

Caught By The Roots

written by

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FADE IN

EXT. HIGHWAY - OREGON - DAY

A rugged midsize pickup truck roars past, horn blasts, tires screeching, weaving between lanes with speed and urgency.

INT./EXT. PICKUP TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

MATT, late 30s, round-faced, sweaty, stocky build, in a military uniform, eyes fixed on the road, his grip tight on the steering wheel.

His face is taut, neck rigid.

MATT  
Move! C'mon!

He swerves, inches from the car in front. The horn blares again. Honk! Honk!

EXT. HIGHWAY - OREGON - CONTINUOUS

The other car finally shifts lanes.

The pickup truck speeds by, cutting through traffic.

INT./EXT. PICKUP TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

Matt's phone rings. His eyes flicker to the glove box, then back to the road, no time.

He looks at the passenger seat, then eyes up, his breath quickens, panics.

MATT  
(sharply)  
Shit!

Another car. Too close. He swerves hard to the left.

EXT. HIGHWAY - OREGON - CONTINUOUS

The tires screech as the pickup truck jerks to another lane, narrowly avoiding a collision.

INT./EXT. PICKUP TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

The phone stops ringing.

Matt sighs, trying to steady himself. His knuckles, white on the wheel.

The phone rings again. Matt eyes the rear view mirror, spots the phone on the back seat.

Phone display: "Call - LAWYER TOM"

A swift motion, he stretches his hand back, fingers brushing against the leather, struggles, turns back, he finally snatches the phone, eyes back to the road. Safe.

He clicks the phone. Loud speaker.

MATT

Tom, I'm, I'm here. Hold on.

TOM (V.O.)

The judge isn't a babysitter, Matt.  
Court isn't a damn kindergarten  
school.

Matt's jaw clenches, his foot presses on the accelerator.  
Engine roars.

MATT

Just give me a few minutes! Punch  
the damn time!

TOM (V.O.)

Claire just walked in with her  
lawyer. You want to see your kids  
again? Get here now.

Matt's breath catches, his eyes darting between the road and the phone, panic mounting.

MATT

(surprised)

What, the kids?! Are they with her?

TOM (V.O.)

No, no. Just her. Oh boy, he's here  
the judge is here.

Matt's face pales. Sweat on his brows.

MATT

Tom, please. Just stall. I'm on my  
way, my shift just ended. The judge  
will understand.

Tears well up in his eyes, slipping down his cheeks. He wipes them away.

Matt's eyes widen.

TOM (V.O.)  
Matt, if you're not here-

Matt gasps, hand jerks the wheel instinctively.

TOM (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
-soon I can't promise any--

BOOM. Crash.

EXT. HIGHWAY - OREGON - CONTINUOUS

The pickup truck slams into the back of a huge truck ahead.

The impact sends it spinning wildly, tires screeching against the pavement.

It rolls violently, tumbling sideways before smashing off the highway.

EXT. HIGHWAY OFF-ROAD - DAY

Silence. The pickup truck is upside down, smoke billowing. Oil leaking.

The vehicle is mangled, dents, shards of glass glint on the road.

Inside, the airbag hangs deflated, brushing against Matt's slack face.

He dangles from the seatbelt, lifeless, blood pooling at his brow, drops tracing down his temple.

His phone lies shattered on the ground outside, his belongings scattered across the wreckage.

Sound of tires rolling, the faint hiss of smoke. Darkness.

TITLE OVER BLACK: **"CAUGHT BY THE ROOTS"**

EXT. PORTLAND CITYSCAPE - DAY

Cloudy orange sky as the sun sets. PEOPLE and cars drift through the streets.

SUPER: *10 Months Later...*

A food truck idles near street art. Old brick buildings clash with sleek glass towers.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY

The café hums, spoons clink, milk froths, muffled news murmurs from a wall-mounted TV.

A few CUSTOMERS sip lattes.

In a cozy corner, an ELDERLY COUPLE (70s) sits at a worn chessboard. Steam rises from their mugs.

The old man moves a black bishop, knocks off a white pawn. It rolls down to the floor.

OLD MAN

Always the pawns first.

The old woman counters with a white rook, smashing a black pawn.

ON TV - A news broadcast, a MALE ANCHOR (40s) in a sleek studio.

MALE NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.)

A strong storm system is sweeping across northwestern Oregon. Heavy rainfall is expected tonight.

ON TV - Satellite view. Swirling cloud masses creep over Portland Metro.

MALE NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)

While cyclone Anita skirts east, urban flood alerts remain. No immediate danger, but residents are urged to stay indoors tonight.

DING. The café door opens.

A CUSTOMER exits. A gust of wind stirs loose chess pieces, a few tumble to the floor.

Close on: The chessboard.

White king on G2. White pawn on F6. Black knight on D3.

The old man lifts the black knight.

OLD WOMAN

Oh boy...

He grins. Gently places the knight on F4.

OLD MAN

Check.

The white king is threatened, not trapped, but exposed.

Close on: The white pawn. Still standing strong on F6. Two squares from promotion.

A louder gust rattles the door. Outside, dark clouds churn. Distant thunder rolls.

INT. HOSPITAL EXAM ROOM - DAY

Bright. Clinical. Pale walls and fluorescent lights hum overhead.

Matt, calm face, sits quietly. Glasses on. He stares at a blank wall, lost in thought.

Healed scars, line his forehead and hands. His right leg ends below the knee, amputated.

DR. KAPOOR, 50s, Indian-American, warm and fatherly, kneeled, fits a sleek, well worn athletic blade prosthetic leg.

DR. KAPOOR

Next time, maybe aim lower. And fists do wonders too.

MATT

He pushed me. He deserved worse.

Dr. Kapoor doesn't argue. Just a quiet nod as he adjusts the prosthetic.

DR. KAPOOR

There. You're cleared to run, jump, dance... maybe fly, if you're into that.

A flicker of warmth in Matt's face.

MATT

My eyes?

DR. KAPOOR

One thing at a time. You're healing faster than most. Let's not rush the rest.

Matt rises. Offers a handshake with his right hand, thumb missing.

Dr. Kapoor takes it anyway, firm, without flinch.

DR. KAPOOR (CONT'D)  
And Matt... maybe think about a  
prosthetic thumb.

They share a quiet, knowing look.

Matt nods, smiles faintly, and exits.

EXT. SOUTHEAST PORTLAND - EVENING

Quiet residential streets.

Tall maples stretch shadows across cracked sidewalks. A porch  
light flickers on.

A KID pedals past, heading home.

EXT. MATT'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Modest. Worn edges, but cared for. An old truck in the  
driveway. A U.S. flag shifts in the wind.

Matt sprints up the path. Stops. Breathing hard. Damp with  
sweat.

He lingers before the door, something heavy in him, then  
steps inside.

INT. MATT'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Warm lighting. Neat, intentional decor. A quiet, masculine  
calm.

Books. Military medals. Framed memories:

- Matt, 20s, in full Marine gear.
- Afghanistan. Dust. Brothers in arms.
- Matt with a young woman and child in his house.
- Matt with two toddlers, one on his shoulders.
- A newspaper clipping, creased and yellowing: "LOCAL MAN  
SURVIVES CAR CRASH - Loses Family Battle."

Matt enters from the kitchen, phone to ear, soda in hand.

MATT  
(into phone)  
I'll talk to Claire...  
(MORE)

MATT (CONT'D)  
Custody kicks in at ten, I know.  
I'll be early.

He drops onto the couch. Pops the can open.

MATT (CONT'D)  
(into phone, softer)  
I'll pick you... Yeah... I'll  
remember.  
(pause)  
Alright. Night.

He ends the call. The screen lights up.

A selfie: Matt, smiling wide, flanked by his son and daughter. Laughing. Alive.

Thunder rumbles. Rain starts.

Matt stares at the photo. His smile lingers, haunted at the edges.

EXT. MATT'S HOUSE - DAY

Sunlight breaks through thinning clouds.

The world, rinsed by rain, feels paused, fresh and still.

Puddles shimmer across the driveway. Wet leaves cling to Matt's porch.

The front door swings open. Matt steps out, layered in trekking gear. A large, rugged military backpack slung over one shoulder.

He adjusts the chest strap, tightens it. Takes a slow, grounding breath. A lone crow caws in the distance.

Silence stretches, peaceful, but weighted.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - MOMENTS LATER

A damp, empty road. The neighborhood hasn't quite woken up.

Matt's truck glides through, tires hissing softly over wet asphalt.

INT./EXT. TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

Matt at the wheel, windows cracked. The wind rushes in, sharp, earthy.



He grins faintly, eyes ahead. One hand taps the steering wheel.

Then, he spins it gently, brings the truck to a slow stop.

EXT. JACKY'S HOUSE - DAY

A modest home with tired bones. Faded siding. Porch light still burning.

An SUV leans crooked in the driveway, tires pressing into damp grass.

Matt walks up, no backpack now. More casual. He presses the doorbell.

Silence.

Presses it again.

Still nothing.

MATT

Jacky?

He steps closer, squints through the window.

MATT (CONT'D)

Jackson?...

A pause. A faint sigh.

He tries the doorknob, it opens, surprises him for half a second.

INT. JACKY'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Dim. Stale.

Crushed cans on the floor. The faint growl of snores.

On the couch, JACKY, mid-30s, African-American, stout, mouth half-open, sleeping deep. TV flickers muted images.

Matt walks over. Looks down, amused.

Then leans close, switch flips in his voice.

MATT

(barking, mock authority)

ON YOUR FEET, MAGGOT!

Jacky springs up, snorts, flails. A mug clatters off the table.

He blinks, trying to breathe, shaking off sleep, a wet sneeze, wipes his nose, breathing shall.

Matt just grins.

MATT (CONT'D)

Easy, tiger. Just checking if the heart still works.

Jacky glares. Fists balled.

JACKY

I've punched you in the face more times than I can count. Right now your nose is a Picasso painting in my head.

MATT

Yeah? I made a Picasso painting yesterday with an artistic prosthetic kick to the nose. Gosh, the way he ran, wow...

Jacky stares, then collapses back onto the couch, eyes open.

MATT (CONT'D)

Get your gear. We roll.

JACKY

Can't.

MATT

What?

JACKY

I'm not coming.

MATT

That's fine, I'll drag you out.

JACKY

Matt?

(beat)

My grandma died.

Jacky sneezes again. Matt doesn't blink. Silence.

MATT

Your grandma has died so many times--

JACKY  
Two days ago.

Matt still. Jacky sits up, eyes tired.

JACKY (CONT'D)  
Found out last night. Drove eighty miles through the storm. Snuck past the hospital guard. Got there right before cremation... yeah... drove back, to the couch.

Matt nods. Quiet. He sits beside Jacky.

MATT  
I'm sorry, man.

Jacky pulls him into a hug, tight. Matt pats his back, then pulls away, awkward.

JACKY  
And I'm sick.

Jacky sneezes. Matt rises.

MATT  
Hot soup? Hot water? Onions?

JACKY  
My aunt's coming. Go. Be with your kids.

Jacky glances at Matt's prosthetic, then up at him.

JACKY (CONT'D)  
You're a badass. A damn good friend. I'll live. Go.

Matt nods no.

MATT  
Thank you... for staying.

Jacky grabs him again, one more hug, sneezes. Matt stiffens, then lets it happen.

EXT. GATED COMMUNITY - ENTRANCE - DAY

A low hum as the iron gate slides open.

Inside, symmetry. Wealth. Pristine stone driveways. Trimmed hedges. Not a leaf out of place.

Matt's rugged truck pulls in, slightly out of sync with its surroundings.

EXT. LUXURY HOUSE - DRIVEWAY - CONTINUOUS

The truck stops in front of a sleek, glass and stone home.

Matt steps out. He takes a breath, eyes the house.

He walks up the path.

DING DONG.

INT. FOYER - CONTINUOUS

The door cracks open. ADAM (8), tousled hair, pajamas clinging, peers out.

Squinting through sleep, then,

ADAM  
(quiet joy)  
Dad?

He leaps. Matt catches him, lifts him in a practiced hug.

MATT  
There you are.

They hold. A small moment.

Adam pulls back, beaming.

ADAM  
I'll wake up Hannah!

He bolts upstairs.

Matt lingers in the doorway, a man both welcome and slightly out of place.

INT. LUXURY HOME - KITCHEN - DAY

Modern. Pristine. Silent hum of appliances.

Matt and DON, late 30s, freshly groomed, wears a crisp tee, calm, unreadable, sit across from each other at the island.

Coffee steams between them.

DON

She's not gonna like this. And ten  
A.M. is like three hours away.

MATT

I'll talk to her.

Footsteps. CLAIRE enters, mid-30s, graceful even in pajamas.  
She's pregnant, subtle but visible. Ties her hair without  
glancing up.

CLAIRE

You can't just show up like this,  
Matt. There's a schedule for a  
reason.

Don's eyes flick to Matt, faint smirk on his face.

Matt doesn't rise to it.

MATT

If we leave now, we'll hit the  
summit by sunrise tomorrow.

Claire freezes at the coffee machine.

CLAIRE

The summit?

MATT

Eagle Creek. The trail's safe. I  
checked everything twice.

A tense pause.

Claire finally turns. Crosses her arms.

CLAIRE

You don't get to make these calls.  
Not anymore.  
(to Don)  
Can you?...

Don rises, not confrontational, more performative.

DON

Matt, c'mon.

