing over him, unable to meet his daughter's gaze...

STRAWN

What I always do when I see something scary. I ran away. As fast as I could, as far as I could. Next thing I know, I'm in the desert, on my knees, throwing up. And I can see bits of squid tentacle in my vomit. That's all I really remember. The next few months are kind of a blur.

Mildred looks miserable. Strawn inhales.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

I moved back in with my mom for a while. I just... couldn't do much, you know. My show got cancelled. A year later, I slowly go back to basics. Card tricks on the street, booking gigs, parties.

MILDRED

And somewhere in all this, you met my mum.

STRAWN

I met your mom, yeah.

MILDRED

I found my her secret diary once. Says she met you while she was on a girl's trip to Vegas. Says I was conceived in the parking lot of a convenience store. That's not really true, is it?

He nods, guilty.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

And they say romance is dead.

They sit there in silence. Mildred finally cracks a smile. Strawn can't help but smile back.

CUT TO:

**EXT. TENT**

The tent, softly glowing in the darkness. Strawn and Mildred's voices lilt from within --

*MILDRED (O.S.)*  
*You're wrong about one thing*  
*though.*

*STRAWN (O.S.)*  
*What's that?*

**INT. TENT**

MILDRED  
 You don't run away from every scary thing.

STRAWN  
 You sure about that?

MILDRED  
 You're here, aren't you? You flew to the other side of the planet to take care of a kid you barely know. And in the *wilderness*, to boot. Maybe you have a backbone after all.

STRAWN  
 Thank you.

MILDRED  
 Now let's get some sleep, shall we?

He smiles tiredly. She reaches for the lamp.

**EXT. TENT**

The tent goes dark.

Crickets chirp. Frogs croak. Fireflies twinkle all around.

CUT TO:

**EXT. CAMPSITE -- MORNING**

Mildred and Strawn sip coffee by the glowing embers of the campfire.



STRAWN

So I was thinking. We have the panther video. Shall we... maybe head home?

MILDRED

Yes. But there's a hot springs I'd like to see first. You can handle another night in a tent, I hope?

Strawn nods, reluctant, but smiling.

STRAWN

Sure. What's one more night?

Mildred is about to crack wise, but checks herself and consults the map, then a book. She looks to Strawn.

MILDRED

Hey. There's a place near here where we can do a scree run.

STRAWN

What's a scree run?

HARD CUT TO:

**EXT. SCREE HILL**

Mildred and Strawn are running down a hill comprised of loose stones, moving with incredible speed.

Strawn loses his footing, rolling down the hill with Mildred.

Mildred also loses her footing -- falling hard, skidding down the hill beside Strawn, towards --

**THE BOTTOM OF THE HILL**

Where they lie on their backs -- laughing, gasping for air.

MILDRED

*That's a scree run.*

Strawn looks over to Mildred, and they share a smile.

The thunder of RUSHING WATER from somewhere as we --

CUT TO:

**EXT. WATERFALL -- DAY**

Mildred and Strawn walk beside a roaring waterfall, admiring its ferocious majesty.

Then, a man's VOICE calls from somewhere --

VOICE (O.S.)

Kia ora!

They turn, seeing --

A COUPLE (40s) trudging towards them, in hiking gear, carrying backpacks. Meet **ARNOLD** and **ANGELINA**.

They approach. Arnold is Irish, Angelina a New Zealander --

ARNOLD

Kia ora.

ANGELINA

Kia ora.

Mildred and Strawn force smiles.

ARNOLD

A father and daughter on a wee trek into the rugged wilderness of New Zealand? Is that what we're looking at here?

STRAWN

Yeah. Hi.

ARNOLD

My name's Arnold. And this here is my missus, Angelina.

ANGELINA

His long-suffering missus.

STRAWN

I'm Strawn. And this is my...  
(stops himself)  
My daughter, Mildred.

Angelina looks impressed by Strawn.

ANGELINA

You're a real American person.

STRAWN

Yes, I am.

ANGELINA

I've never met a real American person before. I watch a lot of American soap operas though.

ARNOLD

All she does is watch those bloody American soap operas.

STRAWN

They can be addictive. That's why they end with cliffhangers. It's to make you desperate to watch the next episode. It's to get you to watch commercials, basically. That's how TV works. It's sort of disgraceful. There should be laws against it. It's disgusting.

Silence.

ARNOLD

So. How are you finding New Zealand?

STRAWN

I quite like it, I think.

Arnold smiles.

ARNOLD

We're heading down to a lake that looks like it's made of glass. Yes, it really is that glossy. Come on, walk with us. I could do with some grown-up conversation.

Angelina playfully swats Arnold's arm.

MILDRED

So could I.

**EXT. TRAIL**

Mildred walks beside Angelina, making chit-chat.

ANGELINA

So, tell me everything. What's it like growing up in America?

MILDRED

I'd love to tell you, but since I've never set foot on American soil, I don't have a bloody clue.

ANGELINA

But your dad...

MILDRED

He lives there. I live here.

ANGELINA

You don't want to live there with him? If I was a kid, I'd rather live in America than boring old New Zealand.

MILDRED

Let's see. I don't like assault rifles. I don't like high-fives. I don't like corn syrup. I don't like people who say "hell yeah" or "buddy". And I despise the word "dude" with every atom of my being.

(then)

I'm not sure America has much to offer me.

Angelina looks at her in confusion and bewilderment.

ANGELINA

You don't...

MILDRED

Talk like a normal child. I know.

**AHEAD**

Strawn walks alongside Arnold.

ARNOLD

So. What's your trade?

STRAWN

Me? I'm an illusionist.

ARNOLD

Like a magician?

STRAWN

Yeah.

ARNOLD

Like David Blaine? I just adore that man. He's literally magical. League of his own. Nobody else comes close, or even close to close.

STRAWN

(stung)

Yeah. What about you?

ARNOLD

Me? I'm a heart surgeon. Not to toot my own trombone, but I'm one the top five leading heart surgeons in all of Oceania.

STRAWN

Wow. I'm impressed by that.

ARNOLD

A lot of people are. And rightly so. It's an impressive job to have. I literally save lives. Lives would literally end if I didn't intervene. So if anything, *I'm* the real magician here. No offense.

They walk on.

DISSOLVE TO:

**EXT. LAKE**

Mildred and Angelina skim stones at the sandy shore of a glittering blue lake.

Strawn and Arnold sit beside each other on a large rock nearby, drinking coffee. Strawn looks at Mildred and Angelina, with a twinge of jealousy.

ARNOLD

She's good with kids. They love her, they do. It's a natural parental warmth she radiates. Some people have it...

(looking at Strawn)

... some people don't.

(then)

I'm sure you do, though.

Strawn sighs, trying to smile. After some thought, Arnold turns to Strawn with a solemn expression --

ARNOLD (CONT'D)

I have to tell you something, mate.

STRAWN

What's that?

ARNOLD

You have to promise you'll stay cool, calm and collected.

STRAWN

I think I can do that.

ARNOLD

Promise?

STRAWN

Yeah. Sure. I promise.

Arnold looks at the lake, thinking. Strawn turns to him.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

What is it?

Finally, Arnold fixes Strawn with a cold stare.

ARNOLD  
I've kidnapped your daughter.

Strawn lets out an incredulous snort --

STRAWN  
Excuse me?

He looks out at Mildred and Angelina, playing happily at the shoreline. He looks back to Arnold, who's dead serious.

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
I don't...

ARNOLD  
It may not look like a kidnapping, in the conventional sense... but a kidnapping is exactly what's happening here.

