

“Ice Ridge” by Chris Mohr

A cold breeze, eight degrees south of freezing, caressed the California canyons and mountains of Mono County near midnight. The moon was absent, the road dim. On an empty pass in the high country, a Honda SUV rounded a curve. Its headlights cut a small patch of bright through the darkness. Pete was one of a trio of athletic mid-twentysomethings in the cab. He scratched the crown of his blond head, an itch brought on by the cold, dry air, as he managed the hilly bends from the driver's seat. This wasn't the first time Pete had made this trip to Mammoth. He'd done it many times but never before by this route. No reason to take the main roads to Mammoth tonight when they could shave fifteen minutes off through this pass and arrive at their rented condo near the slopes in half an hour.

The three friends laughed and joked more for the enjoyment of each other's company and anticipation of a snowboarding weekend than the quality of anyone's wit. Tyler was a thin, tall man with a light complexion who wore an orange baseball cap at all times except when substituting it for a snowboard helmet. He serenaded Dana with the classic kid song “Wheels on the Bus Go Round and Round” from the passenger seat.

Dana, a medium height brunette who often wore a smile, giggled from the back. "Not again with that song!"

Pete chuckled. Tyler tended to get loopy when he was short on sleep. Pete needed to tone down some of Tyler's dopiness because he was growing weary himself after a long week at work. "This is why I was trying to find a radio station earlier," Pete said.

Tyler mock-frowned and responded in an affected, kid-like whine. "Are we there yet?" Pete ignored this, clicking a radio preset in the hope of finding music to distract Tyler. An indistinguishable choppy song pulsed through the speakers. Pete tried another. Pure static. The next was far more static than music. Tyler complained, this time with an exaggerated adult whine. "When are you gonna get this fixed?"

Pete hadn't had time to get the aux-in jack fixed on the stereo, so phone and digital device libraries were out of the question. The travelers were so far from a central town that the radio had been a bust for most of the last hour. Pete thought of another less desirable option and pressed the radio band button on the stereo console. "Let's see if AM works," he said. Muffled static dumped out of the speakers.

Tyler mocked the choice in a goofy crawl. "I got a feeling it's not gonna work." Pete clicked on numerous signal locks, but all he could tune were distant undulating voices that were nearly impossible to discern.

Dana dove in too, mocking with a stiff old-timer voice, "I'm turning into my dad. I listen to AM radio." Tyler cracked up.

Pete was stung by these backhanded remarks but tried to stay cool. "Wow, I'm gonna pull right over guys," he said.

Suddenly, the SUV hit ice on the road. Tyler grabbed the dashboard in reflex to stabilize himself. Pete could see the rearview mirror from the corner of his eye and noticed Dana lean hard into the back seat, gripping the seatbelt under her opposite shoulder. He felt confident as he jerked the steering wheel

and regained control quickly.

"Oh hey, eyes on the road, man!" Tyler said.

Pete nodded calmly. "I got it." Dana relaxed and leaned forward. The vehicle rumbled as the tires hit a pothole in the road.

Tyler was a bit shaken. "You want me to take over?"

Pete remained confident. "I'm good for now."

Dana laughed. "He didn't think he'd be driving at midnight, yet here he is, driving at midnight," she said. Tyler chuckled. Pete gripped the steering wheel firmly, his jaw tightened. He couldn't believe Dana had just tossed that "joke" at him. She knew better than to bring up their past. They had agreed to never talk about it again. He applied more pressure to the pedal. The engine's RPMs steadily rose to oblige.

Tyler noticed Pete's sudden silence. "Is something wrong, buddy?" Pete stared ahead, quietly processing what—if anything—to say, all the while taking notice of Dana through the rearview mirror. The road ahead was a straightaway, so he felt confident applying more pedal pressure. The Honda's RPMs rose even higher. Tyler glanced back at Dana, and she shrugged. He looked at Pete. "Yeah, better to keep your eyes focused," he said.

Pete knew that calling Dana out for raising his ire might create an awkward rift for the rest of the drive, maybe even the trip. He couldn't hold it in, though. The urge to defend himself was too strong. He did try to pull himself back from a full blow-up on Dana. It was hard. Dana's reference to the embarrassing incident last year made him feel she was priming him to look a fool this weekend. "I knew it," he said under his breath. Tyler looked confused. Dana seemed to be confused as well. Pete raised his voice, his anger rising. "You didn't let it go." A new dark mood evaporated the jovial atmosphere of a minute ago.