MATT

It's my weekend. I'm not asking.

Claire stares at him.

CLAIRE

This is our home. You need to go.

Matt stands firm. Claire, tense. Don sits, caught between.

MATT

I'm finally healing. I can run.

Dance. Live.

(to Don)

You know what I've been through.

Claire doesn't flinch.

CLAIRE

Matt, leave.

Don rests a hand on her wrist, calm, but tentative.

DON

Babe... it's his weekend. He looks good. The kids'll love it.

Claire shakes her head, then--

Adam appears in full hiking gear. Behind him, HANNAH, 4, beaming, missing teeth. Both bounce with excitement.

The room shifts.

Matt lights up. Don raises a brow. Claire freezes, phone already in hand.

CLAIRE

I'm calling our lawyer.

DON

(softly)

Claire, hold on.

(to Matt)

Who's going?

MATT

Just me and the kids. Jacky couldn't come.

CLAIRE

No.

(to the kids)

Upstairs. Now.

Adam and Hannah run to Matt instead, hugging his legs tight.

Don sighs. Claire paces away, phone to her ear.

DON  
This isn't smart. It's risky.

MATT  
Then come along.

DON  
Yeah, no. But take them somewhere safe.

Claire returns. Her phone's on speaker.

LAWYER (V.O.)  
He can take them wherever he sees fit.

Claire stiffens.

LAWYER (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
It's his weekend. Claire, you signed the agreement. I can't override that.

Call ends. Silence. Claire folds her arms. Stone.

CLAIRE  
Court or not, this isn't okay.

Matt kneels, looks at his kids.

MATT  
It's gonna be epic.

Adam and Hannah high-five him.

Matt heads for the door.

Claire stares daggers at Don.

DON  
(shrugging)  
What'd I do?

EXT. GATED COMMUNITY - MATT'S TRUCK - DAY

Adam and Hannah, buckled in the backseat, playing with their toys. Soft giggles, unaware of the tension outside.

Matt and Don load the final hiking bag into the truck bed.

Claire approaches, small backpack in hand. Doesn't speak. Don takes it, quietly tucks it in, shuts the tailgate.

He kisses her. His eyes drop briefly to her belly, then up to meet hers, then over to Matt.

DON  
Try not to kill each other. The  
kids'll be fine.

CLAIRE  
The kids, sure. The other part...  
(shrugs)  
No promises.

She climbs into the passenger seat.

Don turns to Matt. A beat.

DON  
Hey. Just be safe, yeah?

Matt lifts his right hand for a thumbs up, but there's no thumb.

He raises his left instead. Thumbs up.

Don huffs a laugh, shakes his head. Hands on hips, amused but tense.

Matt climbs in.

The truck pulls away. Don stands, watching them go. A silent wave.

EXT. PORTLAND STREETS - DAY

Matt's truck cruises out of the quiet, tree-lined streets of the gated community.

City life rises around them. Glints of early sunlight flicker off wet pavement, the last trace of last night's rain.

INT./EXT. TRUCK - DAY

The city skyline fades in the rearview. Towering Douglas firs and moss draped maples rise on either side.

EXT. HIGHWAY 84 EAST - MOVING - CONTINUOUS

Matt's truck merges onto I-84 East. They pass Troutdale, "Gateway to the Gorge", the suburbs thin out, and wilderness begins.



EXT. COLUMBIA RIVER GORGE - MOVING - CONTINUOUS

Majestic cliffs rise on one side. The Columbia sprawls wide on the other.

Mist lingers like a ghost over the water. Waterfalls flash past.

They glide through narrow tunnels, carved into stone.

EXT. EAGLE CREEK TRAILHEAD - DAY

They pass a wooden sign: LEFT - EAGLE CREEK TRAILHEAD.

Matt's truck keeps going. The main trailhead lot, empty.

INT./EXT. TRUCK - DAY

Claire leans toward the windshield, squinting.

CLAIRE

There. That was it.

Matt doesn't slow.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

You missed it. God, Matt!

Matt glances in the rearview. Adam and Hannah press their faces to the windows, enchanted by the deep forest.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Parking was empty. Where are you going?

MATT

That's the public route.

(beat)

We've got a private one.

He steers off the paved road. Gravel crunches under the tires. Then dirt.

Trees thicken. Shadows deepen. Branches scrape the windshield like reaching fingers.

EXT. UNMARKED FOREST PATH - CONTINUOUS

Matt's truck turns off-road, easing into a narrow break in the trees.

No signage. Only a weathered totem stone, half-buried in moss.

A faint trail winds through ancient firs and thick ferns, barely visible.

INT./EXT. TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

Matt's eyes stay locked on the path ahead. Claire watches him, wary.

CLAIRE

You just make your own route now?  
Problems on problems. You said  
Eagle--

MATT

It is.  
(beat)  
Jacky told me, this was once part  
of an old Native trail. Connects to  
the ridge's base camp. Fewer use  
it.

In the rearview mirror, Adam's reflection wide-eyed, curious, glued to the trees blurring past.

BOOM. A sudden BLAST loud, metallic. The truck lurches hard.

SCREECH. Matt yanks the wheel, the truck swerves, kicks up dirt, crunches, under low branches.

They slide beneath the overhang of a massive fir. Silence. Only the ticking of the engine.

Claire breathes hard. Adam and Hannah stare forward, stunned.

EXT. UNMARKED FOREST PATH - DAY

Claire, Adam, and Hannah stand beside the truck, backpacks slung, staring into the dense, overgrown forest. The air hangs still.

Matt crouches at the front tire. A sharp wood sticking in, flat. Checks the back, blown out.

He exhales, gives a wry smile.

MATT

Well... looks like the hike starts  
early.

Claire doesn't smile.

CLAIRE  
Always something with you, Matt...  
Problems and problems.

A beat.

They move. Matt and Adam lead, Claire and Hannah trail behind. Towering firs rise around them. Ferns brush against their legs.

The forest begins to swallow them whole.

MATT  
Adam. How you feelin'?

ADAM (GRINNING)  
Awesome. It's like we're in a  
secret forest or something.  
(beat)  
Think there's treasure?

HANNAH  
Is there any fairy?

MATT  
Maybe both. You never know in  
places like this.

MATT (CONT'D)  
(gently)  
Hannah? You like it?

HANNAH  
(nodding)  
Yeah. I like the trees. They're  
big.

ADAM  
They're huge. Like, taller than our  
whole house.

HANNAH  
Can we see horse? Unicorn? Bear?

CLAIRE  
(tense)  
Bear?! Oh my God--

MATT  
No bear, no bear. I checked. The  
storm pushed them to the other side  
of the mountain. We're clear.

A sudden breeze whistles through the trees. Light filters down like gold dust.

Adam and Hannah pause in awe.

Matt notices a narrow break in the woods. A quiet, sunlit clearing ahead.

EXT. DEEP FOREST CLEARING - DAY

The dense trees part to reveal a hidden clearing. Sunlight pours through the canopy like gold through glass.

A weathered wooden cabin emerges, humble yet striking. Smoke curls from a crooked chimney.

Wind chimes made of shells and bone, whisper in the breeze.

EXT. WOODEN CABIN - CONTINUOUS

The cabin sits quietly, part lodge, part home. Old but alive, as if it breathes with the forest.

XOLO, a male German shepherd, maybe 8 years old, is leashed to a post. He barks once, alert but friendly.

ADAM  
(grinning)  
Hey buddy.

HANNAH  
Hi doggie!

Hannah waves. Dog barks, wags his tail.

A hand-carved wooden sign creaks overhead:

"Eluna Way - Trail Registry & Hotel (Reservation Only)  
Respect the Land. Respect the Spirits."

INT. WOODEN CABIN - RECEPTION - DAY

Matt, Claire, and the kids step inside, backpacks still on.

The room is old but warm faded maps, mugs, polaroids, hiking gear, and dreamcatchers sway gently from exposed rafters.

At the counter stands SANI (60s), tall, weathered, grounded. His calm gaze meets Matt's, unreadable.

SANI  
Jacky?

MATT  
 (shakes his head)  
 No, I'm Matt. We booked yesterday.  
 Jacky had to cancel last minute,  
 so... Claire, my ex-wife is filling  
 in.

Sani's eyes drift, kids, Claire, Matt's prosthetic.

MATT (CONT'D)  
 Blew out both tires on the way up.  
 Pulled off under a tree.

SANI  
 It's safe there. I'll see what I  
 can do. Won't be cheap.

MATT  
 Fair enough. Appreciate it.

SANI  
 I'm Sani. I run this place.

He gestures toward a large open doorway at the back. Beyond it, a narrow trail, barely visible, marked with hand-carved totems.

SANI (CONT'D)  
 That's the old path. Few walk it.  
 Fewer understand it.

MATT  
 We'll catch the sunrise, be back  
 tomorrow morning. Noon at the  
 latest.

Sani nods, accepts that answer. Then:

SANI  
 Might have your car ready by then.

He reaches for a stack of paperwork.

SANI (CONT'D)  
 I'll need your ID.

Matt hands over his wallet. Sani scans it, gives it back with a nod.

SANI (CONT'D)  
 All set.

Then Sani rings a small brass bell. Its tone lingers like wind through pine.

INT. WOODEN CABIN - DINING ROOM - DAY

A rustic room. Wooden chairs and tables.

Matt, Claire, and the kids sit quietly, eyes scanning the old decor animal hides, woven blankets.

From the kitchen steps PATEL, early 20s. Indian-American. Slim athletic, buzz cut, thick eyebrows.

He carries a wooden tray stacked with steaming plates of lunch, sets the tray down on the table.

(Patel has no tongue, his words come out from his throat, garbled, guttural, more sound than speech. Only those used to him understand. He use hand signs, but not sign language)

PATEL  
(gravelly, slurred)  
Enjoy your lunch.

The sound is rough, words tangled like marbles in his mouth.

Claire blinks, uncertain. Matt gives a respectful nod. The kids stare, curious. Sani standing aside.

SANI  
(quietly)  
That's Patel, my cook, he says  
enjoy your lunch... Poor boy, lost  
his tongue in an accident. But  
hears more than most ever say.

Patel grunts softly, points to the meal. The kids smile at him.

Patel smiles back, gives a brief nod, steps back in to the kitchen.

EXT. WOODEN CABIN - BACK - DAY

Hannah and Adam chase Xolo, plays around a tree, Hannah giggles, throws a stick for the Dog.

On a tree stump. Claire and Patel pack food into their backpack, wraps, dried fruit, trail mix. Patel hums quietly, focused.

Matt stands nearby, gazing out at the tree covered mountains, pulls out his phone, checks, no bars. He tilts it, tries again. Still nothing.

Sani steps out from a side shed. On a flat rock, he sets down a shallow wooden bowl, a small bundle of dried sage, a feather fan, and a rolled dry tree root.

His movements are steady, respectful. Claire notices, nods toward him.

CLAIRE  
What's he doing?

Patel zips the pack shut, glances over.

PATEL  
(soft, slurred)  
His ancestry ritual. For protection  
and guidance.

Claire puzzled, nods yes.

Matt watches as Sani kneels, begins arranging the items, not rushing.

Adam reaches Matt, pauses, peeks over at Sani.

ADAM  
Is he making a magic spell?

Matt smiles faintly but says nothing. The moment feels sacred.

Hannah runs up to Matt, laughing.

HANNAH  
Xolo's fast!

Xolo bounds in, drops a stick at Hannah's feet, panting hard. Matt kneels, gives him a pat.

MATT  
Good boy.

From a distance...

SANI  
Matt!

Matt looks up, nods, starts walking with the kids toward Sani.

Claire watches, then reluctantly follows.

The family gathers near Sani.

SANI (CONT'D)

Let's begin this hike with a small ritual, for safety and protection.

CLAIRE

No. We won't be doing that. We have different beliefs. Thank you, Mr. Sani.

Sani stays quiet, eyes on Matt. Matt looks at Claire, softly...

MATT

Claire, let him.  
(To Sani)  
Please, go ahead--

CLAIRE

No. Kids, come.

MATT

It's just a ritual.

CLAIRE

Not for me. I'll pray for them myself.

Sani shifts his gaze to Adam. Adam meets his eyes.

Patel, from aside.

PATEL

Protection ritual, aura cleansing, prayer to his ancestors, the smoke will cleanse all the evil spirits attached.

SANI

It's a simple blessing. Nothing forced. Just guidance from my ancestors for the path ahead.

CLAIRE

We appreciate your efforts, Mr. Sani. But we'll do things our own way.

Claire takes the kids by their hands, walks them off. Matt lingers, guilt in his eyes. Sani calls out...

SANI

Wait.



Claire stops. Turns. Sani approaches Adam, kneels. Claire tenses.

CLAIRE

What are you doing? I said--

Sani without a word, ties the loose right shoe lace, then unties the left.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

That one's fine.

Sani ignores, ties the shoelace, tightens it, firm. He stands, lays a gentle hand on Adam's head. Smiles.

ADAM

Thank you, Mr. Sani.

HANNAH

Can you do magic?

Sani smiles, pulls a feather from his hair, hands it to Hannah, she beams.

HANNAH (CONT'D)

Thank you!

She tucks it into her tiny backpack.

Sani returns to Matt, his steps measured, his gaze steady.