STRAWN  
I don't understand...

ARNOLD  
Well, try to keep up. The girl is now in our custody. I'm about to state a few demands. If said demands aren't met, the girl will remain in our custody. And we actually might drown her, because she's not exactly the kind of child you'd want to keep around. Sorry. No filter here.

Strawn dry-swallows, reality dawning on him... He looks out at Mildred, who looks decidedly *un-kidnapped*, oblivious.

Angelina glances up at Strawn from afar, steely-eyed. She mimes strangling Mildred while her back's turned -- then quickly returns to playful smiles when Mildred turns around.

Then Angelina slyly mimes stabbing Mildred in the back. Then digging a grave.

Arnold continues...

ARNOLD (CONT'D)  
And before you get any ideas, I'd like to inform you that I have a black belt in karate.

Strawn looks to him, unsure...

STRAWN  
Do you really?

ARNOLD

Yes. I do.

STRAWN

Are you telling the truth?

ARNOLD

I am, actually.

STRAWN

I don't believe you.

ARNOLD

You should believe me.

STRAWN

Do a karate move then.

ARNOLD

I'm not a performing monkey. I'm not doing a karate move on command.

STRAWN

Yeah, because you don't know karate.

ARNOLD

I *do* know karate.

STRAWN

I *do* know you're full of hot air.

ARNOLD

Fine. I won't do a karate move. But I will show you this. Look very carefully and commit it to memory, if you can.

Arnold takes a worn-out leather wallet from his back pocket. From inside, he pulls out a folded photograph. He unfolds it, raising it up for Strawn to see.

ARNOLD (CONT'D)

Viddy this.

In the photo: a YOUNGER ARNOLD, with long glossy hair, posing triumphantly in a martial arts outfit, with - yes - a black belt tied around his waist.

ARNOLD (CONT'D)

You see that belt?

STRAWN

Yeah.

ARNOLD

Is it green?

STRAWN

No.

ARNOLD

Is it yellow?

STRAWN

No.

ARNOLD

Is it red?

STRAWN

No.

ARNOLD

Tell me honestly. What color is that belt?

STRAWN

(resigned)

It's... it's black.

Arnold folds the picture, returns it to the wallet, which he then pockets again. He fixes Strawn with a steely glare --

ARNOLD

That's right. The belt is black. As in: it's a black belt. As in: I could karate seven shades of crap out of you if I wanted to. Now, currently, as it happens, I don't particularly *want* to karate seven shades of crap out of you.

(then)

But that could all change in an *instant* if you bugger around with me, in which case I will not hesitate to karate seven shades of crap out of you. And then probably drown your precious daughter. Understood, mate?

STRAWN

Yeah.

ARNOLD

Okay. Down to business. Down to the real nitty gritty of things. You're probably wondering what I want from you.

STRAWN

What do you want from me?

ARNOLD

Your valuables.



STRAWN

You're not actually serious..?

ARNOLD

I am actually serious. I'm actually incredibly serious. If you want your darling daughter back, I'll require your stuff.

STRAWN

Wait, wait. What is this?

ARNOLD

Have you heard of a blood transfusion?

STRAWN

What? Yes.

ARNOLD

This is a stuff transfusion. Your stuff is now my stuff. You can start by handing over your mobile. I believe you yanks call them "cellular phones".

Strawn just stares at him, ashen-faced.

ARNOLD (CONT'D)

Do I need to remind you that an actual karate champion has kidnapped your daughter? Cellular phone. Now.

Strawn sighs. He unpockets his iPhone, reluctantly handing it to Arnold.

ARNOLD (CONT'D)

Passcode.

STRAWN

Please... you don't have to--

ARNOLD

Passcode. I've asked for it twice. If you value the structural integrity of your clavicle, a third time will not be required.

Strawn grits his teeth. Exhales sharply. And --

STRAWN

1981. It's the year I was born.

Arnold taps the code into the phone, unlocking it. Strawn suddenly looks incredibly embarrassed.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Hey. Just don't look at my photos.  
That all I ask.

Arnold side-eyes him slyly.

ARNOLD

I wasn't actually planning on  
looking at your photos. But now  
that you've said that, I just *have*  
to look at your photos.

STRAWN

No, please. Don't.

Arnold accesses the photo library.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Please?

Arnold thumbs through images, eyebrow raised. He looks to  
Strawn, smirking, wry.

ARNOLD

There are pumps for that, and I'm  
told they actually work.

Strawn looks at his feet, blushing, humiliated.

At the lake shore -- Mildred and Angelina are now doing cart-  
wheels on the sand, shrieking with laughter.

ARNOLD (CONT'D)

Right. Now, your camera.

STRAWN

Please don't do this. It's my  
daughter's. It means a lot to her.

ARNOLD

And now it'll mean a lot to me.

Strawn, crushed, reaches to Mildred's bag, pulling out the  
camera. Arnold grabs it from him.

STRAWN

I'll call the cops.  
I know your names.

ARNOLD

Arnold and Angelina. Where have you  
heard those names before? Think.

STRAWN

I don't know. Arnold Schwarzenegger  
and Angelina Jolie?

ARNOLD

Bingo. What do they have in common?

STRAWN

They're... actors.

ARNOLD

And what do actors do?

STRAWN

(realizing)

They... pretend to be other people.

Arnold nods. Strawn looks at him with a simmering hatred.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

I know your job. One of the leading heart surgeons in...

(resigned)

You're not really a heart surgeon, are you?

ARNOLD

Why would a heart surgeon need to relieve hikers of their valuables?

Strawn's losing his grip, face drained, sweat breaking out...

STRAWN

I know what you both look like. The cops will do a composite sketch.

ARNOLD

When we get home, I'm going to shave my mustache off. I look completely different without it.

STRAWN

And Angelina?

ARNOLD

She'll shave hers off too.

STRAWN

You're both bastards.

ARNOLD

We were both born out of wedlock. How did you know?

STRAWN

That's not what I meant and you know it.

ARNOLD

Wallet. Hand it over.

Strawn rummages in his pocket, pulling out his wallet, reluctantly handing it over.

Arnold stands up. He calls to Angelina --

ARNOLD (CONT'D)  
Angelina, darling! We're off!

At the shore -- Angelina points to something in the distance, causing Mildred to stare at it. While Mildred is occupied, Angelina runs over to Arnold, looking to him expectantly --

ANGELINA  
All done?

ARNOLD  
Yep. It was a relatively painless operation.

Angelina notices -- Mildred's FISHING ROD. She picks it up.

ANGELINA  
Nice rod.

ARNOLD  
(winking at Strawn)  
Bet that's the first time a woman's said *that* to you.

STRAWN  
(to Angelina)  
Hey. Please, don't take that. It's my daughter's.

ANGELINA  
My nephew is desperate for a fishing rod. That's his birthday present sorted. Cheers.

Angelina nods to Arnold --

ANGELINA (CONT'D)  
Get their map and their matches. That'll slow them down.

ARNOLD  
You're a criminal mastermind, love. Why didn't I think of that?

Arnold opens the back-pack's side pocket, taking the box of matches. He then takes the map.

Strawn watches helplessly as Arnold lights a match, then uses it to light the entire box of matches -- it bursts into hissing flames.

ARNOLD (CONT'D)

When I was at school, I used to charge my mates a dollar to watch me do that.

ANGELINA

You don't want to know what he charged *two* dollars for.

Arnold shakes his head, disapprovingly. He dangles the map over the flame, setting it alight.

ARNOLD

I'm sorry, mate. Nothing personal.

STRAWN

What if I come after you?