Dana played along as if she wasn't following. "What?"

Pete was sure she knew what he was talking about and shook his head. He stared through the windshield into the dark beyond the headlights. "Your side-jab," he said.

Tyler frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Pete looked directly into the rearview mirror and eyed Dana dead-on. Her brow furrowed. This made him angrier. She was pretending that she had no awareness of her guilt. His eyes shifted back to the road. "She knows," he said. He looked in the mirror again to catch her reaction.

Dana leaned further back into the seat and rested her hands on her thighs. "No, I don't. Tell us."

Glaring at her through the mirror, he tried hard to keep his cool. "Anne," he said.

Dana leaned forward with hands elevated, her face half-obscured in the mirror after shifting. Her pitch and volume rose. "How does this come up!"

Pete stared in disbelief at her. "You're little Conan jab. He was on when—"

"Are you kidding me!" Dana interrupted. "I didn't see what was on TV!" The SUV hit a bumpy pothole as she finished. The Honda rumbled for a second. Tyler gasped. Pete looked to the road in reflex, but his mind fixated almost entirely on Dana and her slight.

"Whoa! Keep your eyes on the road, man!" Tyler said. Pete didn't acknowledge the command because his mind was still churning through Dana's words.

Pete stared at her through the mirror again. "I thought we could still hang!"

Tyler shook his head. "I still don't get how this whole argument started."

Pete didn't want to stop midway through the argument to inform Tyler of the unpleasant details surrounding his break-up with Dana a year ago. He didn't want to explain that she had caught him in the middle of a make-out session with another woman in his dorm room while watching Conan O'Brien's late night TV show. Ending the long school days with the Conan show had been one of Pete and Dana's favorite activities. Pete knew his infidelity had been a poignant betrayal of their relationship. But that was all in the past—or so he thought.

Pete's anger needed to flow at Dana freely. Tyler would have to figure out for himself what was going on, so Pete decided to give Tyler a basic answer.

"Her little 'midnight' reference was a nod at The Tonight Show," Pete said. Tyler's face went blank. This clue was obviously of no help. Pete didn't care whether Tyler knew that Conan had famously joked about never wanting to host a show at midnight ever again but nonetheless found himself hosting a show at midnight.

Dana was irate. "Oh, I get it. You've been waiting to blow up on me."

This blame-shift back on Pete made his blood pressure rise. He swung his head fast to look Dana squarely in the eye. "Don't throw this back on me!" The SUV drove over an icy patch.

Screech!

The vehicle went into a rightwards skid. Tyler nearly jumped out of his skin, clenching the seat's upholstery with both hands.

"Dude! Get control!" he yelled. Pete's attention snapped to the road. He white-knuckled the steering wheel and jerked it in the direction of the skid just as every winter driver has ever been taught. It didn't work. Everyone panicked. Tyler pointed out the window leftwards and said, "Whoa! This way!" Pete tried to stay focused while steering left. None of the tires gained traction. A sharp bend in the road northwards was only moments away. The only protection for a vehicle on that curve was a modest guardrail. Tyler yelled, "The other way!" Pete steered rightwards again. The SUV cut into a ninety-degree side-spin. Tyler and Dana screamed.

Pete realized in a split second that he couldn't possibly regain control. There was no time to think about whether the rail would hold or imagine his death if it didn't. The only thing he felt was a lightning bolt of dread that seized his hands, his legs, his mind.

BOOM!

The SUV smashed into the guardrail, wheels lifting off the ground as the vehicle flipped around 360 degrees. Pete's body spun head over heels, kept in place only by his seatbelt. The Honda landed on its wheels again in a smashing jolt that sounded as if the SUV's suspension and shocks were blown out on impact. Pete was too disoriented to do anything hold the steering wheel tight and press on the brakes as hard as possible. Steering felt loose as if the shaft had dislodged from the internal mechanism. The brakes were gone. No one uttered a word while holding on for dear life. Everything was as dark inside as out, with only a dim view visible through the spider-cracked windshield. Pete felt the vehicle roll forward on all four wheels down a steep slope. Some of the tires must have shredded based on the thudding sound of torn tread pounding against steep hillside rocks. The vehicle increased speed. This fast ride downwards felt an eternity, as if it was a rollercoaster to the end of being.

