

# 'Fall' Film Review: Heights-Driven Thriller Successfully Maintains Its Grip

This suspended-suspenser plays to audience acrophobia

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Like a provisions-packed knapsack, a good deal of emotional backstory gets shoved into the first half-hour of "Fall" before it traps two female climbers 2,000 feet above the ground in a remote stretch of desert for the rest of its running time.

Will that friendship be tested? Of course. But the true signal that co-writer (with Jonathan Frank) and director Scott Mann has his thrill-hungry audience's needs in mind is that before adventuring besties Becky and Hunter can even get to the base of the TV tower they intend to scale, they lock eyes with a carcass-gnawing vulture, who gets a righteously gnarly, ominous close-up.

In other words, you're in good talons with "Fall," a better-than-average B-movie corker that's almost like a corrective these days to the behemoths that spend hundreds of millions of dollars on mayhem only to bludgeon us with

exhilaration-free, numbingly digitized peril. If you long for the sweaty-palmed giggling inspired by Harold Lloyd hanging off a high-rise's clockface or Tom Cruise on the harness-necessitating side of the Burj Khalifa skyscraper, you will likely fall for "Fall."



Cruise's "Mission Impossible" character Ethan Hunt even gets a shout-out in Mann's and co-screenwriter Jonathan Frank's screenplay, invoked as an adrenaline god by daredevil vlogger Hunter (Virginia Gardner, "Runaways"), on a mission to snap her pal Becky (Grace Caroline Currey, "Shazam!") out of a yearlong bereavement following the death of Becky's husband Dan (Mason Gooding).

The movie's "Free Solo"-esque prologue, set on a sheer mountain face, depicts that ill-fated climbing accident, witnessed by the two women. Twelve months later, Becky has curled inward into the drinking, crying, suicidal life of a shut-in, ignoring the emotional pleas of her worried dad (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), until bouncy, sassy Hunter shows up at her door with her version of a self-help scheme: Secretly

ascending a disused TV tower for the one-year anniversary of Dan's death, Becky will then be able to get past her grief, while Hunter, armed with a drone and a selfie stick, gets to create a lot of sexy-dangerous YouTube content.



The screenplay is chockful of platitudes about facing death, living life, confronting fear, moving on, letting go, blah blah blah, but that dialogue matters less than whether Currey and Gardner are a believable Gen-Z team of self-gratification junkies looking like they're having fun doing something crazily reckless. From that angle, the duo's energetic performances suffice, carrying an authentically warm and teasing camaraderie into the California desert, past that No Trespassing sign, up hundreds of rusted rungs, and onto a tiny circular platform that threatens to become the site of Becky's and Hunter's last selfie when the tower's uppermost ladder separates from its loose bolts and strands them.

Mann's previous hackwork in the grizzled-male action genre ("The Heist," "Final Score") won't prepare you for how dedicated he is to avoiding scared-damsel vibes and

centering instead the pair's fearlessness and smarts. (Panic isn't absent, mind you, just saved for when appropriate.) "Fall" can then focus on maximizing its one-location two-hander, toggling between what's outlandishly fun about enduring this particular hazard (which is based on a real TV tower, one of the highest structures in the US) and what's believably clever in the details of how Becky and Hunter try to save themselves.



On the characterization front, things can get clunky — one revelation is eye-rollingly predictable, and a third-act twist feels cribbed from a lot of unreliable-narrator movies. But viscerally the movie delivers — the site-specific peril is suitably unnerving when the stuntwork, effects, and cinematographer MacGregor's more height-intensified shots are in synch, and the rescue hacks these tech-savvy women devise from their available items (phones, binoculars, shoes, drone, selfie stick, tower light, push-up bra) are enjoyably crafty enough to earn the movie's one self-satisfied bit of dialogue: "That's some MacGyver shit."

And don't forget those feathered harbingers of doom. This may be the first movie to apply the Chekhov's gun rule to vultures, a portent sure to satisfy the more horror-minded ticket buyers, not to mention anyone else eager for the kind of back-to-basics survival excitement "Fall" refreshingly serves up in this dreary age of apocalyptic popcorn emptiness.

*"Fall" opens in US theaters August 12.*