ARNOLD

You don't seem the type. Let's be honest.

Strawn looks rage-filled, crushed.

ARNOLD (CONT'D)

Kia ora.

ANGELINA

Kia ora.

Arnold and Angelina traipse off, back towards the hills.

Silence.

Strawn just sits there, defeated, deflated.

He looks out at the lake, seeing Mildred skimming stones across the water's glassy surface.

He buries his face in his hands, reality suddenly hitting him like a freight train.

STRAWN

No...

He looks up at the oblivious Mildred again, tears welling in his eyes.

He almost laughs, but his face creases into a look of pure panic instead.

He mutters something to himself.

At the shore, Mildred turns, approaching Strawn.

MILDRED

Where'd they go?

Mildred sits down on the rock next to Strawn, pulling off her boot, rattling a bit of gravel out, putting his boot back on.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

I said where'd they go?

Strawn just stares at the water. Mildred follows his gaze, admiring the glistening lake.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Transfixing, isn't it? The way the sunlight sparkles on the surface. It's like a royal jewel box has been opened and its contents scattered across a glossy marble floor, in some palace somewhere.

She sidles closer to him, their shoulders touching. After some deliberation...

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Not to get mushy on you, but I think this has honestly been the best day of my life. I just... you know...

(then)

Thank you.

She rests her head against his shoulder, smiling, content.

Strawn just stares ahead, catatonic, on the verge of tears. Finally --

STRAWN

I have to tell you something.

MILDRED

You're going to get mushy too? Look at us. It's like we're in a detergent commercial. Sickening.

STRAWN

I have to tell you something, and you have to promise you'll stay cool, calm and collected.

MILDRED

Alright.

STRAWN

Promise?

Mildred sighs dramatically.

MILDRED

Yes. I promise.

Strawn turns to her at last, fear in his eyes.

STRAWN  
They robbed us.

MILDRED  
Pardon me?

STRAWN  
They kidnapped you.

MILDRED  
Good one, Strawn. Very funny.  
Seriously, where'd they go?

STRAWN  
They held you to ransom. They took  
my phone, my money. The map. The  
matches. The fishing rod...  
(pained)  
... your camera.

Mildred just looks at him, blankly.

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
I know it didn't feel like a  
kidnapping, but that's what just  
happened. All we have left is the  
tent and our sleeping bags.

Mildred gets up, moving to her bag -- crouching by it,  
rummaging inside -- face slackening when she realizes that  
Strawn is telling the truth.

Strawn holds his face in his hands.

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
Oh god... I'm sorry... I think I'm  
going to throw up...

Mildred stands, looking around -- mind racing, plotting.

MILDRED  
Don't. The contents of your stomach  
just quadrupled in value.

Strawn clenches his fists, sadness giving way to anger.

STRAWN  
They took everything... the  
camera... the proof... *everything*.

MILDRED  
And you just *let* them.

STRAWN  
I...

MILDRED

You just handed it over, on a silver platter.

STRAWN

I'm so sorry.

MILDRED

Do I need to remind you that that fifty thousand was going to save mum and me from becoming another depressing welfare statistic? It was going to save our *lives*...

Strawn looks at Mildred, lost...

STRAWN

You hate me, don't you?

MILDRED

More than you could possibly imagine.

Strawn fights tears...

MILDRED (CONT'D)

I actually can't even put into words how much hate I'm feeling towards you right now. You know what? I can't stand the sight of you. Your idiotic eyeliner and your crap low-budget TV magician clothes. And your greasy ratty hair, and those big dumb dopey donkey eyes. You know what? You need to move away from me, right now.

STRAWN

What was I supposed to do? He was a karate master, and--

MILDRED

Move. Away. From. Me. Now.

STRAWN

Mildred... be serious...

MILDRED

I'm dead serious. At least 20 paces. Like we're in a duel. Now go. Move away. I can't stand the sight of you. Vacate my eyeline entirely. Go!

Strawn moves away slowly, his body mechanics barely functioning. He eventually finds a stump to sit on, and just puts his head in his hands.



MILDRED (CONT'D)

That's not twenty paces. That was sixteen paces. And I can still see you. Like an unsightly smudge on the world, that's what you are. Kindly bugger off further.

He looks up at her, mean...

STRAWN

It all makes sense now.

MILDRED

What makes sense?

STRAWN

Now I know why you don't have any friends at school and your mom never wants to take you camping.

MILDRED

(shocked)

*Excuse me?* Are my ears clogged up or--

STRAWN

This whole trip, you've been nothing but a Grade-A D-bag.

MILDRED

Yeah? Takes one to know one.

STRAWN

A pretentious, prickly little... *runt*.

MILDRED

I know you are, but what am I?

STRAWN

You know something?

MILDRED

What?

He stands, defiant.

STRAWN

You're an asshole.

Silence.

Mildred is speechless. Strawn stares at her with contempt.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

You said twenty paces? Let's make it fifty. No, screw that. Let's make it one *hundred* and fifty.

Strawn gets up and snatches the sleeping bag, heading off into the bush, loudly counting his strides as he goes --

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
1.2.3.4.5.6.7...

His voice fades off as the bush envelopes him - he's no longer visible, but we can hear his count continuing.

Mildred, baffled, strains to hear him as he recedes off.

STRAWN (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
32.33.34.35.36.....

Mildred nervously looks around -- the sun is starting to set, sharp shadows befalling the area.

STRAWN (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
45.46.47.48.49.50 --

Silence.

Mildred sits down next to their remaining gear.

She thinks, biting her lip.

She sighs, morose.

#### **EXT. WOODS**

Strawn storms off deeper into the woods. He stops counting his paces. He looks around...

WIND howls through the trees. Twigs snap around him, echoing. An unseen bird lets out a chilling screech.

He picks up his pace, descending deeper into the woods, which darken all around him.

A low guttural GROWL from somewhere startles him.

He flinches, eyes darting around, nerves on edge.

STRAWN  
Someone there?

Silence. Then the rustling of leaves...

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
Mildred? Are you trying to scare me?

No reply. Wind howls through the trees.

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
Agh.

He slows down, looking nervous, turning as --

He walks right into a branch, on which a jumbo-sized WETA is perched. It slashes its mandibles, emitting an alien hiss --

STRAWN (CONT'D)

No!

The Weta JUMPS right at him --

Strawn yelps, flinching -- he turns, breaking into a frantic run, panting and whimpering --

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Leave me alone!!

He turns back, too late --

He catches his ankle on a gnarled root, tripping, landing face-first in --

A shallow POND of muddy water --

STRAWN (CONT'D)

God damn it.

He stands, dripping, spitting brown water.

He looks around, panic rising as he realizes he's utterly lost.

CUT TO:

**EXT. CLEARING**

Mildred inhales deeply, eyes closed, regaining her composure.

Then --

Strawn sheepishly re-emerges from the brush, hair a mess, covered in leaves and twigs, clothes soaked in muddy water.

MILDRED

What's the matter, Mister Twizted Illusions? You got scared in the big dark spooky woods?

STRAWN

No.

He sags, defeated.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Okay, yeah. I did. I heard some creepy sounds. And then I got chased by one of those alien bugs.

She raises an eyebrow, pitiful.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

It was a big one, okay? It was like a giant green homicidal flying lobster. Maybe it was related to the one I stomped, and it wanted revenge... or something.

She looks at him, resolved.

MILDRED

Now, listen to me and listen carefully. The way I see it, we have two options.

STRAWN

Yeah? And they are..?