SLAM!

The SUV hit something huge, maybe a rock formation, and flipped over on its top. The engine burst with explosive energy in a final screaming rev as the wheels spun skyward. The engine ceased.

Dust settled. The smell of burnt rubber filled the cabin. Icy cold air drifted into the cab through the opening where the driver's side window had been moments, maybe minutes, ago. The stereo pulsed with an eerie looping AM radio wave noise. One of the interior overhead lights was illuminated at half power. Most likely, one bulb broke, and the other had survived. It meant for sure that some of the vehicle's electrical systems remained in-tact.

Pete was relieved to be alive, feeling no severe pain. That didn't mean he had survived the crash unscathed. He knew he might have broken bones or worse. It dawned on him that blood was rushing to his upside-down head. The increase in blood pressure was stressful and made the dizziness worse.

He moved his right arm in an attempt to loosen it from the seatbelt strap. His bicep was stiff and bruised. He grunted in pain and exhaled as he looked over his shoulder at Dana, strapped in and upside-down like himself. She was awake, eyes open. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Dana exhaled. "Yeah." She inched over in her seat. "I think so." Pete sighed in relief. "You?" she asked, then exhaled again.

His temples throbbed as blood pumped wildly through his head. "Blood's rushing to my head," he said and grunted while moving his left arm to see if it was ok. It was stiff. He tinkered with the belt release button. "I gotta get right-side-up."

Dana pressed her seatbelt release, and the buckle came loose immediately. Gripping the belt securely, she carefully lowered her upside-down body and rested her shoulders on the SUV ceiling—which was now the floor. Her legs dropped securely onto the interior roof, and she slid her right arm out of the harness as the belt retracted into the seat. Exhaling, Dana moved into a sitting position.

The annoying AM radio noise only exacerbated the throbs that pulsed through Pete's head. He had to get it off. Powering the SUV down to minimum electrical systems might salvage some battery life and deactivate the radio. He jiggered the keyring, but the ignition key remained stuck in the 'On'

position. Pete looked at the ring closely and noticed the ignition key was jammed and bent in the steering column keyhole. He pressed the radio "Off" button. It didn't work. He tapped various station presets on the console. Nothing. Frustrated, he banged on the radio unit directly. It defied him, so Pete hit harder and harder. The radio would not shut off. Huffing, he delivered a barrage of fist poundings on the radio faceplate until it almost broke.

Squelch! The radio went dead. Pete shifted his attention to the belt release, pressing the button continuously while pulling on the belt with lots of might. His breathing became more labored.

Dana scooted closer to the passenger seat. "Tyler?" she asked as she shook Tyler's left arm. Pete stopped rustling the belt and waited for Tyler's response. Tyler didn't move. His eyes were closed, his mouth was open, and his brown hair tousled. His orange baseball cap was missing.

Pete wondered for a split second why he had fussed over the radio rather than take a mere second to reach out and see whether Tyler was okay. He supposed if he and Dana were okay, Tyler would be too. This optimism faded fast when Tyler didn't answer. A helpless sense of powerlessness froze Pete. He barely got the question out. "Is he...alive?" he asked.

Dana leaned further, stretching to reach in front of Tyler's nose. Dread washed over Pete. He didn't want the answer. "He's breathing," she said.

Pete exhaled, only able to muster a half-whisper. "Thank god." After inhaling, he pulled on the belt again. The release mechanism offered no sign of loosening as he fought with it. Looking out the smashed driver's side window, he hoped to find inspiration for additional options. The view was pitch black. He couldn't discern anything through the smashed front windshield or Pete's window either. "Can you see anything?" he asked Dana.

Dana scooted over to the broken window behind Pete. "It looks like we're against a giant boulder," she said, then slid across the back ceiling to the other side of the car by the rear passenger side door behind Tyler. She tugged on the door handle. The mechanism didn't engage. "Door won't open on this side," she said. She moved back to the center of the interior roof and gave the door a powerful kick. Sighing, she kicked again harder.

