

AVALANCHE

Written by
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FADE IN

EXT. JACKIE'S BUILDING - DAWN

A grey dawn in winter. Outside a tidy, converted brownstone in Brooklyn, a Subaru Outback idles next to a massive pile of plowed snow.

NOAH - 35, tall, dressed warmly in winter climbing clothing - leans against it, waiting. His breath is visible in the air.

Just then, the door of the building opens and out walks JACKIE, 40, strong and wiry. She carries a backpack the size of her entire body.

JACKIE

Hi..Noah?

NOAH

(nervous, but hiding it)

Hey. Here let me get that.

(nervous chuckle)

I guess you don't need to borrow gear.

JACKIE

Oh yeah - I don't mess around.

A little too eager, he grabs the large pack and shoulders it, bringing it to the car. Jackie watches him - she's nervous as well.

They both get in and drive off.

INT. SUBARU OUTBACK - DAY - LATER

Noah drives. Jackie sits. No music, just silence. It's awkward.

Noah keeps the car in the middle lane - he's getting passed by many cars going faster.

JACKIE

You're a, uh...very safe driver.

NOAH

(getting her irony)

Yeah, OK - I drive a little slow sometimes. I'm just trying to be safe. The roads are coated.

JACKIE
Safe is good.

The silences settles over them again. It's still awkward.

NOAH
So...are you always this quiet?

JACKIE
What? No - no. Well, sometimes.

NOAH
So why now?

JACKIE
I don't know. I guess...
(she grins)
This *is* a little weird.

NOAH
(agreeing)
Well this isn't exactly *normal*.

JACKIE
(noticing his ring)
You're married?

NOAH
Yeah. She hates the cold. But she's fine with me going, for the most part.

JACKIE
Does she know I'm a girl?

NOAH
(grin)
Yeah. The requisite jokes about adultery were made.

Jackie smiles as this settles.

NOAH (CONT'D)
What about you? Boyfriend?

JACKIE
Ha. No. Not anytime soon. Too much work. Which is why I need to go climbing. I just don't get out anymore.

NOAH
You didn't get any other responses?

JACKIE

A few - but most were from like macho douchebag types. Looking for more than a climbing partner.

Noah laughs.

JACKIE (CONT'D)

You were the only normal one.

NOAH

Well I appreciate that. Have you posted for partners before?

JACKIE

(laughs)

No. I didn't even post this - my friend did it for me. I didn't even know this sort of thing was possible until he told me. I'm kind of forcing myself to go back into the mountains.

NOAH

Oh...did something happen?

Jackie's eyes narrow.

EXT. AFGHANISTAN MOUNTIAN RANGE - FLASHBACK - DAY

TITLE CARD: Afghanistan. 2006.

Jackie, in winter-proof flak gear, holds a camera. She crouches in the snow, watching SEVERAL SOLDIERS - armed to the teeth - walk up a trail.

They move as one, slow, silent and patient. Guns at the ready.

Jackie photographs them as they move up the trail, toward the high mountain pass.

END FLASHBACK. Back to:

INT. SUBARU OUTBACK - DAY

JACKIE

Sort of. I was in Afghanistan.

NOAH

Oh! Oh, I didn't realize. What, uh...like unit or whatever were you with?

JACKIE

I was embedded with the Army Rangers. Combat photographer.

NOAH

(VERY impressed, but unsure how to respond)
Wow...I had no idea. You just said photographer on the phone. That's.. uh...that must have been intense.

JACKIE

Yeah.

NOAH

Sorry, we don't have to talk about it.

JACKIE

Maybe someday.

This settles in the car.

NOAH

Well regardless, it's a good way to find a partner. I actually met my best friend on that website.

JACKIE

God it's like internet dating, isn't it?

NOAH

It's *exactly* like internet dating, except you actually might get killed.

He glances, proud of his joke. Jackie doesn't get it. Noah backtracks.

NOAH (CONT'D)

I mean, from climbing! It might kill you. Climbing ice, you know?

JACKIE

(smiling)
Yeah, it's not exactly sane, is it?

NOAH

Which is why we have to go online
to find other insane people, right?