MILDRED

Live or die. It really is that simple, Strawn. We can live, or we can die. I don't know about you, but I'd quite like to live. And I plan on getting that fifty grand back, too. With or without you.

He sits down next to her, defeated.

STRAWN

We're days from anywhere. We have no map, no food, no fishing rod, no matches. They took--

MILDRED

Everything. They took everything. Thank you for reminding me.

STRAWN

So. What now?

MILDRED

Are you familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs?

STRAWN

Is that an album? Like classical music, or something?

MILDRED

Abraham Maslow. 1943. The hierarchy of needs. At the base of the pyramid, the fundamental physiological human needs. The very foundations of survival: shelter, warmth, food, and water.

She gestures to the back-packs.

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
 Shelter, we have. Warmth, we have.  
 All things considered, we're off to  
 a good start.

Mildred examines the surroundings again.

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
 As calories are in short supply, I  
 suggest we make camp here. We have  
 food and water on our doorstep.  
 We'll plot our next moves from  
 there, with clear heads and full  
 bellies.  
 (beat)  
 Now tell me, Strawn. Can you  
 whittle?

Strawn looks at her, truly lost.

STRAWN  
 Can I what?

HARD CUT TO:

**EXT. LAKE -- LATER**

Mildred finishes erecting the tent.

She looks to Strawn, who is attempting to whittle a tree  
 branch into a spear. It's not going well.

MILDRED  
 Keep going.

Strawn nods, continuing. The "spear" is uneven, ragged,  
 poorly done.

Mildred gets up, assembling a camp fire with care. She tries  
 rubbing two sticks together, to no avail.

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
 Come on... come on...

She keeps trying, jaw clenched, frustration rising...

Strawn gets an idea. He moves over to the campfire, crouching  
 beside it.

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
 Get back. I've got this.

STRAWN  
 You sure about that?

MILDRED  
 Yes, I'm sure about that.

STRAWN  
I'm just saying, it doesn't look  
like--

MILDRED  
Silence. I need to concentrate. Go  
and whittle.

She keeps trying. No sparks. Nothing. Then --

Strawn reaches to the pile of sticks. He snaps his finger,  
creating a FLAME -- instantly igniting the fire.

Mildred gawks at him.

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
How did you...

STRAWN  
(winks)  
It's called magic.

She smiles, impressed.

MILDRED  
Alright. I'll give you that one.

She gets up, seeing the poorly-whittled spear on the ground.  
She picks it up, looking at it with pity.

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
Christ.

STRAWN  
I'm sorry. I really don't think I'm  
very good at whittling.

MILDRED  
No, I didn't think you would be.  
That's why I asked you to do it.

STRAWN  
What? Why?

MILDRED  
I wanted to give you a task to  
focus on, something to occupy your  
mind. I'm glad I did. You've calmed  
down, haven't you?

Strawn shakes his head, hopeless.

STRAWN  
We're still stranded out here.

Mildred ignores this. She begins expertly whittling the  
branch. Within seconds, she's fashioned a sharp spear.

Strawn eyes the spear's tip, with a twinge of inferiority.

MILDRED

I'm afraid we're going to have a very salmon-heavy diet over the next few days.

Before Strawn can respond, Mildred kicks her boots off, rolls her trouser legs up, and heads towards the water, spear held ready.

Strawn watches her, helpless.

At the lake -- Mildred wades into the water, scanning the surface, spear held ready.

STRAWN

You really think you can...

In the water, Mildred moves fast, slamming the spear down with a splash.

She raises the spear, on which a flapping salmon has been skewered.

MILDRED

Look at this great big bugger..!

Mildred wades out of the water, ambling back to Strawn.

She slaps the salmon down on the ground.

Strawn looks at it, squeamish.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

If you're of a sensitive disposition, now might be a good time to avert your eyes.

Mildred grabs a rock, raising it aloft. Strawn looks away --

STRAWN

Oh god... I can't watch.

MILDRED

(sombre)

I'm sorry, mate. I really am. Please forgive me.

STRAWN

It's okay...

MILDRED

I was talking to the fish.

Mildred SLAMS THE ROCK DOWN as we --

HARD CUT TO:

**EXT. CAMPSITE -- NIGHT**

The mellow fire softly crackles.

Mildred and Strawn eat roasted salmon chunks, drinking boiled water from tin cans.

Strawn stares into the flames, lost.

MILDRED  
(posh Brit accent)  
Fancy a spot of tea, old chap?

STRAWN  
Very funny, Mildred. God. I'd kill  
for a cup of tea right now.

Mildred gets up, wandering over to a bush. She plucks a few leaves off. She then returns to her position by the fire.

She drops leaves into his and Strawn's water.

Strawn just looks at the leaves as they sink to the bottom of his can.

MILDRED  
*Piper Excelsum*. Known around these  
parts as Kawakawa.

STRAWN  
Kawakawa...

MILDRED  
It has powerful antiseptic  
properties, and it happens to taste  
scrump-diddly-umptious too. Sling  
that down your gullet.

Strawn sips his tea. He smiles faintly.

STRAWN  
It's good. It's *really* good.

Mildred edges a little closer to her.

MILDRED  
You know, Strawn... I don't think  
less of you.

STRAWN  
What?

MILDRED  
That's what you're thinking, isn't  
it? You failed to be a man. You  
crapped the bed as a protector.  
(MORE)



MILDRED (CONT'D)

Your weakness put us in grave danger, and now we're two of the 8000 people who go missing in New Zealand every year.

Strawn slumps, ashamed.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

All because you were naive, and you were weak, and you refused the call to action... like a coward.

STRAWN

Is that what you think?

MILDRED

No, that's what I think you think.

STRAWN

Which part of it isn't true?  
I really messed this up, didn't I?

Mildred shrugs, deciding not to say anything.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

(bitter)

I just let him take everything. I let him... I gave it to him on a silver platter, like you said.

MILDRED

Are you talking about Arnold, or David Blaine?

*That* hit Strawn. He looks at Mildred, intense...

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Sorry.

(sighs)

Look. We lost it all. It's a kick in the head, no doubt. But we've got grub in our guts, air in our lungs, and somewhere cosy to sleep. We're not done yet, mate. No way. No bloody way. Not on your Nelly.

She gets up, heading tiredly towards the tent. Strawn calls to her --

STRAWN

Mildred. Hey...

MILDRED

(turns)

Yes?

STRAWN

I'm going to look after you.

She smiles.

**INT. TENT**

In the murky half-light, Mildred sleeps, snoring loudly.  
Strawn lies beside her, wide awake, thinking.

CUT TO:

**EXT. WOODS**

Strawn and Mildred, back-packs on, walk through misty woods in silence.

Mildred crouches when she sees --

An area filled with wild mushrooms. She unpockets the knife, cutting the fungi loose, gathering them.

She points to a clump of brownish conical MUSHROOMS growing out of a damp tree stump --

MILDRED

See those mushrooms there?

Strawn crouches, noticing them, nodding.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

*Psilocybe Makarorae*. If anything happens and we get separated out here, don't ever eat those.

STRAWN

Why? What happens?

MILDRED

Full body numbness. Powerful hallucinations. Total freakout.

STRAWN

Sounds fun.

Mildred looks confused. Strawn pauses, correcting himself --

STRAWN (CONT'D)

I'm obviously kidding. Don't ever take drugs. Drugs are bad. Drugs tear families and communities apart.

She turns, rummaging through the undergrowth, seeing another array of fungi.

MILDRED

Here we go. *Pleurotus Parsonsaie*.  
Pink oyster mushrooms. That's lunch  
sorted.