Pete waited for some sign that the door would give. He realized a chill was working its way deep into his bones. Their coats had been stashed on the floor behind Tyler. Hopefully, they hadn't been ejected from the cab in the chaotic downhill roll. He interrupted Dana. "Can you get us our jackets?" She moved closer to the rear of Tyler's seat by the jammed door. Pete continued tugging rapidly on the seatbelt. A moment later, he heard cloth rustle. At least some of the jackets were still there. Dana crawled closer to Pete and handed him his jacket first, then Tyler's.

"Put Tyler's jacket around him as best you can," she said. Pete stuffed his coat between the driver's side door and his seat and leaned toward Tyler as far as his constraining belt and strap would allow. This body shift made his ribs twang with sharp pain. Working through the ache, he covered Tyler with the jacket and tucked the sleeves in around Tyler's arms to prevent it from slipping off onto the ceiling.

Dana thrust her arms into her coat and zipped up. "The rear hatch window is crushed," she said. Pete turned to look for himself. It was odd seeing her right-side-up because she looked upside-down to him. She motioned to the passenger rear door, and he looked at it. The impact had smashed out most of the glass. "Best way out is mine," Dana said. She retracted her right leg closer to her body, then thrust it

forward, resuming brutal kicks to the door. Grunts accentuated each thrust. Pete couldn't stand being trapped, so he tugged hard on his seatbelt again.

On Dana's third kick, the vehicle slightly pivoted on the roof. The entire cab creaked like an old hulking ghost ship, and a few bits of window glass dislodged and fell onto the ceiling. Pete's heart skipped a beat.

"Did you hear that?" Dana asked.

Pete's voice quivered. "Yeah. We moved a little."

"Can you unbuckle?" she asked.

Pete was ticked. Hadn't she seen him jigger the belt this entire time? "I've been trying!" He said while pressing on the belt release button in rapid succession with rising frustration. "It's jammed." He exhaled, then engaged in another round of belt-tugging and button-pressing.

"I haven't had a signal on my phone for over an hour," Dana said. Pete remained fully focused on the belt. He tore at it. This mechanism wasn't going to beat him. Dana continued, "I'll climb up to the road unless yours is working."

Pete put aside the belt problem, slid his hand into his pocket, and dug out his phone. He thumbed the faceplate. Its frame was bent and screen was cracked in five places. Desperate for a little good news, he pressed the wake button. The display remained black. "It's toast," he said.

Dana's voice cracked. "Can you reach Tyler's?" Pete strained all the muscles in his torso, leaning over to reach under Tyler's jacket and into his left pocket. The phone wasn't there. Had Tyler been using it around the time of the crash? Stretching as far as possible to reach Tyler's right pocket, Pete got his hand into it but didn't find anything. His ribs and right bicep hurt terribly. He summoned the energy to give Tyler one more pat-down.

Pete leaned back to his seat. "I can't find it."

Dana repositioned herself for another kick. Her voice strained, possibly the result of the kind of aching Pete experienced. "We might not have much time. I'm climbing." She grabbed a cardboard coffee cup insulator that was lying on the floor. It had flown loose from one of the empty cups of java they had bought at the start of the trip. With the cardboard fanned out, she brushed away window glass near the door.

Pete knew he had to get out of the seat because he didn't want to remain stuck and helpless while Dana carried out the heroics. Concern for Tyler's safety occupied his mind too. "We have to take him with us," he said.

Dana swept glass shards further from the back window. "We can't," she said. "If he's seriously injured, we could kill him." She kept brushing.

Dana sounded reasonable, but he had to see the wreckage and join the rescue operation. "Hold on," he said. Dana stopped sweeping. Pete pulled on the strap with all his might. His anger rose again. He grunted while pressing the belt release button repeatedly. It wouldn't give. His rage was peaking, so he

pounded on the door near the release mechanism. *I'm gonna tear this lock out of the seat!* He groaned and exhaled, yanking and pounding. His rage hit max.

The belt popped loose. Pete sighed as he swung his legs down onto the ceiling while holding his body frame up off the interior roof with the strap. His ribs jolted in pain as he breathed.

"Okay?" Dana asked.