Jackie laughs. They continue on their way, driving past a sign:

"Adirondack Northway - 1/4 Mile"

EXT. ADIRONDACKS

The car drives through the snow-covered wilderness. Jackie looks out the window at the ice-choked gullies, swaddled in the late-afternoon light.

EXT. THE INN - NIGHT

They pull into the parking lot of a tavern-like building - a hostel/bar type place.

INT. THE INN - NIGHT

Jackie sits in a chair in the small, cramped room: one queen bed, tiny bathroom and hob burner.

Noah walks in.

NOAH

I'm sorry. This is the last one
they have.

JACKIE

Well I've been in tighter quarters
with married men, so I can handle
it if you can.

NOAH

Yeah...uh, sure. I mean - I promise
I won't...uh...Please don't worry.

Jackie laughs at Noah's petrified look.

JACKIE

Relax. I'm not going to seduce you,
and you're not going to try to
cheat on your wife. Let's just go
grab some food and get some sleep.

Noah smiles, relieved, and follows her out the door.

FADE TO:

INT. THE INN - DAWN

An alarm goes off. Noah jolts awake and sees Jackie boiling water at the stove.

JACKIE
Morning.

Noah looks scared.

NOAH
You OK?

JACKIE
Yeah.

NOAH
I didn't...

JACKIE
(smiling)
Snore? No. You were fine.

Noah breathes a sigh of relief.

JACKIE (CONT'D)
You worry a lot, don't you?

NOAH
Yeah, I guess. I'm commanded to by
the Talmud.

Jackie laughs.

JACKIE
Well I hope you're calmer when
you're climbing. You're the
experienced one here, you know?

NOAH
(a grin)
That's the one thing I DON'T worry
about.

He jumps out of bed and starts gathering gear.

EXT. CHAPEL POND PARKING AREA - DAY

The Subaru labors through the snow into a barely-plowed parking area next to a winter wonderland. Several feet of snow blanket the thickly-forested wilderness.

Jackie and Noah get out. Jackie looks over the surrounding area, drinking it in.

The parking lot is perched over a drop-down to a vast, frozen lake.

On the other side of the lake, several ice-choked gullies snake their way down a sheer cliff face which towers over the lake, several hundred feet high.

Jackie is impressed.

JACKIE
This is beautiful.

NOAH
Well it's not the Hindu Kush,
but...you know.

JACKIE
Yeah and it's close to home.

NOAH
(joking)
And you don't have to worry about
militants, huh?

Jackie's face contorts. Noah notices and quickly walks back.

NOAH (CONT'D)
I'm...I'm sorry. I didn't...

JACKIE
(recovering)
It's OK. Really.

Noah, a little unnerved, moves to the car to pull out the gear.

JACKIE (CONT'D)
Hey. Don't walk on eggshells, OK?
That will help.

Noah nods and starts repacking the gear.

Jackie's eyes rest on the thickest river of ice that snakes its way up the cliff.

JACKIE (CONT'D)
(apprehensive)
Is that what we're climbing?

NOAH
 (smiling)
 No. That's a little advanced for
 your first time.

JACKIE
 So where are we going?

Noah points to the left of the lake, where a long but lower-angled slope rises from the left bank of the lake through the trees.

NOAH
 Chapel Pond slab. It's not too
 hard, but it's long, so it's a good
 intro.

The both sit down on the back of the car and begin to change their boots.

EXT. ADIRONDACKS - CHAPEL POND SLAB - BASE

Carrying massive packs, Noah and Jackie arrive at the base of a low-angled slab of ice which rises into the sky. They are both out of breath and sweating in the cold air.

They drop their packs and begin to unload - Noah takes out two thin ropes and a huge sling of ice screws.

NOAH
 I think they got some snow here
 last night.

JACKIE
 That's not good, right?

NOAH
 Just means we'll have to be
 careful. Might be more snow than
 ice to climb.
 (wry)
 You ever been in an avalanche?

Jackie ponders as we:

CUT TO:

EXT. AFGHANISTAN MOUNTIAN RANGE - FLASHBACK - DAY

The small unit of soldiers is almost at the top of the slope. High mountain walls surround them to the left and right, so close together that the team can only walk two abreast.

Huge tongues of snow and ice dangle above them, clinging precariously to the top of the cliffs.

Jackie - toward the rear of the short column - takes a photo of the line.