She cuts the mushrooms free, raising a handful of grey soggy  
fungus to show Strawn.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

I've always wanted to try these.

STRAWN

Why? They look absolutely  
disgusting.

MILDRED

You know what looks absolutely  
disgusting?

STRAWN

What?

MILDRED

Corpses that have succumbed to  
starvation in the wilderness.

(then)

Dead people...

Her thoughts drift to her mother again. She darkens, real  
fear in her eyes. Strawn nods, understanding.

STRAWN

Okay.

**EXT. FIELD -- DUSK**

Mildred trudges on, mind racing, still plagued by fear and  
worry. Strawn struggles to keep up.

Strawn finally catches up to her. She looks tormented, mind  
racing. He looks to her --

STRAWN

Hey. What is it?

She thinks. Insects scream all around.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Mildred? Are you okay..?

MILDRED

I have to tell you something. It'll  
change the way you look at me  
forever, probably. But I have to  
just say it.

STRAWN

Okay...

She sighs.

MILDRED

I used to wish my mum would just disappear. I'd lie awake at night, just hoping she'd not be there when I woke up. And then you'd come, and we'd be together. And you'd understand me. Really understand me, like she never could. And we'd do stuff together. All the things mum is too scared to do. Like go camping. Hunting. Fishing. The stuff of adventures.

Strawn considers this, shocked.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Maybe my wish came true. But in the wrong ways. I don't want my mum to go now. And as for you understanding me...

She looks at him at last, tears welling in her eyes.

STRAWN

Here. Wipe those eyes. Hold on, I have a hankie...

He starts pulling a handkerchief from his pocket... and keeps pulling... and pulling -- it's a magician's comically long hankie. He smiles warmly.

She wipes her eyes with her sleeve, offering a faint smile back.

MILDRED

I'm sorry. Now might be a good time to admit something atrocious about yourself.

He wipes his eyes with his sleeves. He thinks. And then...

STRAWN

David Blaine didn't screw me over.

MILDRED

But...

STRAWN

He asked me to be his partner on his show. He wanted us to be the new Penn and Teller. And I chickened out. I got scared. I said no.

(MORE)

## STRAWN (CONT'D)

I see something scary, I run away.  
That's all I do, it's all I've ever  
done.

(sighs)

He went straight to the top of the  
A List. I went straight to the  
bottom of the D List. His shows  
blew up. Mine got canned after four  
episodes. He grabbed Emmys... I  
grabbed *balloon animals*.

(then)

And I only have myself to blame.

That hangs there, untouchably awkward and painful. They move  
on in silence.

From somewhere, the sound of an EKG MONITOR beeping, getting  
faster and louder as we --

CUT TO:

## INT. HOSPITAL ROOM -- NIGHT

Mildred's mother ZO lies unconscious in bed, EKG monitor  
beeping. She's still, peaceful. Until, suddenly --

She BOLTS UP in bed -- eyes manic, staring RIGHT AT US,  
screaming angrily --

ZO

IS THIS WHAT YOU WANTED!? IS IT!?

Suddenly -- JONESIE THE CAT bounds onto the bed beside her,  
claws bared, emitting a deafening HISS as we --

SMASH TO:

## INT. TENT -- NIGHT

Mildred WAKES with a gasp, cutting the nightmare short. She  
sits up, breathing hard, eyes wild. She grabs Strawn's arm,  
shaking it --

Strawn stirs awake, looking up at her, confused --

STRAWN

What? What is it?

She just looks at him, embarrassed.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

If you're going to wake me up in  
the middle of the night, at least  
tell me why.

He sits up, moving closer, paternal softness taking over --

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
 Hey. What is it?

MILDRED  
 I had a bad dream and now I need a  
 wee. I don't want to go on my own.

He sees the real vulnerability in her eyes.

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
 Please?

STRAWN  
 Yeah. Sure. Okay.

**EXT. TENT -- DAWN**

The sky is bruise-purple, pre-dawn. Birds chatter in the trees.

Strawn and Mildred emerge from the tent. Strawn pulls on his boots, heaving and huffing tiredly.

**EXT. HILLSIDE**

In the half-light -- Mildred and Strawn traipse up a hillside in silence.

**EXT. WOODS**

Dark woods, damp from yesterday's downpour. Strawn and Mildred approach a clump of bushes.

MILDRED  
 Stay here.

Strawn yawns, nodding. Mildred heads into the bushes.

Strawn moves to the edge of the woods, looking out at the vast dim expanse beyond.

And there, at the bottom of the hillside --

A **TENT**, illuminated from within. Two shadowy forms are discernible inside. Their hands move, gesticulating.

Mildred walks to Strawn's side, seeing what he's seeing.

From inside the tent, faint VOICES. One male, one female. Raised, *angry*... in the midst of an argument.

Strawn glances at Mildred, who furrows her brow.

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
 You hear those voices?

STRAWN

Yeah..?

MILDRED

It's them.

STRAWN

Who?

MILDRED

John, Paul, Ringo and George. Who'd you *think*? The buggers who "kidnapped" me. Took our belongings. Left us for dead. Perhaps you remember them?

Strawn considers this.

STRAWN

What do we do?

MILDRED

Isn't it obvious?

STRAWN

Obvious? No, it's not obvious. It's actually very far from obvious.

Mildred creeps down the hill, towards the tent.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Hey, wait. Where are you going?

MILDRED

I'm going to pick a fight.

Strawn moves, heading after her, nervous...

STRAWN

Hold on!

**EXT. TENT**

Mildred hides behind a bush, close to the tent.

Strawn scrambles to her side, breath fast and shallow.

He's about to speak, but Mildred motions him to hush.

MILDRED

(whispered)

*Shh. Listen...*

Strawn leans forward, peering out at the tent.

Arnold and Angelina's VOICES emanate from within -- a heated argument is underway between the two. Accusations are hurled, egos skewered --

ARNOLD (O.S.)  
*I know you've been seeing Ronnie Reynolds.*

ANGELINA (O.S.)  
*Christ, not this again. He's just a friend.*

ARNOLD (O.S.)  
*Why did I find his laser-pointer under our bed, then?*

ANGELINA (O.S.)  
*Now, hold up. I can explain.*

Strawn looks to Mildred, awkward.

STRAWN  
 (whispered)  
*Being an adult... it's, you know... I mean, relationships... they're just so complicated, and--*

MILDRED  
 (whispered)  
*Shhhh. Listen.*

Mildred leans forward, listening.

*In the tent, Arnold and Angelina continue --*

ANGELINA (O.S.)  
*Look. I'm knackered. Tiring business, kidnapping and extortion. I need to sleep. Can we iron this out in the morning?*

ARNOLD (O.S.)  
*You're a deep-fried anus on a stick. And so is Ronnie Reynolds.*

ANGELINA (O.S.)  
*Oh, you silver-tongued devil. Sweet dreams to you too.*

*Inside the tent, the light clicks off.*

Strawn looks at Mildred.

STRAWN  
*You're not seriously going to sneak into their tent, are you?*



MILDRED

I'm *seriously* going to sneak into their tent, yes.

Before Strawn can respond, Mildred continues --

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Here's the plan. I'm going in. I'm going to grab their bag. I'm going to throw it to you, like a rugby ball. You're going to catch it, and we both just sprint. Back to our tent.

STRAWN

What, and lead them straight to our headquarters?

MILDRED

Yeah. You're totally right.

He nods, savoring the small victory. She glances around.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

We're going to run up that hill over there.

She points to a distant foothill, steep and jagged.

STRAWN

What if they catch us?

MILDRED

They won't.

STRAWN

Why?