SANI

The cyclone knocked out all the cell towers. No signal, no radio... nothing. You're the only group on this route today. A few others will be coming tomorrow, but I'd advise caution. Don't venture too deep. Xolo sniffed both your kids, but there's no cause for concern. I'll handle the ritual alone. You can start your hike whenever you're ready.

Matt nods, slight hesitation.

MATT

Hey? Can you... do the ritual on me?

Sani glances briefly at Claire and the kids, then back to Matt. His expression softens for a moment as he nods.

SANI

Yes.

Matt stands still. Sani kneels by the flat stone, the items he arranged. Sani lights a bundle of sage in a stone bowl, smoke curls up.

He circles Matt, fanning the smoke with a feather. A rattle shakes once, low, dry.

Adam and Hannah watch from a few steps away, silent, wide eyed.

Sani mutters something under breath. Smoke drifts over Matt's chest, head, shoulders. Matt eyes shut, exhales.

Sani finishes, rests a hand on Matt's shoulder.

SANI (CONT'D)

The spirits walk with you.

Matt nods, quiet. Grounded. Sani pushes a dry leaf in his chest pocket. Pats it.

Adam grips Hannah's hand, whispers...

ADAM

That was cool.

Matt reaches Adam and Hannah. Claire, eyes him, smirk.

CLAIRE

So what? Got your super powers back?

Matt doesn't respond. Claire laughs.

HANNAH

Dad has super powers?

MATT

I'm amazing dad.

Hannah jumps, happy, grabs his hand, her face shrinks.

HANNAH

Eww...

Adam sniffs.

ADAM

What is that smell?

MATT  
My super powers.

Adam laughs. Claire sighs.

Patel stares, lifts the phone. Click. Matt, Adam, Claire, Hannah, Xolo and Sani freeze mid smile in the frame.

Patel reaches them, steps forward, turns the camera, flashes a grin wide and toothy. Click. A selfie joins the memory.

A beat.

Matt and family, walks towards a narrow bushy trail, with a stick, there is a totem, Adam and Hannah, eyes wide as they pass.

Sani stands still, watching them disappear into the trail, he kneels by the stone bowl.

The sage bundle burns low. The smoke curls, then spirals downward. Sani's eyes narrow.

Xolo, pauses, ears perk, uneasy growl toward the woods, then backs away with a soft whimper.

A gust of wind, heavy creak from the forest canopy. Snap. Thick branch crashes down in the distance. THUD.

EXT. FOREST - UNMARKED TRAIL - CONTINUOUS

The family walks single file through the narrow path.

Matt leads, map in hand. Adam trails close behind Matt.

Hannah walks in the middle, gripping her small backpack. Claire follows at the rear, scanning the woods, suspicious.

CLAIRE  
(tense)  
What was that sound?

MATT  
Just an old tree falling. Happens here all the time.

The path widens. Birds chirp, wings flutter overhead. Green slopes stretch out, sunlight cutting through the trees.

Suddenly, a snake darts across the path, swift. Adam stumbles back, gasping. Claire pulls Hannah close, shields her. Matt keeps going. Others doesn't move.

They see a hard rope tied to a branch, Adam and Matt gaze at each other, smirks.

Hannah grips the rope. Matt gives her a gentle push. She swings out with a squeal, giggles.

Adam takes his turn, laughing as Matt sends him off.

Claire watches from a distance, unmoved.

Matt grabs the rope, steps back, grins at the kids. A short run, then leap. The rope tenses, branches creak.

Adam and Hannah look up, breath held.

Matt swings wide fast, high. He nears the ground, a jerk, braces, digs his heels in land, legs skid through leaves, stops.

Adam and Hannah, laughs. Matt grins, adjusts his prosthetic leg.

Claire turns her back, shakes her head.

They all walking ahead, crossing a river, in single file, Matt up front, Adam close behind.

They are back on trail.

A fallen tree trunk bridging the trail.

Matt hoists Adam up. Hannah struggles, Claire gives her a boost, then climbs after.

Together, they snap a selfie. They carefully climb back down.

EXT. TUNNEL FALLS - DAY

The trail narrows along a basalt cliff, leading to a 130 foot waterfall plunging into a pool below.

A tunnel, carved into the rock face, they all pass directly behind the curtain of water.

Matt pulls his phone out, takes a snap of his kids. Matt, Adam and Hannah pose, Claire clicks, uninterested.

EXT. FOREST TRAIL - SLIPPERY SLOPE TOP - DAY

They face a narrow, a long moss slick path of slanted stone. Wet. Glimmering with fungus.

Dense bushes flank both sides, no other way through.

Matt tests the slope with his prosthetic leg. It slips.

MATT

Okay, follow my path. It's slick.  
Kids? Grip those sticks tight.

Matt steps forward, nearly loses balance. His hips shift, catching himself. He slides a bit.

HANNAH

Don't fall, Daddy!

Claire watches, arms crossed, eyes fixed on Matt's struggle.

Matt regains balance, plants his stick, then suddenly slides again, THUD, falls face first.

ADAM

Dad!

HANNAH

Mommy! Help Daddy!

Claire doesn't move. She watches, arms folded, something close to amusement in her eyes.

CLAIRE

Wow. The heroic dad. Guess the  
spirits really are watching over  
you, huh? This is what you meant by  
"experience," Matt?

Matt struggles up, slips again. His prosthetic leg detaches, clatters down the slope.

Adam takes a step toward it. Claire snaps her arm out.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

No, Adam. Stay back. You'll slip  
too.

HANNAH

Daddy! Get up!

Matt exhales hard, rolls to his side, mud streaked on his shirt. Claire's lips twitch into a smirk.

MATT

I got a better idea.

Still on the ground, Matt unclips his backpack, gives it a shove, it slides, bounces, hits the runaway prosthetic, stops it near the bottom.

MATT (CONT'D)  
Kids? Watch and learn.

Matt plants his hands, pushes off. His body glides down the slick rock like a sled.

MATT (CONT'D)  
Wooooo!

Adam and Hannah gape, wide-eyed, thrilled and laughter.

HANNAH  
Go Daddy!

ADAM  
That was awesome!

Claire doesn't react, unimpressed.

EXT. SLIPPERY SLOPE - BOTTOM - CONTINUOUS

Matt skids to a stop, panting. He flips over, mud smeared, looks up, grinning.

MATT  
Adam, let's go!

EXT. SLIPPERY SLOPE - TOP - CONTINUOUS

Adam lights up, throws his backpack, it slides away. Claire grabs his arm.

CLAIRE  
Absolutely not--

WOOSH. Hannah zips past them, squealing.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)  
Hannah!

EXT. SLIPPERY SLOPE - BOTTOM - CONTINUOUS

Matt's eyes go wide, he lunges forward just in time to catch Hannah. She crashes into his arms, both laughing breathlessly.

MATT  
Hooooo!

HANNAH  
I like it! Can I go again?

Claire from up the hill.

CLAIRE (O.S.)  
Hannah?! Are you okay?

Hannah turns back.

HANNAH  
I'm ok!

She giggles with Matt.

EXT. SLIPPERY SLOPE - TOP - CONTINUOUS

Adam bounces with excitement. Claire stands stiff, watching from above, caught between nerves and hesitation.

ADAM  
Can I go, Mom? Please?

Claire exhales, forces a smile. She kneels beside him, placing a hand on his back.

But Adam slips free, launches himself down the slope.

CLAIRE  
Adam!

EXT. SLIPPERY SLOPE - BOTTOM - CONTINUOUS

Matt dusts off Hannah, then looks up, sees Adam barreling down.

MATT  
Heads up!

Adam zooms in, skids to a stop near them, breathless and laughing.

ADAM  
That was awesome! Mom, you gotta try!

Matt reattaches his prosthetic.

EXT. SLIPPERY SLOPE - TOP - CONTINUOUS

Claire watches from above, tight lipped. She gestures a cross sign on herself.

CLAIRE  
(Muttering)  
I hate this.

She shuts her eyes, and pushes off.

EXT. SLIPPERY SLOPE - BOTTOM - CONTINUOUS

Matt sees Claire sliding down, quickly ushers the kids aside.

Claire spins on her descent, barely keeping control. She screams as she tumbles straight into a patch of thick bushes.

Silence.

HANNAH  
Mommy?

The bushes rustle. Claire pops up, covered in leaves.

CLAIRE  
I'm fine! Just, fine.

She gets up, brushes herself off, yanks the trail map from Matt's pack.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)  
I'll lead.

Matt sighs. Hannah tugs at his sleeve.

HANNAH  
Can we do it again, Daddy?

Matt winks at Hannah.

MATT  
When we come back tomorrow. Okay?

Hannah giggles. Adam runs to catch up. They all move forward, deeper into the trail.

EXT. FOREST - WIDE PATH - DAY

The trail opens up. Claire leads with Hannah, a beat behind, Matt walks beside Adam, protective hand near him.

The sound of a waterfall grows louder as they ascend a slope.

Matt hoists Hannah up with ease, then Adam climbs up, then offers his hand to Claire.



Claire eyes it, but grabs an exposed root instead, pulls herself up.

MATT

You're pregnant. Maybe skip the stunts?

Claire doesn't look at him.

CLAIRE

If something happens, it's on you.

Matt exhales, climbs without another word.

EXT. WATERFALL POND - CONTINUOUS

A pristine cascade spills into a crystal clear pond. Fishes flicker beneath the surface. The kids pause, awestruck.

Matt unlatches Hannah's backpack, scoops her up, tosses her into the pond. SPLASH!

Claire jolts.

CLAIRE

Are you insane?!

Matt just smirks. Hannah resurfaces, squealing.

HANNAH

It's freezing!

Hannah laughs, splashing water at them.

Matt looks at Adam, points to the pond.

Adam lights up, drops off his backpack. Claire grips his arm.

CLAIRE

You're not doing this. He threw her.

MATT

Better now than smelling like trail mix all night. Trust me, mosquitoes will eat you alive. Adam, now!

Claire turns, too late. Adam slips free, jumps. Another splash.

Claire frowns, lips tight. Hannah and Adam laugh, splashing wildly.

Matt watches, quiet pride on his face.

Claire storms over, grabs Matt's arm, pulls him aside.

CLAIRE  
(low, seething)  
You do things like that, if  
anything happens to my kids, you'll  
never see them again. Jail, Matt. I  
mean it.

Matt just grins, backs up, dives sideways into the pond, a splash. He swims toward the kids.

Laughter fills the air.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)  
(shouting)  
We need to be at the top before  
dark!

No one replies. They're lost in the moment. Claire exhales.

A beat.

Claire sits on a rock, towel drying Adam's hair. Her movements are brisk, lips tight.

A few feet away, Matt tousles Hannah's hair with a gentler touch.

MATT  
Whew. One freezing plunge, worth  
it.

ADAM  
I like it here.

HANNAH  
Can we stay?

MATT  
We'll camp at the top. It's safe.  
We'll play games there too, yeah?

Claire bends to undo Adam's shoe lace. The knot won't budge. She tugs harder.

CLAIRE  
(Grumbling)  
That old man can't even tie a knot  
right, what spell did he use?

Matt walks over with Hannah, crouches beside Adam. Tries the knot. It's tight, his fingers wince at the tension.

MATT  
He probably did it to keep leeches  
out. Smart move.

Matt looks at Adam.

MATT (CONT'D)  
Let's check it out properly once  
we're up there. Sound good?

Adam nods. Claire sighs.

Matt gives the falls one last glance. They gather their gear, head back toward the trail.

EXT. FOREST TRAIL - VALLEY - DAY

A vast valley nestled between two looming mountains. The view stuns. Windy.

They sit in a small tree shade, finishing lunch. Matt finishes his bite, lets out a small burp, swigs water.

Opposite to Matt, Adam and Hannah head spin around, gazing at the view, still chewing.

Claire wipes her hands, eyes on the trail ahead.

MATT  
Easy, troops. We're not racing the  
mountain. Chew like it matters.

Claire gives the kids a look. They keep munching, grinning. She then pulls the map, studies it.

CLAIRE  
We cross the valley, then detour  
right up to base camp.

Matt takes the map from her. Scans it. Shakes his head.

MATT  
We're not circling. We're going up.

Matt gestures toward a slope cutting up the right side of the valley.

MATT (CONT'D)  
Shortcut. We'll hit base camp  
before sunset.

Claire's jaw locks. She yanks the map from his hand.

CLAIRE

Great. You go. We'll take the safe way.

Matt gets up, eyes at the kids.

MATT

(shrugs)

See you at the top. Bye, monkeys.

Matt walks past them, heads toward a mud slope aside.

Adam swallows, glancing back at Claire.

ADAM

Mom... Can't we go with Dad?

Claire, eyes focused on the map.

CLAIRE

Too steep. Not for your sister. Or me.

HANNAH

But I want Daddy...

A loud guttural growl behind them.

MATT (O.S.)

Arghhh!

Everyone flinches. Claire spins.

CLAIRE

Jesus, Matt! You idiot!

ADAM

Dad!

Matt steps out, laughing.

MATT

Gotcha.

Hannah jumps up, slaps Matt's leg with her little palms, half-laughing, half-scolding.

HANNAH

Mean!

MATT

Okay, okay! Valley it is.

Claire exhales through her teeth.

CLAIRE

Do that again, no weekends too, I swear, I'll make it happen.

MATT

Come on. It's just me and the kids. Can't we just enjoy? When they're old they'll remember this moment.

CLAIRE

This isn't summer camp. No slip ups.