One of the soldiers points to a spot at the top of one of the walls and speaks to the team, quietly.

SOLDIER

That's where they were seen. Be ready.

Jackie takes a photo of the soldier pointing. Her camera shutter resounds in the narrow, snow-filled canyon.

She lowers it and resumes the march.

END FLASHBACK. Back to:

EXT. ADIRONDACKS - CHAPEL POND SLAB - BASE

JACKIE

I've seen them.

NOAH

We'll be careful.

Noah begins tying a knot in the ropes.

NOAH (CONT'D)

(sarcastic)

You remember how to belay, right?
Just like rock climbing!

Jackie smiles, reassuring him, and expertly takes the ropes to clip in.

EXT. ADIRONDACKS - CHAPEL POND SLAB - LATER

Snow falls in a steady curtain.

On a high ledge of ice, Noah - tied into the wall by three ice screws - runs the rope through his device, bundled up against the snow.

The rope snakes over the ledge, down about 50 feet to Jackie, who clings to the ice, axes in both her hands.

She moves consistently, but not fast. Noah pulls the ropes in silently as she arrives at the ledge and pulls herself onto it.

JACKIE
(wincing in pain)
God, my fingers are KILLING ME.

NOAH
(sympathetic)
Screaming barfies. It's what happens when you grip hard with frozen fingers. Relax your hold on the axes.

JACKIE
(grimacing)
Easy for you to say.

NOAH
Can you go on? We've got a long way to go.

JACKIE
(glancing up, her voices shakes a little)
Yeah. Isn't this snow a problem though?

NOAH
I'll be careful. I won't go further if there's avalanche danger.

Jackie doesn't look convinced, but she stomps out a stance and gets ready to belay as Noah clips in, getting ready to lead up. Resolution sets in her face as she struggles to calm her nerves.

Noah climbs up, leading on, and quickly disappears from view over a bulge in the slope.

EXT. AFGHANISTAN MOUNTAIN RANGE - FLASHBACK - DAY

The team is almost at the top of the pass. Snow has begun to fall - lazy, large flakes.

The air is thin, making their breathing laborious, but the tension among the soldiers is thick, and Jackie notices.

Sensing something as a team, they slow their pace and watch the top of the cliff walls - the snow and ice formations are closer now, and more menacing.

They are almost at the top, and the snow falls more heavily, blanketing them and restricting their vision..

Suddenly - an EXPLOSION! And a piercing scream sounds.

VOICE

JACKIE!

END FLASHBACK...

CUT TO:

EXT. ADIRONDACKS - CHAPEL POND SLAB - PRESENT

Jackie jolts awake to hear:

NOAH

JACKIE! TAKE!! FALLING!!!

Suddenly there's a HUGE ROAR as tons and tons of snow come rocketing off the slope, engulfing her. She instinctively hauls down on the rope, locking it off.

She looks up into the onslaught...

CUT TO:

EXT. AFGHANISTAN MOUNTAIN RANGE - FLASHBACK - DAY

The explosion reverberates between the cliff walls as they see sparks and fire flash from the top. As if choreographed, the snow and ice blocks that hang above them detach and descend.

Jackie is yanked backward as a huge ice block lands in front of her. Somehow, she snaps a photo, just as the soldiers ahead of her on the path disappear in a cloud of snow.

She feels herself pulled down the mountain even further, unaware of what's happening. The sound of muffled gunfire sounds as she's pushed back down the slope.

END FLASHBACK.

CUT TO:

EXT. ADIRONDACKS - CHAPEL POND SLAB - PRESENT

Back in the present, the sensation is the same - snow and ice falling around her. Here, however, there's nowhere for her to run.

She huddles, trying to make herself small, as snow crashes everywhere.

CUT TO:

EXT. AFGHANISTAN MOUNTAIN RANGE - FLASHBACK - DAY

Some of the soldiers return the gunfire, but it's ineffective. Jackie regains her senses and starts running back the way they came, joined by 4 other soldiers.

They gulp air - unable to run full speed at this altitude - but adrenaline fuels them as they make their retreat.

Suddenly she trips and goes TUMBLING down the mountain, rolling faster and faster, gaining momentum - and all goes black.