MILDRED

Because I'm going to steal their boots and snap the tent zipper off.

STRAWN

That is officially the craziest thing I've ever heard.

MILDRED

I know. I'm bloody jazzed too. Okay, let's move with maximum speed and stealth. Go, go, go.

STRAWN

Wait, wait, wait...

MILDRED

No, no, no...

She rolls out from behind the bush, creeping towards the tent, slowly. Strawn follows, nervous.

**AT THE TENT**

Mildred drops to a crawl. She listens carefully --

Silence from inside the tent.

She nods to Strawn, who crouches down, scared. Slowly, with great concentration, Mildred begins to unzip the tent.

She peers in --

**INSIDE THE TENT**

Arnold and Angelina are asleep in separate sleeping bags.

Mildred takes a deep breath, and *slooooooowly* crawls inside.

**STRAWN**

Watches the tent nervously, nibbling his fingernail, muttering to himself.

He waits. He looks at the horizon, glowing pink pre-dawn. He looks back at the tent.

Silence.

Mildred peers out from tent's opening, tossing a RED RUCKSACK to Strawn -- he catches it, eyes bulging --

Mildred reaches back into the tent, hurls two pairs of hiking boots into the bush, and slowly closes the zipper down. She starts to twist the zipper, but --

A YELP from inside the tent -- the LIGHT switches on -- Arnold screams out within --

ARNOLD (O.S.)  
*What the hell!?! Wake up, Syd!  
Intruders! We've been robbed!*

MILDRED  
Go! Run!

Strawn clasps the rucksack tight, breaking into a run, away from the tent, towards the distant hill --

Mildred frantically snaps the zipper, sprinting from the tent, catching up with Strawn --

**BEHIND THEM**

Arnold bursts out of the tent, ripping the zipper seam apart, shouting with rage...

ARNOLD  
Come back here *immediately*, you  
thieving bloody ratbags!

He leaps up, bolting into a BAREFOOT RUN after Strawn and Mildred --

**EXT. FIELD**

Strawn and Mildred run -- desperate, frantic --

STRAWN  
(breathless)  
He's going to catch us!

MILDRED  
(breathless)  
No he's not!

STRAWN  
How can you be so sure!?

MILDRED  
Look at the ground!

Strawn looks down as he runs -- beneath his feet, grass gives way to sharp jagged GRAVEL --

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
Not ideal terrain for barefoot  
running, I'm sure you'll agree!

Strawn smiles, wild-eyed, as they race towards the hills --

**BEHIND THEM**

Arnold runs onto the jagged gravel, instantly falling, claspings his feet in agony, screaming --

ARNOLD  
Bastarding ballsacks --

**MILDRED AND STRAWN**

Speed up, giggling maniacally, stealing glances back at their felled pursuer --

They make a frantic dash up the hillside, between two cavernous columns of rock --

**EXT. CLIFF**

They run to the top of the hill. Mildred's face falls as she scans the terrain ahead --

They slow down, catching their breath. Arnold's voice echoes from somewhere in the distance --

ARNOLD (O.S.)

*Listen, you muppets! It wasn't personal before, but it's highly personal now! I'm going to find you and I'm going to use lethal karate moves on you both! I'm not bluffing!*

Mildred looks to Strawn.

MILDRED

I've made a catastrophic blunder.

STRAWN

What? Why?

MILDRED

I appear to have led us to a cliff edge.

Strawn looks ahead --

They are, indeed, at the precipice of a vertiginous cliff-edge, precariously lording over a valley 100ft below.

A single mossy ROPE hangs slack across the chasm to an opposite cliff-face. The final remnants of an ancient rope-bridge, perhaps.

STRAWN

We can just slowly amble back to our tent now, right?

MILDRED

Not yet. Wait a minute.

Mildred opens the pilfered rucksack --

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Let's make sure we've still got the proof.

She pulls out the video camera with trembling hands, muttering a silent prayer to herself.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

*Please... please... please...*

She pushes the REWIND button... then PLAY --

CUT TO:

**CAMERA FOOTAGE**

*POV of Arnold in the tent, tiredly staring right at us.  
Angelina must be holding the camera --*

ANGELINA (O.S.)  
*This is a pukka little camera.  
Crisp HD visuals. You look  
handsome, pet.*

*Arnold stares daggers into the lens... accusingly...*

ARNOLD  
*Do I look as handsome as Ronnie  
Reynolds?*

ANGELINA (O.S.)  
*Now wait just a mi--*

CUT TO BLACK:

**EXT. CLIFF**

Mildred, glassy-eyed, pushes STOP on the camera.

MILDRED  
*No... They recorded over it...*

Mildred lowers the camera, face constricted in rage. She's about to speak, but suddenly freezes, noticing SOMETHING --

STRAWN  
*Fifty grand, gone... again.*

MILDRED  
*(whispering)*  
*Strawn... we may have more pressing  
issues right now.*

STRAWN  
*What could possibly be more  
pressing than this?*

Mildred puts her finger to her lips.

Strawn slowly follows her gaze, gasping when he sees --

**THE PANTHER**

CAMOUFLAGED IN NEARBY BUSH, BLOCKING THEIR PATH, yellow EYES fixed on them, a rope of saliva swinging from its maw --

STRAWN

Yeah. That's quite pressing.

MILDRED

My thoughts exactly.

STRAWN

What do we do? Make ourselves big and loud? Or was it quiet and still?

She eyes the panther, reading its gestures...

MILDRED

No. He's hungry. They get bold when they're hungry. They take risks.

STRAWN

Oh god...

MILDRED

As far as *he's* concerned, the kitchen is open. You're the bangers and I'm the mash.

Mildred returns the camera to the rucksack, hooking it over her shoulder -- she gets up slowly, backing away.

STRAWN

Maybe there's food in their bag.

MILDRED

Reach in and have a look. *Slowly*. No sudden moves.

Strawn carefully unzips the rucksack, reaching in, rummaging around, finally pulling out --

A dried-up ham sandwich, wrapped in cellophane.

STRAWN

Do panthers eat ham sandwiches?

MILDRED

Let's find out.

Strawn unwraps the sandwich, gingerly tossing it down in front of the panther, who looks at it with disdain -- then back at Mildred and Strawn, growling, ready to pounce.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Apparently not.

Strawn looks around -- desperate, panic-stricken -- towards the cliff's SHEER EDGE -- and the primitive moss-covered ROPE slung out across the chasm.

STRAWN  
 (whispered)  
 I have a dumb question.

MILDRED  
 (whispered)  
 In potentially fatal Big Cat encounters, there are no dumb questions.

STRAWN  
 Okay. Can panthers climb ropes?

She glances at the rope, making mental calculations.

THE PANTHER GROWLS hungrily, edging CLOSER towards them...

MILDRED  
 No, they can't.

They back away, hearts pounding...

Strawn stares at the panther, who begins prowling closer...  
 FANGS bared, salivating...

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
 On three, Strawn.

Strawn cringes, petrified.

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
 One. Deep breaths.

The Panther **ROARS**, ready to pounce...

Mildred steps closer to the edge...

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
 Two. Dry your hands.

Strawn whimpers, wiping his sweaty hands on his shirt...

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
 Three. Don't look down. GO!

Time slows to a crawl. Sound drains to a hollow rumble, as --

Mildred JUMPS for the rope --

The PANTHER leaps towards Strawn --

Strawn cries out, JUMPING off the cliff's edge --

SMASH TO:

**EXT. ROPE BRIDGE**

Mildred and Strawn grab the rope, gripping on for dear life, bodies flailing, legs kicking -- narrowly evading --

THE PANTHER, who pounces to the cliff edge, CLAWS swatting futilely, ROARING in anger --

STRAWN  
Move! Lets go! Quick!