MATT

My mistake. Shouldn't have informed you in the first place about the hike.

Claire sighs, gets up. Matt winks at Adam, secret pact. Adam, a stern face but cracks a smile.

Matt pats his head. Hannah stands arms crossed, unimpressed.

The kids drink their water. Snack wrappers are tucked away. Claire takes their hands, begin across the valley, Matt trailing behind.

EXT. MOUNTAIN SLOPE - ASCEND TO BASE CAMP - DAY

A very tall mountain waits.

They enter the trail head, Claire leads with Hannah, Adam in the middle, Matt at last.

The forest is silent.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - DAY

Bright sun. Great height. They all enter a narrow dirt path.

On their right- a steep cliffside drop. On their left- moss covered rock walls and tangled ferns.

The drop to the forest floor is sharp, unforgiving. Dense pine trees stretch out across the valley below. Quiet, remote, risky.

Matt inches to the edge. Wind whispers past his ears.

Matt's POV: Below, tree roots claw from the cliff face, twisted and dry. Farther down, jagged boulders scatter the forest floor, trees look like toys.

Matt's eyes widen. The roots sway slightly. One bad step, death.

Matt looks up, sun dipping, casting long shadows.

ADAM (O.S.)

Dad!

Matt turns, jolted. He masks his concern with a smile, walks back to the group, checks Hannah.

MATT

You see that view, kiddo? Whole world down there.

Claire gently pulls Hannah behind her.

CLAIRE

No lifting. She has eyes, she can see.

Matt sighs, raises his hands, truce.

MATT

I know where we are. I'm not that dumb.

Matt takes a pull from his water tube, scans the valley.

MATT (CONT'D)

Let's take five. Then we push.

CLAIRE

No, we keep moving. Light's fading.

Adam slows, breathing heavy.

ADAM

Can we just sit... one minute?

Claire studies him, softens. She kneels beside him.

CLAIRE

Alright.

She sits with Hannah. Matt rests down, Adam drops his pack, slumps into Matt's side.

Matt pulls out sealed glucose pouches, hands them around.

MATT

No caffeine. Just trees and sugar.

They all sip, quietly taking in the view high above the world, alone but together. For a moment, peace.

CLAIRE

Wish Don was here.

Matt, silent. Claire pulls out her phone.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Ugh. No bars. No WiFi. No electricity. Nature, right?

Matt smirks, eyes still on the horizon.

MATT

No distractions. More strength, more memory, more dopamine. Real adrenaline. Fresh air. Nature.

Claire raises an eyebrow.

CLAIRE

Oh? That's why you're just sitting there breathless?

She lifts her phone.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Picture?

Matt exhales, grabs it, slowly stands, moves aside the descent. Claire and the kids pose. Click.

Matt stretches, bends back, vertebrae crack.

MATT

Oh, spicy gravy.

Adam grins, his eyes land on a violet flower behind Matt. He glances at Hannah, then...

ADAM

Dad? That purple one, can you grab it?

Matt squints around, eyes rolling.

ADAM (CONT'D)

Behind you, the flower.

Claire dusts off her hands.

CLAIRE

Alright champ, let's move.

She ruffles Adam's hair, gets up, starts walking with Hannah.

Matt turns around, he limps, stops, adjusts his prosthetic leg, now fixed, looks around, spots the flower, crouches.

Matt's fingers brush the stem. A small, victorious grin.

Behind Matt, Adam slings on his backpack. A tug. A stumble. WHOOSH. Backpack's weight pulls Adam back, he drops over the cliffside edge, soundlessly, vanishes.

Matt tucks the flower into his jacket. Stands. Smiles. Turns.

Empty space. His grin fades. Eyes scan. No Adam. Claire and Hannah walking, unaware.

SILENCE. Then, THUD. Matt flinches. Distant. Heavy. Echoes.

Matt, breath caught in his throat. Eyes frozen.

Claire stops.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Trees just keeps falling? Nature?

No answer. Claire turns. Sees Matt. Pale. Trembling. Eyes locked on the void. She looks down the path. No Adam. A beat. She gasps.

Claire stares at Matt. She doesn't speak, doesn't blink. Her breath shortens, knees buckle, she knee drops. THUD.

Hannah stands, small fingers fidgeting. Her head tilts, eyes scan the emptiness.

HANNAH

Adam?

Silence answers.

Claire lowers her head. A sob bubbles from her throat.

CLAIRE

No... no...

Matt takes a shaky step, then another. A limp in his stride. His face drained, as if blood itself abandoned him.

He sees Hannah. Still. Confused. Then Claire, collapsed. Weeping.



MATT

Claire...

Claire explodes.

CLAIRE

You fucking idiot! You idiot! What did you DO?!

Matt's lip quivers. A tear rolls down, slow.

He drops to his knees, stares at the cliff's edge. Doesn't dare move closer. Another tear. Then another.

HANNAH

Mommy?

Claire turns, pulls Hannah into her arms. Her cries deepen raw, animal, almost wordless.

CLAIRE

(to Matt)

I told you! I TOLD YOU it wasn't safe!... You loser!... My boy...

Hannah begins to cry too. Smaller. Fragile.

HANNAH

Mommy... I'm scared...

Matt leans back against the moss covered wall, sits. Hollow. Breath shallow. Soul gone.

Claire pushes up, trembling. She rips off her backpack, hurls it at Matt. WHUMP. It hits Matt, he doesn't flinch.

Hannah stands off to the side, watching her mother storm at Matt, fists clenched around his jacket.

CLAIRE

My boy is GONE! You IDIOT!

She breaks, falling against him, sobbing. Hannah inches forward, places a hand on Claire's back.

Matt lifts his head, eyes glossy. Watches Hannah turn toward the cliff, takes one step. Then bends forward.

MATT

Hannah, no. Come here.

Claire spins swiftly, grabs Hannah's little backpack, pulls her close. But Hannah squirms, eyes locked on the edge.

HANNAH  
Adam's calling me...

Claire freezes. Matt looks up. Alarm sharp in his eyes.

A faint, distant voice carries on the wind.

ADAM (O.S.)  
Hannah?... Dad? Mom?...

Matt gasps, throws himself flat, crawling fast to the edge like a soldier in a warzone. Peeks down.

A dizzying drop. Far far below, debris scattered like broken toys, Adam's backpack torn open, pieces of trail mix glinting in the sun.

Too far. Too quiet. Matt's breath catches. Then movement. Something stirs. Subtle. Almost missed.

A hand. Emerging from the cliff wall, entangled in a mess of roots.

ADAM (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
Mom?...

Matt blinks hard, leans forward. Squints.

Just behind the twisted roots, a head. Mud smeared. Barely visible. Still. But alive.

MATT  
Adam?! Oh my god. I'm here! I see you!

Claire stumbles to the edge, one hand gripping the ground. She peers down, her breath stolen from her lungs.

CLAIRE  
Adam?! Oh my God...

She covers her mouth. Eyes wide, locks at Adam's barely visible head. She can't look away.

Matt stays frozen, afraid to move, afraid that even breath might break the fragile thread holding his son between life and death.

MATT  
Adam?! Don't make any move? Are you okay?!

ADAM (O.S.)  
(Faint voice)  
My leg...

MATT  
Your leg?!

CLAIRE  
Oh my god...

MATT  
Does it hurt?!

ADAM (O.S.)  
(Faint voice)  
Yes...

MATT  
Don't worry, I see you! I'll get  
you up! Don't move!

Matt staggers upright, breath ragged.

MATT (CONT'D)  
(urgent, to Claire)  
Stay with Hannah. I'm going down.  
He's okay. I saw him.

Claire doesn't answer. Her eyes are locked on Adam below.

Matt gently taps Hannah's shoulder.

MATT (CONT'D)  
Stay close to Mommy, okay?

Hannah clings to Claire. Matt turns, limps off, ascent, then  
breaks into a run, despite the pain.

EXT. MOUNTAIN SLOPE - SHORTCUT DESCENT - DAY

Matt reaches a steep decline of loose dirt, sand, thorny  
brush. No time to think, he leaps.

Gravity takes him. He tumbles, slides, ricochets off rocks  
like a pinball, slamming into mud, twisting, flailing.

He finally skids to a stop. Covered in earth. Groaning.

Matt pushes up, panting. His prosthetic leg is twisted. With  
shaking hands, he straightens it. Keeps moving.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - DAY

Claire never blinks.

CLAIRE

Adam... Mommy's here, okay? We're  
gonna get you out.

She presses a kiss into Hannah's hair. Hannah kneels beside her.

HANNAH

Adam! Daddy's coming!

EXT. MOUNTAIN SLOPE - SHORTCUT DESCENT - MOMENTS LATER

Matt scrambles downward, slipping again, his prosthetic snaps loose.

He crashes face first into the dirt. A beat of stillness.

Face to the ground. No sound but his breathing.

He rolls over, gasping, eyes scanning. No glasses.

He paws through the muck, finds the glasses, shaky hands push them on. Blurry.

He stares at the sky a moment. Lost. Then wipes the lenses.

He spots the leg, a few meters ahead. Retrieves it. Locks it in.

EXT. FOREST TRAIL - VALLEY - DAY

Matt trudges through wild growth, mud streaked across his face.

MATT

Adam!!

Faint. From above, a voice.

ADAM (O.S.)

Dad?...

Matt rips off his glasses, wipes again, looks up. Eyes widen.

Matt's POV: Far above, Adam dangles upside down, cradled in roots. His left foot tangled in a thick snarl. Arms clutching a branch. Barely hanging on.

One bad root away from falling.

MATT

I see you! Try to keep your head  
up! And don't move your leg! I am  
coming.

EXT. MOUNTAIN BASE - CONTINUOUS

Matt rushes forward, scrambles up boulders until his hands  
slap the base of the cliff wall.

He looks up, almost vertical, smooth in places, jagged in  
others. No ledges. No grip. Just a drop.

Adam is so far. Just a silhouette swaying.

Matt glances down, jagged rocks, the shredded backpack,  
smashed water bottle, head pillows, rolled rubber mats.

He tries to climb, jumps. The cliff face crumbles in his  
hands, too steep. Too slick. Too tall.

Above Adam: Mid-level roots.

Above that: Small branches.

Above that: Rocks, cliff edge.

Above that: The cliffside trail, where Claire and Hannah  
wait.

Matt wipes his face, breathes. Then backs up, scanning the  
mountain. Calculating.

MATT

Stay calm, Adam! I'm coming!

He spins around and sprints toward the shortcut.

EXT. MOUNTAIN SLOPE - SHORTCUT ASCENT - DAY

Matt climbs, not fast, but steady. Breathing hard. Mud clings  
to his legs.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - DAY

Claire sits frozen, eyes locked on Adam. Footsteps. Hannah  
turns, Matt appears, panting.

Claire looks at him, desperate, angry.

CLAIRE

I want him back, Matt. I want my  
son back safe!

Matt doesn't answer, drops to his knees, rips open his backpack.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)  
I'm talking to you, dumb!

Matt ignores her. Hannah runs to him, throws her arms around him.

MATT  
Hey, sweetie. I'm gonna save your brother. Then we're getting ice cream. Deal?

CLAIRE  
Hannah? Get away from him.

Hannah stays, clings tighter. Matt looks up at Claire, his eyes red, raw.

MATT  
I've got an idea.

CLAIRE  
Fuck your ideas, Matt! This was your idea! Dragging my kids into this death trap!

MATT  
My kids too. I love Adam. I love Hannah. I'm not leaving him.

Claire bites her lip, trembling with rage.

CLAIRE  
Hannah...

MATT  
Sit here, baby.

Hannah settles beside the mossy rock wall.

Matt dumps the backpack. No rope. Shit. He glances at the fading sun, time's running out.

He picks a hard military flashlight. Three headlamps.

He straps one headlamp on Hannah, one on himself, tosses one to Claire. She catches it.

Glow sticks. He grabs a handful, stuffs some into Hannah's mini pack.

MATT (CONT'D)  
When Daddy asks, hand these to me,  
okay?

Hannah nods, eyes watery.

MATT (CONT'D)  
Hey... Adam's gonna be fine.

Matt approaches Claire, hands her a flashlight and a few glow sticks.

Without a word, he unclips her backpack and walks back to Hannah.

Claire watches him, tears cutting silent tracks down her cheeks.

CLAIRE  
(hoarse)  
Bring him back.

Matt nods, eyes fixed downward, avoiding hers.

MATT  
The cliff's near vertical. No  
footholds, nothing to grip. We  
can't climb. Only way is pulling  
him up.

He dumps Claire's backpack out, fingers working fast.

Matt slices off the shoulder and waist straps with his knife. Then he turns to his own military pack, same treatment.

He yanks a solid wooden rod from the frame. He pauses, glances at his boot, then at Claire.

MATT (CONT'D)  
Toss me your shoes.

Claire wipes her face, exhales shakily. She slips off her shoes, tosses them to him. Her eyes flick back to Adam's distant, dangling shape.

Matt quickly strips both her laces, then his own. He braids them together tightly, reinforcing the knots.

Hannah silently begins to remove her shoes.

MATT (CONT'D)  
No, sweetie. I got it.

He grabs a spare pair of jeans from his gear, ties the straps and laces to the pant legs like a makeshift rope. He tugs solid.

One end gets tied to the heavy backpack, the other to the wooden rod. He yanks again. It holds.