END FLASHBACK

EXT. ADIRONDACKS - CHAPEL POND SLAB - PRESENT

She opens her eyes to find herself still being inundated by snow. Suddenly, something REALLY huge WHOOSHES past her, and a nanosecond later she is YANKED toward the anchor, the rope taught.

The anchor holds. In one instant, all is quiet again.

She jolts up, realizing. She looks over the edge of the ledge to where the rope snakes down.

JACKIE
(screaming at the top of
her lungs)
NOAH!!!!

EXT. AFGHANISTAN MOUNTAIN RANGE - FLASHBACK - DAY

Jackie's eyes flutter open to see the world flowing by - she's moving fast, as if she's flying. She tries to lift her head up, but it's immobilized.

She looks up and sees four soldiers carrying her - she's on a gurney. The sound of a helicopter grows louder.

END FLASHBACK

EXT. ADIRONDACKS - CHAPEL POND SLAB - PRESENT

Jackie listens intently, straining to hear. Then:

NOAH
(muffled voice)
I'm...I'm here.

Her shoulders slump in relief.

The voice sounds weak, but she can make it out. Noah speaks in measured tones, trying to stifle his budding panic.

NOAH (O.S.) (CONT'D)
I think...I think the best thing to do is lower me. I only have another 20 feet to the ground.

JACKIE
COPY!

She starts slowly letting the rope out of her device until a muffled cry comes up.

NOAH (O.S.)
Stop! That's good!

Jackie stops.

NOAH (O.S.) (CONT'D)
You can take me off belay!

JACKIE
(shouting to be heard)
OK! OFF BELAY!!

Jackie unhooks the rope, then quickly starts arranging her own descent.

Leaving the ice screws, she clips in and rappels quickly down the ice.

EXT. ADIRONDACKS - CHAPEL POND SLAB - BASE

Jackie arrives at the base, landing next to a slumped over Noah. His leg and his arm look bent, and there's a streak of blood from his temple to his chin.

JACKIE
Jesus...

NOAH
(weak)
The snow was no good. I was turning around, trying to bail and climb back down. Then the slab broke...

His eyes shut, groggy - he's obviously had a bad hit. Jackie looks at the cut on the side of his head.

NOAH (CONT'D)
Big block of ice got me.

JACKIE
Can you walk?

NOAH
Not without help...I think I did my
leg too.

Jackie looks at the twisted leg.

JACKIE
(maintaining her calm)
OK, we'll set that. I'll help you
hike out of here. We can get cell
service from the car, right?

NOAH
(grinning)
Yeah. Looks like I chose the right
partner. You done this before?

Jackie pauses before answering.

JACKIE
Not exactly. It's been done for me.

She moves under him, gently, and lifts him slowly. They take
it one step at a time, following their tracks out.

INT. HELICOPTOR - FLASHBACK

Jackie lies in the gurney, attended to by a doctor. Five
soldiers sit in the chopper with her. They speak in hushed
tones.

SOLDIER 1
Walter makes ten. That's it.

SOLDIER 2
We should never have been up there.

SOLDIER 1
Yeah. Fucking intelligence guys
have a lot to answer for.

Jackie lets her eyes drift shut as the chopper continues its
flight.

END FLASHBACK.

EXT. CHAPEL POND PARKING AREA - DAY

An ambulance idles at the trailhead, next to the Subaru. Noah - immobilized - is loaded onto it. Jackie looks on.

NOAH
(to Jackie)
Keys are in my pack.

JACKIE
I'll follow you to the hospital.

NOAH
(a catch in his voice)
Would you...call my wife? Just tell
her what happened?

Noah nods and looks at her. His eyes brim with tears as he mouths the word: "Thanks."

Jackie gives him a tight, reassuring smile. The ambulance doors close. She's left alone.

She looks out across Chapel Pond at the ice-choked gully that Noah called Chouinard's. Her eyes linger.

She goes to the car and reaches into her pack. In the deep recesses of one of the pockets she pulls out a battered photograph and gazes at it:

CLOSE UP ON PHOTOGRAPH of a soldier, palpable fear in his eyes, about to be engulfed by a massive cloud of snow that lingers 5 feet above him.

Jackie's eyes brim as she looks at the photograph. She puts it into her jacket and gets in the car.

FADE OUT.