MILDRED  
Wait, wait.

STRAWN  
What is it? What's wrong?

MILDRED  
Stop moving.

STRAWN  
Because..?

MILDRED  
I think I can film it.

STRAWN  
Are you kidding? You're going to get us killed... get across, NOW!

MILDRED  
But what if it disappears?

STRAWN  
There's a time and a place for filming wildlife, and guess what? It's not now, and it's not here!

Mildred starts climbing underneath the rope, monkey-bar style. Strawn follows, teeth gritted. But **SUDDENLY** --

The rope starts moving side to side. Strawn looks back and sees the panther swatting at the bridge.

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
It's going to tear the rope!

Mildred looks back, eyes bulging -- defensive veneer shattered, just a petrified kid now. She starts moving faster.

MILDRED  
I can't hold on... my hands are slipping...

STRAWN  
You can do it... keep going...



The rope begins **FRAYING** --

The pace escalates -- *a primal ROAR booms around them* --

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
We're going to make it...

MILDRED  
(looking back)  
I don't like this...

Mildred **panics**. Her strength gives way --

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
No!

She's dangling by one arm, strength fading -- she looks at Strawn with terror -- her fear just amplifies his own --

STRAWN  
No, no...

MILDRED  
I can't hold on! Help!

Mildred's hand **LOSES ITS GRIP** -- she lets go of the rope, **SCREAMING** as she drops --

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
No!

Strawn's hand appears out of nowhere, grabbing Mildred's, tight --

Mildred **SWINGS** below Strawn now, screams echoing off rock --

STRAWN  
I've got you. I've got you.

She just stares up at him, helpless.

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
I told you I had the wrist strength of a professional wrestler. Did you believe me?

MILDRED  
Honestly... no.

Before Strawn can respond --

The rope's threads **SNAP** more!

Mildred immediately starts trying to grab the rope with her free hand -- swaying wildly, **YELLING** out --

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
Come on, come on..!

**THE PANTHER**

At the precipice, growls and swats at the rope --

**STRAWN**

Tries to reach Mildred's flailing HAND --

STRAWN

Stop moving. Stay calm. I've got you. Hey...

(simmering)

I've got you.

Mildred silently nods, surrendering...

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Now reach over and gra-

**SNAP!**

R.I.P rope.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

HOLD ON!

They DROP, swinging in a Tarzan arc towards the other side of the ravine, both SCREAMING --

Their bodies SLAM against the rock face with a ghastly crack, blasting the air out of them.

**THE PANTHER**

Cocks its head, confused by their sudden disappearance. It turns, creeping off, gone.

CUT TO:

**EXT. RAVINE**

**STRAWN'S FACE.** Pale, eyes half-open, drifting in and out of consciousness, muttering to himself in a daze --

STRAWN

(delirious)

*Get a drink... have a good time now... welcome to paradise...*

He's lying on his back at the bottom of the ravine, a small bloody wound on his forehead.

He blinks, regaining consciousness, disoriented.

A muffled sound resolves into focus --

**SCREAMING**, ringing out from somewhere close -- loud and desperate --

He turns, eyes widening when he sees --

MILDRED, lying nearby. Her elbow is dislocated, at a grotesque angle. A large TREE has fallen on her, pinning her legs. She cries out --

MILDRED  
Please! Help!

Strawn weakly hoists himself up, trembling. His clothing is torn, knees bloody, hands grazed.

He staggers to Mildred's side, looking at her in horror --

STRAWN  
Jesus...

She cries in pain, looking up at him with desperate vulnerable eyes --

MILDRED  
Help me... help me... please oh god  
help me...

Panic washes over him. He looks at the TREE pinning her little legs down. He goes to grab it, but she shouts out --

MILDRED (CONT'D)  
Ow Ow! No, no! Don't move it...

He looks at her dislocated elbow. He winces, face ashen...

STRAWN  
It's going to be okay, Mildred.  
You're going to be fine. Looks like  
you've just got...  
(wincing)  
A sore elbow.

MILDRED  
(pained, breathless)  
It's dislocated... and... the tree  
has crushed my legs...

STRAWN  
Oh Jesus.

He stifles a wave of nausea.

MILDRED  
(breathless)  
*Psilocybe Makarorae.*

STRAWN  
What?

MILDRED

Mushrooms.

STRAWN

Why are you talking about mushrooms?

MILDRED

For... the pain...

He nods, frantic, *getting it*.

She glances toward a WOODED AREA nearby -- dark, foreboding...

He sees the woods, clenching his jaw, dry-swallowing.

He staggers off, breaking into a run towards the woods --

She lies back, letting out a pained whimper.

**EXT. WOODS**

Strawn rushes into the woods, frantically scanning for fungi.

STRAWN

Mushrooms... mushrooms... come on, where are you?

He walks deeper into the woods, which seem to darken with each step he takes.

Twigs snap somewhere. A low howl... wind, or beast?

He steels himself, muttering, burying the fear...

STRAWN (CONT'D)

I'm not scared... I'm not scared...  
I'm not scared...

He steps forth, coming face-to-face with --

Another WETA, perched on a dangling vine, staring right at him. It braces itself, ready to jump...

He stares at it, with a newfound iron resolve --

STRAWN (CONT'D)

Don't even *think* about it, you ugly bastard.

The Weta stands down, seemingly getting the message.

Strawn carries on, venturing further into the dark woods. Then --

He drops to his knees, seeing a clump of fungi around the base of a damp tree.

He looks at the various species of fungus, unsure which are *Psilocybe Makarorae*.

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
 Dammit... which ones are you?  
 Brown? Spots? Oh, come on...

*From afar, Mildred lets out another SCREAM --*

Strawn nods to himself, resolved --

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
 Screw it.

He grabs at the mushrooms, picking them all, bunching them up in his hands, racing back out of the woods --

**EXT. RAVINE**

Strawn rushes back to Mildred, mushrooms in his hands --

STRAWN  
 I got them all. Just nod which ones  
 are the magic ones when I hold them  
 up, okay?

Her face is clenched in pain, skin pale and sweaty.

She stares at the mushrooms, nodding at a clump of brownish conical ones when Strawn raises them --

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
 How much?

Mildred is nearly passing out from pain, forcing Strawn to make a fast judgement call.

He breaks some of the mushroom's head off with trembling fingers --

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
 Here...

He raises the mushroom sliver to her mouth. She chews it, swallowing, gasping...

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
 How long do they take to kick in?

MILDRED  
 ... hold... hold my hand...

He crouches beside her, taking her hand -- she jolts in pain, letting out another guttural scream --

She grimaces, looking up at the sky --

BIRDS streak across the cobalt morning sky. They move fast, skittering, like animals in time-lapse.

Strawn squeezes Mildred's hand gently. He looks at her with sorrow and shame.

STRAWN

I'm so sorry.

She just looks up at him. No pithy comeback. Just a scared little girl holding her dad's hand.

STRAWN (CONT'D)

I guess this is better than being a panther's bangers and mash, though.

She tries to smile, but the pain is too much. She looks up at the sky again. It seems deeper blue now. Brighter.

All SOUND seems suddenly distant, echoing, hollow...

She looks at Strawn, face slackening...

Her breath slows down...

MILDRED

I think it's starting to work.  
I feel fizzy. Like I've got Lemon & Paeroa in my veins.  
(off his look)  
Lemon & Paeroa is a popular fizzy drink here.