Matt lies flat on the cliff's edge, presses the rod down with his weight, and lowers the backpack into the abyss.

Claire kneels beside him, watching closely.

The backpack jerks mid air snagged.

CLAIRE

Pull it up a bit. Swing and drop.

Matt follows her lead. He swings the pack, lets it fall again, this time it clears.

MATT

Adam! Do you see my pack?! Can you grab it?

Silence.

CLAIRE

Adam?! Baby?!

ADAM (O.S.)

(faint)

No...

Claire leans over the edge, peering down.

CLAIRE

It's too short. He can't reach it.

Matt begins reeling it in, but it gets caught in branches. Claire takes over, her hands deft.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Swing wide. Watch the limbs.

Matt steadies himself.

MATT

Adam! Just hold on! Are you okay?

Nothing. Then...

MATT (CONT'D)

Show me a thumbs up.



Below, a tiny hand lifts. Thumb up.

MATT (CONT'D)

That's my boy! Stay strong, we're here!

Claire hauls the rope back.

Matt stands, barefoot, unbuckles his prosthetic leg. He strips off his hiking pants, revealing rugged shorts.

He ties one end of the pants to the prosthetic, the other to the backpack.

Tug. Secure. He nods, jaw tight.

Claire eases the rope down, hands steady but trembling.

The prosthetic leg dangles at the end, swaying like a pendulum.

MATT (CONT'D)

Adam?! That's for you, grab it and hang tight!

Both Matt and Claire lie flat on the narrow trail, faces inches from the edge, watching.

EXT. CLIFF FACE - CONTINUOUS

The makeshift rope snakes downward, bouncing off sharp rocks, brushing branches, scraping against jagged bark.

The prosthetic leg bumps, twists, catches, then drops again.

Deeper down. Adam dangles upside down, tangled in a web of thick roots.

His left foot is wedged tight, pinned between gnarled roots. His right leg kicks freely, searching for balance.

One arm clings to a thick root, muscles trembling. Dirt streaks his face. Blood mats his hair.

He lifts his head, just barely, sees it. The prosthetic leg swinging toward him.

It hits his shin, rebounds, sways again. Adam grits his teeth, breath sharp and shallow.

The prosthetic leg swings back closer this time, it brushes against his stomach and pauses.

With a grunt, Adam loosens his right hand from the root, reaches. His fingers tremble, stretch.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - DAY

Matt and Claire lie flat on their stomachs, peering over the ledge. Dirt coats their faces. Matt holds on the wooden rod.

MATT  
(calling down)  
You've got this, Adam! Nice and  
slow, just hold it!

EXT. CLIFF FACE - CONTINUOUS

Adam dangles upside down like a marionette caught mid twist. His right arm stretches up, shaking.

He sees the prosthetic leg swinging just inches above him.

With a grunt, he pulls on a root with his left hand, his body arches, straining his right hand just brushes the prosthetic foot.

It slips away. He tries again. Pulls harder.

This time, his fingers graze the metal edge, slip, then hook. Clutch. He's got it.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - CONTINUOUS

Matt feels the sudden tug through the wooden rod. He digs his elbows in, anchoring himself.

MATT  
(urgent, steady)  
I've got you, buddy. You're good.  
Hold tight.

Claire edges forward, just enough to catch a glimpse of Adam's face, mud caked, eyes wild but alive.

CLAIRE  
Oh God, Adam! That's it, baby! Hang  
on! Just hang on!

MATT  
Don't rush! Keep that leg locked  
in. Use the rope to lift, not your  
foot, don't move that leg! You hear  
me?

EXT. CLIFF FACE - CONTINUOUS

Adam manages a shaky thumbs up.

He clutches the root with his left hand, the prosthetic leg with his right. He draws in a breath, tight, burning. Then he pulls.

Dirt rains down. His body lifts inch by inch, shaky, off balance, but rising.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - CONTINUOUS

Matt grunts, straining as he pulls the makeshift rope.

Hannah watches wide eyed from behind, frozen.

Claire leans out dangerously, eyes locked on the drop.

CLAIRE  
(breathless)  
He's got it... I can see him!

Matt braces, kneels, heaves.

SNAP. The rope jerks violently.

Matt stumbles backward, crashes onto the path. Claire screams, eyes down at the edge.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)  
Adam?! Adam?!

No answer. Matt scrambles to his feet, limping closer.

MATT  
Adam! Talk to me!

Silence. Claire clutches the dirt, sobbing.

CLAIRE  
No, no, please, God, no...

Matt scans the cliffside, squinting, then sees it. A hand slowly rising, trembling.

A thumbs up.

Claire spots, exhales like she's been underwater.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)  
Oh my God. Thank you.  
(shouts)  
Are you hurt, sweetheart?!

Adam gives a weak wave.

MATT  
(grinning, relief)  
That's a no.  
(yells down)  
You're doing amazing, Adam! Stay  
with us, we're bringing you up! And  
hold your head up!

Matt reels in the rope, what's left of it. The end dangles  
limp and frayed. His prosthetic leg, his pants and backpack,  
gone.

He stares at it. Grits his teeth.

MATT (CONT'D)  
Fuck!

Claire turns to him, alarmed.

CLAIRE  
What?--

Before he could answer. Matt loses his footing, his good leg  
slips off the edge.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)  
Matt!

She lunges, grabs his jacket just in time, he's hanging on  
the edge.

HANNAH  
Daddy!

Hannah rushes in, grabbing a fistful of jacket. The fabric  
stretches.

CLAIRE  
Push with your leg! Come on, Matt!  
Help us!

Matt swings an arm up, grabs a rock. His other arm claws at  
the dirt.

With a fierce growl, he pulls himself back onto the path. He  
collapses on his back, panting.

All lay down. Silent. Just wind and breath. Matt doesn't wait. He scrambles to his feet, grabs his hiking sticks. Snatches Claire's.

Dropping to one knee, he puts the sticks together. Rolls them with the last strip of cloth, wraps them tight. Pulls hard. Knots it. Again.

It's solid now, sturdier. A makeshift staff for balance and reach.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Matt, don't do something stupid.

Matt looks up, eyes clear, burning.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

He's my son. I want him safe.

MATT

So do I. I'm heading to the cabin. Sani might be able to help, get medics, firemen, whatever he can get.

(beat)

Adam's foot is stuck tight. He just has to hold on. Keep him talking. Keep him awake. This spot is safe. If anything, use this rod.

Matt hands over the wooden rod. Claire nods, silent. Matt turns to Hannah. Sun slowly disappears.

MATT (CONT'D)

Hannah?

Matt extends his hand, palm open. Hannah places the glow sticks into it, her fingers trembling.

He cracks one snap, a surge of green light pulses to life. It reflects off Hannah's wide eyes.

Matt cracks a couple more, shakes them hard, then crawls toward the edge. He leans over, eyes scanning the drop.

With careful aim, he tosses the first glow stick.

It bounces off a branch, spins, and catches between a tangle of roots, a soft, eerie glow now marking Adam's outline in the dark. Then throws the remaining sticks.

MATT (CONT'D)  
(To Claire)  
Keep eyes open. If he moves, throw  
more.

Claire nods.

Matt clicks on his headlamp. The beam cuts through the shadows.

He glances at Hannah, turns on her head lamp, winks.

Matt plants the makeshift staff into the dirt. It holds.

He places the staff to his armpits, shifts his weight onto it, steadying himself up.

Matt takes the flashlight from Claire, angles it toward the moss covered wall, wedges it into a crevice. Click.

The beam floods the narrow path, illuminating Claire and Hannah.

Matt watches it for a second, making sure it holds. Then he switches it off.

MATT (CONT'D)  
Only use it if you need to.

Without looking back, he starts walking, the threaded sticks bracing his weight.

Claire watches him go, her face tight with fear and hope.

Hannah clutches on a few remaining glow stick, eyes fixed on her father as he disappears into the fading light.

EXT. MOUNTAIN SLOPE - SHORTCUT DESCENT - NIGHT

Matt removes his headlamp, tucks them into his jacket, his glasses into a small box. Exhales. Covers his head. He jumps.

He slides. Rolls. Bounces. Fast free fall.

EXT. WOODEN CABIN - NIGHT

Cabin lights on. Sani opens the door, reaches his battered old truck.

SANI  
Patel? The bag.

Patel steps out, tosses a duffel into the truck bed. Sani climbs in. The engine growls to life, leaves.

XOLO, the dog, barks and circles Patel, nose to the dirt.

EXT. MOUNTAIN BASE - NIGHT

Headlamp beam slices through the dark, sweeping across scattered gear. A snake slithers off into the brush.

The light catches Matt's prosthetic leg, still tied to a shredded pair of hiking pants.

Matt reaches, kneels, yanks the knot loose. The beam glints off the metal blade, bent, warped. Useless.

He looks up, the faint glow of green light marks Adam's silhouette above.

MATT  
(under breath)  
Hang on, kid. I'm coming.

He straps on the busted prosthetic leg anyway. Winces.

Grips his makeshift staff tight, he limps forward, low to the ground, fast and steady.

EXT. WATERFALL POND - NIGHT

Matt staggers, soaked, chest heaving. His headlamp cuts through mist and spray.

The world is pitch black, no moon, just the roar of the falls and his own breath.

He looks up. Only darkness.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - NIGHT

A halo of green glow sticks faintly illuminates the trail.

Hannah sits, clutching her knees.

Claire kneels near the edge, two glow sticks by her side, eyes locked downward.

CLAIRE  
(shouting, trembling)  
Adam?! Matt's gone for help!  
They're coming, baby, just hang on!  
(MORE)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)  
Mommy's here, you hear me? Keep  
your head up!

She flicks on her headlamp. Eyes narrow, searching, a movement.

Adam's hand, still gripping the root.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)  
(whispers)  
You're holding on... Good boy.

Thunder cracks. Claire jerks, eyes wide. Rain pours.

EXT. FOREST TRAIL - NIGHT

Matt pushes forward, hat soaked, limping hard but fast. Rain lashes down.

His foot slips, he crashes to a knee, grits his teeth, pushes up. Keeps going.

EXT. SLIPPERY SLOPE - BOTTOM - NIGHT

Matt's light slices through the sheet of water rushing down the mossy slope.

Matt stops. Stares up. Breath ragged. He plants a hand. Slippery. No grip.

Then he throws himself forward, grunts, claws at moss, slides backward. Catches himself. Gasping.

Plants his makeshift staff. Uses it for leverage. He pulls himself upward, inch by inch.

Rain soaks him. Mud clings. Halfway up. THUD. SLIP. He falls, slides fast, slams the staff into a rock, stops hard. Hangs there, frozen. Soaked.

His prosthetic leg, pops off, skids to the base.

Matt watches it slide away. Stares up again. Breathes.

He tightens both hands on the staff. Stands up. One leg.

Matt balances, trembling. Pulls the staff free. Slips. Drops to a knee. Doesn't slide.

On one knee, soaking wet, he pushes forward with the staff. Crawls. Climbs. Cautious.



EXT. SLIPPERY SLOPE - TOP - NIGHT

Matt grabs a branch, yanks himself over the edge. Flops onto the path. Lays there. Breathing. Alive.

MATT  
Just please stop. Please.

Thunder, rain still pours.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - NIGHT

Thunder growls. Rain lashes down.

Glow sticks cast a sickly green hue. Hannah huddles under a rain poncho, shivering.

Claire, soaked to the bone, crouches at the edge, headlamp cutting through the dark.

CLAIRE  
(shouting down)  
Adam! Tuck your nose, lift your  
chin, stay with me, baby!

She peers into the void. Adam's hand slips from the root. She gasps. The hand clamps back.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)  
(strained)  
You're strong, Adam. Just hold on.  
Hold on!

The rain softens. A beat. Silence.

Claire drops her head in the mud.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)  
(quiet, breaking)  
Thank you... thank you God...

She exhales, peels off her soaked jacket, now just a t-shirt and shorts clinging to her skin.

EXT. FOREST - UNMARKED TRAIL - NIGHT

Rain continues. Matt limps, braced on his makeshift staff. Every step is a grunt. A drag. A breathless battle.

He pushes past a bush, loses balance, tumbles sideways down a slope, hard rolls to a stop.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Matt scrambles upright, dazed. The trail gone. Nothing but trees. Shadows. Rain.

His beam sweeps the dark. A rope dangles in the distance, swaying, familiar.

He stumbles toward it, grabs it, pulls hard. Branches above groan, resist. He yells. Pulls harder. Nothing.

He tries climbing. Hands slip, he crashes down to his knees. Matt, roars to the sky.

MATT

Why?! Why always me?!

INT. WOODEN CABIN - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Rain hammers the roof. Patel hums, flips an egg into a pan, steam hissing, face momentarily lost in the rising smoke.

Xolo barks from the corner. Patel grabs the pan, turns toward the door.

INT. WOODEN CABIN - RECEPTION - NIGHT

Patel, holds up the pan. Xolo barks again, growls. He reaches the huge back door.

EXT. WOODEN CABIN - BACK - NIGHT

Warm light spills from the windows. Patel steps out with the pan in hand. He pauses.

Matt emerges from the dark, mud-caked, drenched, limping hard on his makeshift staff.

Xolo darts out, barking joyfully. Circles Matt. Tail wagging. Tongue out.

Patel drops the pan.

INT. WOODEN CABIN - RECEPTION - NIGHT

Matt slumps into a wooden chair, Patel holding him up.

PATEL

Are you alright? What happened?

Matt, heaving, rasps, gestures vaguely for water. Patel sprints to the kitchen. Returns with a cup.

Matt gulps it, spilling half down his chest.

MATT

More.

Patel rushes back. Hands him another. Matt drains it. Xolo sniffs Matt.

Patel's eyes trail down, muddy shorts, no leg.

PATEL

(staggered)

What happened? Where are the others? The kids?

Matt's gaze lifts, sharp.

MATT

Where's Sani?

PATEL

(confused)

He left. Drove to town, to get new tires for your truck.

Matt shakes his head, trying to make sense of it.

MATT

(urgent, louder)

What?... Sani? Where is he?

PATEL

(signs)

City. He's not here. Went to buy tires, your truck, remember?

Matt sinks back, breath shallow.

MATT

Sani's in town?...

Patel nods.

PATEL

Tell me?! what happened?!

MATT

Call 911. Your phone. Now.

Patel snatches his phone. Dials. Waits. Nothing. He shakes his head.

Matt grabs it. Checks, no bars.

MATT (CONT'D)  
No signal? Anyone nearby? You got a  
satellite phone?

Patel nods no, overwhelmed.

PATEL  
(shouting)  
What happened?!

Matt locks eyes with him.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - NIGHT

Mist. Glow sticks flicker green. Claire, kneeling near the edge, soaked, arms wrapped around herself. Her headlamp flickers.

CLAIRE  
Adam, baby, just hold on. Don't  
sleep. You hear me?

Hannah lays on the moss wall. A dozen of fireflies blink in and out.

HANNAH  
(whispers)  
Fairies...

She reaches out slowly, one lands on her hand, glowing softly.

INT. WOODEN CABIN - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Patel moves fast. Opens a dusty backpack, tosses in water bottles, granola bars, leftover chocolate. No hesitation. Just instinct.

INT. WOODEN CABIN - SHED - NIGHT

The flickering bulb hums. Patel yanks open a shelf drawer. Tools clatter. He grabs a flashlight, a multi tool, keeps scanning, no rope.

Matt limps in behind him.

MATT  
Even something short. Just strong  
enough to hold weight.

Patel shakes his head, nothing. They exchange a look. Bolts outside.

EXT. WOODEN CABIN - BACK - NIGHT

The rain's eased. Everything drips.

Patel spots a clothesline wire stretched between trees. He rushes over, rips down soaked clothes, hacks the wire with his pocket knife.

Nearby, Matt eyes a coiled garden hose. He tugs too tight. He leans into it, grits his teeth, yanks harder.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - NIGHT

Hannah sleeps, curled against the mossy rock wall.

Claire soaked to the bone, eyes locked on the cliff's edge.

CLAIRE

You're doing great, Adam! Stay with  
me, baby!

A beat. Claire glances at Hannah. Protective. Exhausted.

CRUNCH. FOOTSTEPS.

Claire snaps alert. Two FLASHLIGHTS bob down the trail, slow, deliberate.

She stands, hits the wall mounted flashlight Matt installed. A powerful beam floods the path.

The other lights pause. Then one starts moving forward again.

CLAIRE, shivering, arms crossed over her chest. Her wet T-shirt clings to her pregnant belly. Her legs tremble.

Out of the darkness emerge Two men, BEN and KANE, early 40s. Hikers. Drenched, but oddly calm. Packs strapped. Faces too clean.

Claire instinctively steps back, shielding herself with one arm.

BEN

Hey... Sorry to bug you. We're  
totally lost. Missed a turn after  
base camp. I'm Ben, this is Kane,  
my business partner. This trail  
lead anywhere?...

CLAIRE

(nods, quiet)  
Hey, Yeah. It's...  
(MORE)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)  
it's a private route. Old native  
trail. Leads down. You're on the  
right track.

Ben takes her in, eyes lingering a second too long on her  
face, her chest, her belly, her bare feet.

Claire avoids his gaze, stares down the cliff.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)  
Do you have rope? My son's down  
there. We need help pulling him up.

Kane steps to the edge, peers over. He sees the faint glow  
sticks far below.

KANE  
That him?

Claire drops to her knees beside him, points into the void.  
Ben eyes Claire's back.

CLAIRE  
Yes. Adam. He's stuck.

Ben drops down next to her. Too close. Claire shifts away,  
uneasy.

BEN  
(long beat)  
Shit...

CLAIRE  
Do you have rope?

Ben doesn't answer. Just keeps looking at her. Something  
hungry in his eyes.

BEN  
You two up here alone?

KANE  
Three.  
(to Claire)  
Your daughter?

Claire nods quickly, voice firm now.

CLAIRE  
Yes. And my ex-husband's on his  
way. Should be close. Can you help?  
Please?

KANE  
(cliff again)  
That drop's near vertical. We've  
got no rope. No signal. It's not  
safe. We need to get out to the  
trail head, then get help. It's...

Kane eyes on her cleavage. Claire looking down the trail.

Ben keeps his eyes on Claire, drifting from her soaked shirt  
to her thighs. She notices. Stands up. Folds her arms  
tighter.

Silence grows heavy. The air sharp with dread.

EXT. FOREST TRAIL - NIGHT

Under the hanging rope from earlier, Patel and Matt pull down  
with everything they've got.

XOLO barks excitedly, tail wagging.

They strain, nothing.

Patel signals Matt to hold it steady. Climbs halfway up the  
trunk like a monkey.

MATT  
Little more... Right there.

Patel saws at the knot. One cut. Two. SNAP. He falls straight  
onto Matt.

MATT (CONT'D)  
(grunting)  
I got you, I got you.

They roll off each other, muddy, panting.

Matt adjusts his glasses, breath steadying. Patel coils the  
rope tight, focused.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - NIGHT

Ben and Kane rise slowly. Their eyes stay on Claire. She  
backs up instinctively, body tense.

BEN  
Hey. We'll help. We can get him  
up... Right, Kane?

He doesn't take his eyes off her.

KANE

Yeah. Sure. We'll help.

Claire doesn't like how close they're getting. Something shifts in the air. Off. Predatory.

BEN

But first... Maybe we make a little trade?

Claire stiffens. Her hand subtly reaches back toward the wall.

CLAIRE

No, thank you. My ex is nearby. He's on his way. I don't need anything.

Ben glances behind, only black trees and silence. Hannah sleeping.

BEN

We're not here to hurt you. Just...  
Lighten the mood. You're divorced,  
right? Single mom. No harm in  
some... You know, highschool  
campfire memories.

Kane looks back at the cliff, then grabs Ben's arm, pulls him slightly back. Whispers, but not quietly enough.

KANE

(whispers)

We dump her down, slip and fall.

Claire hears. Her pulse spikes. She lunges, grabs a nearby wooden rod, swings fast.

CLAIRE

Back off! He's military. If he sees  
you touch me, you're dead.

Ben catches the pole mid air, rips it from her hands, tosses it over the cliff.

KANE

(stepping in)

Should've just said yes.

Kane lunges, Claire knees him in the groin. He stumbles, gasping.

She grabs a rock, throws, hits Kane in the face.



Ben grabs Claire by hair, Yanks her back.

CLAIRE  
(yelling)  
Hannah! Run!

Hannah bolts upright, sees her mom struggling.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)  
Go! Get help! Go!

Claire kicks, claws, trying to scream again. Hannah runs away.

Ben closes her mouth. Claire bites his hand. He screams.

EXT. SLIPPERY SLOPE - BOTTOM - NIGHT

Matt and Patel slide down, landing hard but steady. Mud splashes.

Matt spots his bent prosthetic leg half buried in the muck. He grabs it, straps it on with a grunt.

Patel looks up the slope. Xolo stands frozen at the ridge, ears perked, growling low.

PATEL  
(whistles)  
Xolo!

Xolo doesn't move. Something out there's caught his nose.

With a sudden snarl, he bolts, leaps over Patel, disappears into the dark underbrush.

PATEL (CONT'D)  
No! Xolo!

Patel whistles again, sharper. No response.

MATT  
Xolo! Get back!

PATEL  
(sighs)  
Chasing rabbits!

MATT  
What?!

PATEL  
He's ex-K9. Still thinks he's on  
duty.

Matt nods.

PATEL (CONT'D)  
Ex-K9 dog.

MATT  
I get it. K9 dog. Yeah. Ex-k9.

Patel gives a half smile. Matt slaps his back.

They press forward, urgency picking up in their steps.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - NIGHT

Claire on the floor, t-shirt torn, crying. Kane sits above  
her.

CLAIRE  
Please! Please! Please!

Kane slaps, spits on her.

KANE  
Fucking bitch.

Claire screams. Ben, tries to remove her shorts. Kane unzips  
his pants.

KANE (CONT'D)  
Just pull it!

Ben fastens his hand. A stone hits his head. THUD. Another  
stone hits Kane's head.

Hannah throwing stones.

KANE (CONT'D)  
Throw her down.

CLAIRE  
No! Hannah run! Run! Run!

Hannah runs, Ben chases her. She screams.

Hannah stumbles, slips on the slick rock, thuds to the  
ground.

Ben lunges, snatches her by the arm.

Suddenly, a blur of black and tan bursts from the dark. Xolo.

The dog clamps down on Ben's neck, yanking him back with a vicious snarl.

Ben screams, thrashes, blood sprays in the moonlight.

Kane, frozen, stares wide eyed at the chaos.

KANE

Shit!

He scrambles for a rock, hurls it. It misses.

Xolo drops Ben, turns growling, lips peeled back at Kane.

Kane rips his hiking stick from his pack.

Xolo charges.

Kane swings, misses. Xolo lunges, teeth sinking into his hip.

KANE (CONT'D)

AHHH!

Ben, staggering, blood on his collar, grabs his backpack, slams it into Xolo.

The dog tumbles, lands hard but bounces back, teeth bared, steady.

Hannah screams. Claire, breathless, scrambles to her side, shields her with her body.

HANNAH

Bite him, Xolo! Bite him!

Ben, wheezing, slams his fist into the dog's muzzle.

Xolo stumbles, regains footing, crouches low, snarling.

Ben and Kane, bleeding and panting, back up slowly, side by side.

Claire clutches Hannah. Both terrified.

EXT. MOUNTAIN SLOPE - SHORTCUT ASCENT - NIGHT

Patel, with a bag, a rope rolled on his shoulders.

HANNAH (O.S.)

Daddy!

Matt freezes.

MATT

Hannah?!

Patel hurls the rope and bag aside, bolts uphill. Matt snatches them up, follows him.

EXT. WOODEN CABIN - NIGHT

The old truck stops. Sani steps out. Gets back, pulls the duffle bag from the trunk.

SANI

Patel?!

Silence.

Sani whistles. Nothing.

SANI (CONT'D)

Xolo!

Sani eyes suspicious, gets inside the cabin.

INT. WOODEN CABIN - RECEPTION - NIGHT

Sani enters, drops the bag, strolls into the kitchen, comes back to the back door.

SANI

Patel?!

EXT. WOODEN CABIN - BACK - NIGHT

Sani eyes the totem, looks up the mountains, then around, sees the clothes on the floor, clothesline cut, turns aside, garden hose gone.

He stares at the trail.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - NIGHT

Xolo snarls, blocking Ben and Kane.

Kane reaches for his bag. Xolo lunges, he swings hard, thwack.

Xolo stumbles but holds ground, growling deep.

Ben raises his own bag to strike, pauses.

A flashlight darts through the trees toward them.

KANE  
Push 'em now!

Ben leaps. Claire, trembling, shields Hannah, heart pounding.

HANNAH  
Bite, Xolo! Bite them!

Xolo blocks, snarls again, but then--

PATEL (O.S.)  
Hey!

Claire jerks around. Patel emerges, breath heaving.

He clocks the scene, the men, Claire's torn t-shirt, the dog.

PATEL (CONT'D)  
Xolo?

He steps forward. Claire grabs his arm.

CLAIRE  
No wait. They tried to kill us.

Patel's eyes flare. He pulls a knife, screams.

PATEL  
Come on! Come on!

Behind, Matt bursts up the path, gasping.

The flashlight beam hits Ben and Kane, they back off, melt into the darkness.

Xolo growls, alert but still.

Matt reaches, Hannah runs into Matt's arms, shaking.

HANNAH  
They hit Xolo... they hit Mom too.

Matt freezes.

MATT  
What? Who?

Patel quickly takes off his shirt, wraps it around Claire's shoulders.

He crouches, whispers to Xolo, pulls a small treat from his pocket.

Claire, shaking, slumps against the moss wall, silent tears falling.

Matt kneels beside her. Hannah lays beside Claire.

MATT (CONT'D)  
Hey. What happened?

Claire can't meet his eyes.

CLAIRE  
Save him. Just please save Adam.

MATT  
I will... You okay?

Claire hesitates, keeps mum.

MATT (CONT'D)  
Claire, talk to me, what happened?!

She breaks, clutches him.

CLAIRE  
Why do you care?! You idiot!

Matt holds her. Claire cries.

MATT  
Fuck, I'm sorry Claire. This is on me.  
(softly)  
Goddammit... Are you hurt?

Claire bites her teeth, inhales.

CLAIRE  
It's all because of you! You retard!

She hits, slaps Matt, sobs again.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)  
He was a fine little boy, you took him here, changed his fate! I have to go through this crap...

Matt eyes her cheek, red.

MATT  
What happened?