He looks at her, guilty.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

What are you thinking?

STRAWN

I'm thinking that between getting you kidnapped and feeding you psychedelics, I've secured my place on the Mount Rushmore of disappointing dads.

MILDRED

Oh, your place was secured long before all of that.

He looks hurt, guilty. She smiles, slightly dazed...

MILDRED (CONT'D)

I'm kidding. It's great. It's all great.... You're great. I'm great. The planet, it's great.

(MORE)

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Lemon & Paeroa is great. Really,  
you should try it sometime.

**HER POV** -- the sky brightens, deepens, streaks of light emanating from the sun like glowing tendrils.

**REALITY** -- she looks at Strawn. She suddenly bursts into a fit of breathless giggling.

STRAWN

What's so funny?

MILDRED

Light waves. They're hilarious,  
aren't they?

STRAWN

Oh god... did I give you too much?  
I gave you too much, didn't I?

She giggles uncontrollably, gasping for breath. She calms herself down, looking up at him --

MILDRED

Can you pop my elbow back into  
place now?

He looks at her dislocated elbow, horrified, squeamish.

STRAWN

How?

MILDRED

You know how it doesn't look like a  
normal arm now? Just make it look  
like a normal arm. Make it  
straight. Pop. Snap. Straight.

He moves toward her arm. He clasps her bicep with one hand, her forearm with his other.

She smiles, blissful.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

This is the easy part. You've still  
got that bloody great tree to get  
off my legs. Come on, dad.

STRAWN

(stunned)

What did you say?

MILDRED

What? Nothing.

STRAWN

You called me dad.

MILDRED  
No I didn't.

STRAWN  
Yes you did.

MILDRED  
Really?  
(smiles)  
I *must* be tripping.

He smiles faintly.

STRAWN  
Ready?

She nods to him, approving. And --

**SNAP!** He pops her elbow back into place.

She gasps, relieved. She bursts into laughter again.

**HER POV** -- Strawn glows, celestial, reality throbbing and undulating --

**REALITY** -- Strawn looks down at her, then to the tree on her legs.

He gets up, trying and failing to lift the tree.

STRAWN (CONT'D)  
I can't do it... it's too heavy.

MILDRED  
No it's not.

STRAWN  
I can't do it.

She smiles, looking up at him, dazed...

MILDRED  
Ace of Hearts...

STRAWN  
What..?

MILDRED  
The one you threw... at the window... remember? I lied... I was just winding you up... that *was* my card...

*That* hit Strawn. He nods, claspings the tree again.



MILDRED (CONT'D)

(fading)

You can do this, dad... levitate...  
magic... I believe in... in...

**HER POV** -- through swirling pulsating light, Strawn clasps the tree tight --

MILDRED watches, eyes wide, rapt...

**HER POV** -- Strawn strains to lift the tree...

MILDRED watches. Tears well in her eyes...

MILDRED (CONT'D)

Oh... god...

**HER POV** -- Strawn, as if by magic, begins to RISE OFF THE GROUND, clasping the tree...

MILDRED stares up at him, in disbelief --

MILDRED (CONT'D)

*You're levitating... you're...  
actually levitating...*

**HER POV** -- STRAWN RISES, levitating, tree held in his arms -- he rises, higher and higher, casting the tree aside with ease.

Suddenly, the light BRIGHTENS even more, engulfing all we see, image burning up as we --

FLASH TO:

**WHITE.**

Endless, infinite, pristine.

Birds chirp. Grass rustles in the breeze.

We slowly resolve into an IMAGE --

**EXT. MEADOW -- DAY**

Strawn, cradling the sleeping Mildred in his arms, wading through long grass.

His face is haggard and bloody, lips cracked.

He moves with purpose and resolve.

Mildred stirs in his arms. Her eyes blearily open. She looks up at him, vulnerable, a child... a *real* child.

MILDRED  
 (whispered, rasped)  
 I've had... enough of camping. Take  
 ... me home...

He smiles tiredly.

STRAWN  
 What's the magic word?

MILDRED  
 I love you... with all my heart...

He looks stunned, moved. She passes out again. He holds her tighter -- marching on, determined.

**EXT. PARKING AREA**

Strawn carries Mildred through woodlands, struggling, each step an arduous effort.

**EXT. PARKING LOT**

He carries her onto the threshold of the small parking lot.

In it, a JEEP is idling. Nearby --

ARNOLD AND ANGELINA are standing, in the midst of an argument, oblivious to Strawn and Mildred's presence.

ARNOLD  
 I drive!

ANGELINA  
 It was *your* fault we lost them, so  
 I get to drive.

ARNOLD  
 You're carrying on with Ronnie  
 Reynolds, so I get to drive!

Behind them -- Strawn silently opens the jeep's back door, placing Mildred and the RED RUCKSACK on the back seat.

ARNOLD (CONT'D)  
 I drive! I drive! I DRIVE!

ANGELINA  
 Oh shut up, Jethro. Just shut up  
 and stay shut up forever.

ARNOLD  
 You stay shut up forever.

Behind them -- Strawn gets into the jeep's driver's seat -- firing up the engine, speeding out of the lot --

Arnold and Angelina just stare in disbelief as the jeep speeds off.

ARNOLD (CONT'D)  
Those muppets are worse than us!

**INT. JEEP**

Strawn drives fast, pedal to the metal. He glances at the half-asleep Mildred in the rear-view mirror --

STRAWN  
It's okay... everything's going to be okay... I promise...

**EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD**

**FROM ABOVE:** The car tears off down a vertiginous winding road, kicking up dust --

**INT. JEEP**

Strawn, one hand on the wheel, grabs his recovered iPhone, attempting to shoot a video of Mildred whilst driving --

STRAWN  
Smile for your Mum. She'll never believe this.

MILDRED  
(pained)  
Shouldn't you be watching the road?  
*Dad!*

Strawn turns, looking forward -- eyes wide as he sees --

**THE PANTHER**

Standing motionless in the road, right up ahead -- *about to get hit* --

STRAWN  
Look out!

Strawn swerves hard to avoid the beast, as we --

SMASH TO BLACK:

**OVER BLACK**

A deafening cacophony -- metal crushed, glass shattered. Silence. Then --

Breathing. Laboured. Fast. The chirp of an EKG MONITOR, as we

FADE TO:

**INT. HOSPITAL ROOM**

Mildred's eyes open, adjusting to the fluorescent light.

She's on a hospital bed, face scraped up, head bandaged, leg in a plaster cast. She slowly glances to her right --

STRAWN sleeps peacefully on a bed next to hers. His legs are elevated in plaster casts.

Mildred looks to her left -- Mother ZO, head bandaged, sleeps in a bed on her other side, an EKG monitor chirping steadily.

Mildred takes her hand, holding it. With her other, he takes Strawn's hand, gently squeezing it. Strawn stirs, a faint smile on his face, a murmur... Then --

Mildred's CAT inexplicably prowls into the room, jumping onto her bed, purring. Mildred closes her eyes, a dazed smile creeping across her face.

The family lie there, reunited.

FADE OUT:

**CREDITS ROLL**

Credits begin, but are interrupted by STATIC VIDEO FUZZ, resolving into --

**IPHONE CAMERA FOOTAGE**

We see MILDRED IN THE CAR, panicked, staring past the lens --

MILDRED  
Shouldn't you be watching the road?  
*Dad!*

The camera WHIP-PANS from rear to front, and through the windscreen of the jeep --

We catch the PANTHER, clear as day -- and we FREEZE FRAME.

*Proof it's real.*

**THE END.**