CLAIRE  
Move away from my face!

Claire pushes Matt. Patel crouches at the edge, cracks a glow stick, snap, tosses it down.

A faint green glow reveals Adam, sprawled below.

PATEL  
Adam?! Patel! I'm here!

Matt drops beside Patel, out of breath.

MATT  
Adam! We are getting you up!

Patel flicks his flashlight, catches a glimpse of Adam's hand, limp but clutching the earth.

He tightens the rope around his chest. Looks at Matt.

PATEL  
(Hand signs)  
I go down, you hold the rope,  
tight, I put the rope on Adam. I  
say pull, you pull. Ok?!

Matt nods.

MATT  
Ya, I hold the rope, you go to  
Adam, I pull you both.

They glance at the makeshift rope- Garden hose, swing cord, clothesline wire.

Matt grips it, wraps it twice around his forearm.

Patel, flashlight in his mouth, begins the descent, feet on branches, fingers searching rock holds.

Matt braces, digging in. Suddenly, another hand joins. Claire. Silent, strong.

Hannah watches, huddled back near the moss wall.

Down below...

PATEL (O.S.)  
(Faint guttural)  
Pull, pull.

MATT  
Pull! Pull!

Matt and Claire haul, inch by inch.

MATT (CONT'D)

Ahh!

They pull up hard. Matt's prosthetic leg snaps, buckling.

Matt collapses, the rope yanks back, burns his hand, clutches it tight, doesn't let go.

Claire falls to her knees, straining.

Claire and Matt. Pull One. Pull Two. Then Three, four, five, six... A hand on the ledge, it's Patel's. They haul him over.

But no Adam.

CLAIRE

Where's Adam?

MATT

Patel?

Patel, gasping, holds up a finger, wait.

Claire snatches the flashlight from him, shines it down. Adam still lies there, barely moving.

PATEL

Adam? Leg tight. His leg tight.

Matt nods.

MATT

You couldn't reach?

Patel nods no fast.

MATT (CONT'D)

What?

CLAIRE

Patel?

Patel points his left leg.

MATT

Leg! His leg?

Patel nods yes. Then sticks his both hands, then tries to separate it, holds it together.

PATEL

Tight.



CLAIRE

Tight. His legs are tight?!

Patel nods quickly, chest heaving.

He snatches his knife from the dirt, clenches it between his teeth.

Without a word, he crawls back toward the edge.

Matt yanks him back roughly.

MATT

Hold up. You're too heavy to haul... Come with me.

Matt grabs his staff, limps toward the shortcut, followed by Patel.

Xolo stays posted, eyes locked on the dark trail.

EXT. MOUNTAIN SLOPE - NIGHT

Matt and Patel reaches the descent, scans the area.

Spots a long, heavy log.

They shoulders it. Matt drops it. Struggles to pick it. Grunts. They roll the log.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - NIGHT

Hannah nibbles on a chocolate bar.

The dog stands stiff, ears perked.

Matt and Patel appear, sweat soaked, rolling a massive log.

Claire helps lay it near the wall.

Matt picks up the dented food tin, starts digging, on the path floor.

Patel joins in, carving with a jagged rock.

They work in silence. Determined. Focused.

A beat.

The pit's deep enough. Matt and Patel slam the thick log upright into the hole.

Matt yanks the rope tight around it, knots secure.

MATT

Let's see if it reaches. Then you go.

Patel nods.

Matt lowers the rope.

Claire crouches, flashlight beaming, rope sways just above Adam's hips.

CLAIRE

Adam? Can you reach?

A faint twitch, Adam tries. Fails.

Suddenly, Xolo growls. Loud. Sharp. Then barks, wild.

Everyone freezes.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

It's them.

Matt shoves Claire behind him, staff raised. Patel grips his knife. Claire pulls Hannah close.

Xolo's barking intensifies, then, silence.

MATT

Xolo?!

A low growl rumbles from the dark.

Then CRASH.

A hulking BLACK BEAR stomps into view, blood streaking its snout.

Matt looks back at Hannah.

MATT (CONT'D)

Run!

Claire scoops Hannah, bolts up the trail.

The bear charges. Xolo lunges, claws tear, jaws snap. A vicious struggle.

Patel and Matt scream, to scare the bear off.

The bear latches onto Xolo's leg, hurls him.

Xolo crashes at Matt's feet.

The beast looms, steps over the dog.

Matt and Patel backpedal.

The bear rears up, grabs the wooden log, rips it free, flings it off the cliff. The rope sails down with it.

Matt swings his staff, landing solid hits. Patel pelts rocks. The bear snarls, maddened.

It lunges at Matt. He falls, bear on top. Matt jams his staff across it's jaws, holding it off.

Patel kicks its snout hard. Matt slams the staff into it's face again.

The bear reels back.

Patel yanks Matt to his feet. But too late. The bear turns, charges again. Grabs Matt, hurls him into a rock.

Matt hits hard. Head snaps back. Vision blurs, he searches for Hannah.

Through blurred vision, MATT sees a massive silhouette human figure stumbling toward him, arms outstretched, unnatural. A guttural noise.

Matt blinks, goes into darkness.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH. DREAM - NIGHT

Matt's eyes flutter open. Silence. He's flat on his back. Cold earth beneath. Breath visible.

A carved totem stands at the cliff's edge, it's eyes hollow, watching.

Nearby, Patel and Xolo sleep, curled close. Claire and Hannah lie tucked against a mossy wall, still.

A frayed rope stretches from the totem disappears over the cliff.

Stillness. Then, a jolt. Rope tightens.

Matt scrambles to it, starts pulling. SNAP. The rope yanks from his hands. He stumbles back, heart pounding.

He crawls to the ledge. No Adam. Just dark. Empty.

Then, a flash of blue light.

A tall blue figure, four hands, leaps up from the abyss, wearing lion's head as a crown, draped in lion's skin, black eyes locked on Matt. Inhuman. Silent.

Matt scrambles backward, breath shallow. The figure slowly points upward.

Matt follows the gesture, sees the Orion constellation, bright and still.

He looks back down. The figure's gone.

A voice, calm, familiar.

ADAM (O.S.)

Dad? I'm safe. I made it up.

Matt turns, hopeful. But. A creepy grinning native woman stares back. Her smile too wide. Too knowing. Matt jerks.

She lunges, drags him down, pinning him. Her breath on his face.

Matt shuts his eyes. A soft voice.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Matt? Matt?

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH. PRESENT - NIGHT

Matt's eyes blink open. Claire's face hovers upside down.

CLAIRE

Matt?

He groans, sits up, blinking, scanning. No totem. No rope. No Patel. Just damp night air.

MATT

Adam?

He crawls to the cliff's edge, voice raw.

MATT (CONT'D)

Adam!

Footsteps crunch. Sani appears, holding a carved wooden bottle.

SANI

Here.

Matt turns, disoriented. Recognizes him. Takes the bottle, gulps.

He looks around again, calm, too calm.

Then spots Hannah, bundled in a sleeping bag nearby. There is Xolo, laying far from her.

MATT

Hannah?

SANI

She's safe. Let her sleep.

MATT

Adam fell. Down the cliff.

Sani rests a hand on Matt's shoulder.

SANI

I know. Patel's gone up to base camp for help.

Matt looks up the sky, sees the orion constellation bright.

SANI (CONT'D)

He'll be back.

Matt nods slowly. Breath heavy.

MATT

The bear?

SANI

It's gone, won't come back. You rest.

Sani nods, walks over to sit beside Hannah.

Claire kneels beside Matt.

CLAIRE

He's not moving...

Matt lowers his head. Silent beat.

MATT

He's fine.

Claire shakes her head, tears spilling.

EXT. BASE CAMP - NIGHT

Tents in a half circle glow faintly under string lights. A dying campfire at the centre.

Children's laughter fades into the tents, red, green, and blue domes zipped shut.

A larger canvas tent, marked 'Supervisors'. A folding table outside.

Glow sticks mark a trail toward the trees, portable toilets just out of sight.

Quiet. Still. Silent.

Patel approaches, bare chest, a white cloth slung over his shoulder, a crumpled paper clutched tight.

A THE SUPERVISOR in his 50s, stands out far, guarding, torch in hand. The beam catches Patel. He raises a hand, breath ragged.

The supervisor steps forward, wary. Patel hands him the paper, urgency in his eyes.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - NIGHT

Matt lies near the edge, staring into the dark. Claire sits beside him, silent tears streaking her face.

He gently reaches for her hand, she pulls away.

MATT

Claire... He's okay. We'll get him back. What's going on with you?

CLAIRE

(quiet, bitter)

I hate you! You brought us here to suffer. You ruined everything.

Matt, silent.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

(voice rising)

He's out there, poor boy, maybe dead, and it's your fault. You dragged us into this!

Hannah stirs. Sani strokes her hair, watching quietly from a distance.

MATT

He's alive. And he's my son, our son. I'm not leaving without him.

Claire turns sharply, eyes wild.

CLAIRE

He's not your son.

MATT

Look... I love him. I'll get him back, I swear. Just, please don't take them from me.

CLAIRE

You dragged us here, Matt. You always do. You break things and expect us to just keep going.

MATT

You think I wanted this? I came back for you. For them.

Claire glares at him. Her voice trembles, but it cuts deep.

CLAIRE

You don't get to play hero. You don't get to pretend none of this is on you.

Matt snaps. Voice low at first, then rising.

MATT

You!... You, you cheated on me. With him. Don, that prick. You think I don't know? You think I didn't feel it the second I walked through that door?

His voice rises, sharp, but cracked from the weight.

MATT (CONT'D)

I was out there killing myself for us, working my ass off to build a future. Saving every damn cent for Adam, for Hannah. For you. And you were in bed opening your legs for him. Laughing. While I was out there wondering if I'd even make it home.

Claire's breathing gets shaky. She doesn't respond.

MATT (CONT'D)

You call me broke? Retard? You think I didn't see it in your eyes every time I came near? You think I didn't hear it in your silence? I gave everything I had, and you threw it away like it meant nothing. You broke me, took my kids, and you are enjoying there, his richness and money.

Matt's breath ragged. His eyes red.

MATT (CONT'D)

You don't get to blame me. Not after what you did. You think I'm the monster? Look in the mirror, Claire.

Claire tears.

CLAIRE

He is not your son.

Matt sighs, drops back on the floor, exhales. A beat.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

(soft, broken)

He's Don's.

Silence. Matt doesn't flinch. Just stares, hollow. Claire lowers her head, tears falling.

She looks back up. Matt's gone. She blinks, scans the space. Empty.

Sani rushes over, leans toward the cliff's edge.

SANI

(sharp)

Matt?!

Silence.

CLAIRE

(choked)

No... no, Matt... I'm sorry...

Hannah watches, wide eyed. Claire stumbles back, reaches Hannah, holds on tight.

HANNAH

Mommy? Where's Daddy?



The main flashlight dims, flickering out.

Sani clicks on his torch, eyes sweeping the shadows.

SANI

Matt?!

EXT. CLIFF FACE - NIGHT

Dark. No headlamps. No prosthetic.

Matt dangles by one arm, clutching a thin branch, muscles shaking. Below, a faint green glow from a cracked glow stick.

Adam dangling upside down, passed out.

Matt scans.

Just beneath Matt: mid-range roots.

Lower: Adam's leg, tangled in thick vines.

Matt grits his teeth. Releases the branch. Drops. Catches the mid roots, but they're slick.

He slips. Catches himself on the thick tangle below.

Now inches above Adam. He swings one leg into the root tangle, locks himself in, bends upside down.

Adam's face, pale, still.

MATT

Adam?

No response. Panics.

Matt reaches down, grabs a fistful of Adam's shirt, pulls, grunts, struggling to lift him closer.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - NIGHT

Patel reaches Claire, grins, shouts.

PATEL

They're coming! Coming down!

Sani turns, slow and tense.

Patel scans the area, no sign of Matt. His eyes land on Claire, clutching Hannah, both trembling.

Patel's grin fades. The weight hits.

The supervisor reaches, nods at Sani, bends down to the cliff edge.

SANI

Medics?

THE SUPERVISOR

They will be here.

(Squints down)

What's he doing?

EXT. CLIFF FACE - NIGHT

Matt clutches a root, hauls himself upright.

He spots Adam's foot, tangled deep in the knotted roots.

With one hand anchoring himself, he reaches down, grabs Adam. Strains.

Braces Adam's back against the cliff. Digs into the roots, yanks the leg free.

Adam slips. Matt shoves him tight against the wall. Grits his teeth.

He shifts, bends, slides Adam onto his shoulders. Secure.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - NIGHT

The supervisor's flashlight blazes to life.

Silhouettes a battered Matt climbing, Adam limp over his shoulders.

SANI'S POV: Matt grips the roots, ascending slow, deliberate.

SANI

Matt?! Hold! Don't come up yet!

Move to the left!

Matt edges left.

SANI (CONT'D)

Right! Your right!

Claire peers down, eyes widen at the sight of Adam on Matt's back.

EXT. CLIFF FACE - NIGHT

Matt steadies himself, shifts right. Nears the end of the roots.

Looks up, light spills across the stone. Shadows move above.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - NIGHT

Sani, the supervisor, and Patel moves faraway aside, drop to their knees near the edge.

The nearby edge is slanted, not vertical, but slick.

Flashlights sweep the slanted cliff, hides Matt and Adam beneath.

SANI  
(Shouts)  
Matt?! You're close, climb up!  
Slow. Steady!

EXT. CLIFF FACE - NIGHT

Matt breathes deep. Steels himself.

He climbs, grit in every move. Arms trembling, one step at a time.

He reaches the mid roots. Slips once, recovers. Keeps going.

He eyes the above branches, grabs one. It snaps in his hand. He lunges catches another. It holds.

He dangles for a beat. Then pulls. Hard. Keeps climbing.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - NIGHT

Sani, the supervisor, and Patel edge toward the cliff, but the angle blocks their view.

Sani eyes the supervisor.

SANI  
Grab my leg.

The supervisor nods, clamps both hands around Sani's leg.

Sani lowers himself, body sliding down the slanted stone.

SANI (CONT'D)  
Matt! I can't see you, talk to me!

MATT (O.S.)

I'm here!

Sani twists right, listens, gestures. The supervisor shifts, dragging Sani along the ledge.

Finally, Adam's head breaks into view, straining.

Sani stretches his arms out.

SANI

One more push, Matt! Hold onto him!

Matt grunts, jerks his shoulders, Adam's hand and head rolls onto the slope.

Matt braces Adam with his head, lets go one arm at a time, pushes him higher.

Sani can't reach, fingers graze Adam's jacket collar.

Suddenly, Patel slides in fast, locks onto Adam's armpits.

Sani grabs Patel's leg.

PATEL

Pull!

SANI

Pull! Now!

The supervisor strains. Too heavy.

Claire rushes in, grabs Sani's leg, pulls.

One by one, they're dragged back, until finally, Patel hauls Adam over the ledge.

Claire screams, races in.

CLAIRE

Adam!

She cradles him, sobbing, lays him gently near the wall. Adam is out cold.

Hannah runs over, eyes locked on her brother.

The supervisor checks for a pulse.

THE SUPERVISOR

It's faint. We've gotta get him to base camp, now.

Sani stares down the steep, angled ledge, heart racing.

SANI

Matt?!

Patel peers into the darkness. Nothing.

Claire scans the shadows.

Hannah clutches Adam's hand, looking around, scared.

CLAIRE

Where is he?

HANNAH

Daddy?

A tense beat.

Patel slides down again, Sani grabs his legs, bracing. The supervisor grabs Sani's from behind, anchoring the line.

Patel leans out, can't see the bottom, edge is too far.

PATEL

Matt?!

Patel inches forward.

SANI

No, Patel! Don't! Too far!

Claire's eyes widen, something's wrong.

PATEL

Matt?!

Silence. Patel, chin down, slides back.

Suddenly, a hand slaps the edge, Matt's. Patel's head lift, lunges, tries to grab it, just short.

He turns back, frantic.

PATEL (CONT'D)

Down!

SANI

No! No!

Sani sees the hand, tightens his grip.

SANI (CONT'D)  
 Come on, Matt!  
 (beat)  
 Pull up! Pull!

Sani and the supervisor grunts, struggles.

EXT. CLIFF FACE - NIGHT

Matt dangles on the slanted ledge, barely holding on.

His right hand claws the edge. Left hand clutches a thin, bending branch.

His amputated leg braces against a rock, the other hangs free.

Matt grunts, jaw clenched.

He lets go of the branch, swings his left hand up, scrambling for grip.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - CLIFFSIDE PATH - CONTINUOUS

Patel lunges forward, grabs Matt's wrist.

Sani slides with Patel, grabs Patel's foot.

The supervisor drops, slides, Claire dives, catches his foot.

Now all of them, sprawled flat on the slanted cliff, laying, hanging on like a human rope.

PATEL  
 (shouts)  
 Pull! Pull him!

THE SUPERVISOR  
 Pull us back, he's slipping!

Claire strains, trying to pull them all, but it's too much.

Far away, lights beam, CLAIRE's eyes widen, TWO WOMEN, mid 40s, and a group of SCOUT GIRLS, 15-16 year olds, rush in, headlamps blazing.

They drop a first-aid kit, beam their lights toward the cliff.

The scout girls rush in, grab the supervisor's other leg, forming a human chain, pulling.

The women kneel by Adam, start treating him.

Matt groans, tries to lift, Patel's grip slips on his left wrist.

Matt's right hand, thumb missing, struggles to find grip.

PATEL

Matt!

He grabs Matt's right wrist with both hands, it's slick sliding.

Below, the supervisor's feet hit solid ground.

The scout girls collapse, some sliding back. Gravity pulling others down.

Claire, still gripping tight, cries out, barely holding on.

Patel locks eyes with Matt, he's fading, slipping.

Patel, a sharp WHISTLE.

Xolo, the dog, leaps onto the slope, teeth latching onto Matt's rugged shorts.

It growls, digs in, pulls with all its might.

CLAIRE

Come on Xolo!

All pull together, grunting, straining.

Matt is yanked up, over the edge, collapsing onto the narrow trail with the others.

They lie there, bodies heaving, breath ragged.

Matt pants, spent.

Sani and Patel exchange a look, then a smile. Victory.

Patel sits up, eyes Matt, then Adam, a faint smile, still catching his breath.

PATEL

(softly)

Xolo?

Patel whistles. Nothing.

Sani rises, peers over the cliff. Stillness. No sign.

Matt scrambles over to Adam, who lies limp, surrounded by the women and scout girls.

MATT

Adam?

(To the women)

Is he okay?

LADY #1

Blood rush. He needs care, now.

The supervisor lifts Adam, starts moving.

The others follow, Claire supported, Hannah cradled by the girls, walking away up the path.

Patel whistle's again, no response, stands frozen, tears forming.

Sani places a hand on his shoulder.

SANI

(softly)

It was his time. He did his job.

Matt limps over, hugs Patel, eyes glassy.

MATT

(choked)

Thank you.

Sani pats Matt's shoulder.

The first light of sunrise breaks the horizon.

Matt breathes, gazes the sun.

A beat.

Matt and Patel, picking their belongings from the floor to a bag.

Matt eyes at the bear's dry foot print on the mud, he spots a purple flower aside, plucks it.

EXT. BASE CAMP - DAY

Bright morning sun.

Crowded with FIREMEN, COP and MEDICS.

A few Medics exit a tent.

Cops and Medics check on Claire, Hannah, and Matt.



Patel and Sani watch as a group of firemen approach, carrying a small stretcher. Xolo lies still.

A fireman looks at Patel, nods no. Somber.

Patel's face breaks. Tears stream.

Matt holding a stick, joins Sani, pulling him into a hug.

MATT

Thank you... For saving Adam.

Sani shakes his head.

SANI

You saved him.

Matt looks at him, eyes full.

MATT

No... The shoelace. You tied his shoelace tight. That's what saved him.

SANI

The spirits Matt, the spirits.

Sani gives Matt a gentle pat, then turns. Looks toward Hannah, who stares back at them. He smiles.

INT. TENT - BASE CAMP - DAY

A faint beep. The slow drip of a glucose IV.

Adam, pale and bruised, inhaler mask over his mouth, lies propped up on a cot. A needle taped to his hand.

His eyelids flutter awake, barely. Still.

Beside him, Claire sits stiff, hands clenched in her lap.

Hannah leans on her mother's side, eyes never leaving Adam's face.

The tent flap rustles, Matt and Sani step in. Dust streaked. Hollowed out.

MATT

(soft)

One hell of a hike, buddy.

Adam's lips twitch into a faint smile. It's weak. But it's real.

Sani steps closer. Kneels.

SANI  
(gentle)  
You walked through the valley...  
And death stepped aside.

Sani brushes Adam's damp hair back, whispers something inaudible.

From his pocket, he pulls a small feather, lays it gently in Adam's palm.

A quiet beat. Sani nods once, stands and walks out without another word.

Matt lingers. He reaches into his jacket, pulls out the purple flower, crushed slightly, but intact.

Matt holds it out. Adam blinks at it, then grins, turns to Hannah, offers it to her.

She smiles, receives it like a treasure.

Claire's eyes lift, she looks at Matt.

Matt meets her gaze, his face unreadable.

He turns to Adam, holds the stare a moment.

His breath trembles. He exhales, nods softly, and leaves.

INT. HOSPITAL EXAM ROOM - DAY

SUPER: *Days later.*

Matt sits calm but inward.

Dr. Kapoor, sat down in front of Matt, tightens the straps on a new prosthetic leg, carefully aligning it to Matt's knee.

Jacky lounges in a chair nearby, crinkling a bag of chips, mid-chew.

MATT  
...And they checked Claire thrice.  
Thrice. The fetus' fine. But she  
insisted to check once again, just  
to be sure. Wow.

JACKY

All Don said was sorry? That's it? Man, they both lied in court, he should hand you a penthouse, cash and a Ferrari with that apology.

MATT

I asked for time. With the kids. No drama, no noise. Just, regular days.

JACKY

I'd have asked for a Lambo and naming rights to the company. You gotta level up your negotiating game, bro. Sue him.

Dr. Kapoor glances up from the prosthetic, his focus razor sharp but silent. Jacky notices, shrugs.

JACKY (CONT'D)

So... Adam? How'd he take it?

MATT

(calmly)

Hugged me like always. Like nothing's changed.

JACKY

But did it? For you?

Matt doesn't answer right away. His eyes lock on the leg, testing its weight with a shift.

MATT

Still his dad. Can't change the past.

JACKY

Hannah?

MATT

Yeah... She took it better than I thought. Maybe didn't fully process, but--

JACKY

No, I mean. Is she?...

Matt eyes Jacky.

MATT

Mine. I have the results.

Jacky holds the look, then nods once. Quiet acceptance.

Dr. Kapoor steps back, inspects his work. Smiles.

DR. KAPOOR

New hero, new leg. Alright, Captain  
Cliffhanger, your new ride's ready.  
You can run, jump, hike, just maybe  
skip the part where you fly off a  
mountain next time. And no more  
fighting bears.

Dr. Kapoor pats Matt's shoulder, exits with a grin.

Matt smirks.

JACKY

Come on, Iron Man. Let's roll.

Matt nods once. Stands slowly on the new leg, steadier than expected.

They head for the door.

EXT. WOODEN CABIN - BACK - DAY

A simple pine box sits on a stone slab surrounded by tall pines.

Draped on an old faded K9 police vest, patches worn.

Xolo's collar rests on top.

A fire pit glows nearby. Smoke rises like spirit into sky.

Sani, in silence, burns sage. The smoke drifts gently over the box.

Jacky and Matt stands still, Hannah beside Matt holding a small bunch of flowers.

Patel, eyes red, clutches a folded photo of Xolo in uniform.

Sani chants in his native tongue, soft, steady.

SANI

(softly, to Xolo)

You've walked your path. You've  
guarded. You've loved. Rest now.

A beat. Everyone stands still. Nature listens.

Matt steps forward, kneels. Places his hand gently on the pine box.

Hannah places the flowers on top. One slips through the gap in the wood, landing quietly.

A hawk screeches above, circling once.

Patel walks forward, kneels, tears falling, places an old tennis ball by the box. It rolls slightly, then settles.

Patel cries, Matt places a hand on Patel's shoulder.

Sani pulls a match, lights the cedar logs at the base of the box.

SANI (CONT'D)  
His spirit joins the wind, the  
trees, the stars.

Sani steps back, looking up.

SANI (CONT'D)  
He was sent here. And now he  
returns.

They all watch in silence. Not sadness. Something closer to reverence.

In the distance, wind whistles through the trees. Leaves rustle.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY

A soft ding of the door bell. Steam rises off fresh mugs. Calm.

The low hum of espresso machines. Light chatter.

NEWS on the mounted TV.

On TV - the male news anchor, at the studio desk.

MALE NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.)  
Celebrating our local father, Matt  
Patterson for his courageous  
efforts during the dramatic Eagle  
Creek rescue day before yesterday-

On screen: A still of Matt, tired but alive.

MALE NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)

-The two suspects, Ben Spencer and Kane Vance, business partners, still remain at large. Both are wanted for attempted rape and assault, and are believed to have fled deeper into the woods...

On screen: A picture of Kane and Ben, together in suit.

A BARISTA glances up, turns down the volume.

In the corner, the same elderly couple, 70s, playing chess.

The old woman, focused, calmly advances her white pawn to the eighth rank.

OLD MAN

Queen?

She nods no. Smiles.

The old woman replaces the pawn with a white knight.

The chess board: The black queen moves, stalks the center. Two white rooks sit adjacent, vulnerable.

She doesn't defend them.

One. White knight moves.

Black queen takes the first white rook.

Two. White bishop moves.

Black queen takes another rook.

The black queen is now threatening the white knight.

Three. White knight moves.

OLD WOMAN

Checkmate.

The old man blinks. Leans back. A Knight-Bishop mate. The old woman stirs her tea, smirks.

EXT. DEEP FOREST - DAY

Still. Dense. Mist curls between trees. Birds flocking. A faint growl breaks the silence.

INT. CAVE - CONTINUOUS

Dark. Damp.

Two lifeless bodies slump inside, Ben and Kane.

Torn clothes. Blood splattered over the stone.

A black bear, slow, rips through one of the corpses. Bone crunches under its jaws.

Flies buzz. Wind howls faintly outside the cave.

FADE OUT.

**TEXT OVER BLACK:**

*"Nature may be ruthless, but so is a father who refuses to let go. In the end, the wild does what it must... and so did he."*

THE END