Able to move freely, Pete's lowered his rump onto the ceiling and let go of the strap. It retracted only partway, yet it was enough to free him completely. He put his right arm through the jacket sleeve and ran his left arm through the other one as he spoke. "Let's go." He scooted across the ceiling floor to the back seat overhead. Dana turned, swept a few more pieces of glass out of the way, and crawled outside through the broken window. Pete bushed a bit of pesky glass aside with his half-numb hand and squeezed through the window.

He felt the thin layer of snow covering soft earth as he crawled out on his knees. He stood up quickly to prevent his pantlegs from absorbing too much wetness. Dana was already stepping back from the SUV, brushing snow off her knees and jacket. He did the same.

Pete took in the full view of the catastrophe. The headlights were dead, but the rear driver's side break light was partially operational, although cracked. A couple of its naked bulbs dimly illuminated the scene, along with light spilling out from the interior cab. The front of the SUV perched precariously against a large boulder that rested on a sandy clearing. The clearing was on a moderately angled slope that ended at a cliff on the other side of the boulder. "It doesn't look good," Dana said while surveying the scene.

The boulder had stopped them from driving off the cliff and free-falling into the valley below. Pete walked to the behemoth rock and looked down. The drop was so deep that he couldn't see the bottom. He gasped, "Oh dang," realizing he had witnessed a miracle. Dana walked across a few feet of the clearing toward the steep hill where the SUV had careened down. Pete felt the sting of cold air. His nose was numb. They had to take action fast, or the freezing temperatures would finish them all. He figured their first and best option would be to get back up to the road.

He joined Dana, who was scanning the hillside. Minimal illumination covered the entire pass, a combination of starlight along with a slight bit of light pollution from a far-off town. Pete reckoned the road was a steep forty feet above.

Dana flicked her phone flashlight on. She sounded strained. "If we slip, we're done for."

Pete nodded and whispered, "Yeah." He noticed bigger ruts that were better suited for footing that ran along a shallower portion of the incline to the road above. He took a few steps southward and examined the terrain. Intermittent tracks from the SUV's haphazard path led up the hill to the road. A slip could still result in a terrible fall. "This way. It's not as steep," he said. Dana followed.

They started the ascent. Pete moved his shoe onto a foot-long rock and raised his body upwards to grab a divot above his head. The earth jostled loose as he lifted his body weight onto the hold. He grunted as he reached fast for a firmer grip overhead. His hand landed in an indent near the bad hold. He froze for a second and breathed, then looked down at Dana. "Careful of that rock," he said.

Her phone was wedged between her teeth so she could keep both hands free. "Okay," she mumbled as she angled the beam from the cell flashlight as best as possible to illuminate the path above them. The resulting light was narrow and of little use yet better than nothing. She grasped a hold near her left shoulder and pulled herself up onto solid rock. Pete grabbed the fortuitous overhead hold with his right hand and reached his left to a two-foot-long flat rock diagonally above. He brushed a layer of icy snow off the long stone first, then palmed the rock and elevated himself another three feet. Dana followed close behind, repositioning her flashlight with each move. Pete reached his right hand onto another even ledge straight above his head and pulled up. His right foot landed on a large rounded rock a couple of feet away. The rock took his full body weight.

Swish! The rock dislodged, sending a mound of pebbly earth down the slope along with it. Moaning, he gripped the ledge with both hands for dear life and panicked to find footing. His heart pounded wildly. Dana turned her face away just in time to avoid getting showered with debris. Pete probed with his left foot and found a jagged stony formation to the right. He tested the rock with half of his weight. Relief. It was holding. He allowed the rock to take his full weight.

Dana glared up at Pete. "You sure this is—?"

"Yeah!" Pete interrupted. "Just keep moving." He felt bad enough about the mistake and didn't need Dana to question him about it. This was the best way. He continued to climb, and Dana followed.

A few minutes later, Pete reached his left hand up onto the flat ground at the hilltop. He swung his right hand next to the left and pulled himself up. As the sole of his left shoe touched top ground, he felt hope. The coldness wasn't a concern because his body had warmed up from the exertion of the climb. He hurried three steps away from the ledge to the roadway. The winter breeze was stronger up there on the road, and it was dark. There was no sign of any headlights north or south along the pass. His body warmth was dissipating. The sense of hope from a moment ago diffused, as if sucked into the darkness.

Dana reached her left hand up to the ledge, feeling for a spot. She didn't appear comfortable enough for a final surge to the top. Grunting, she strained to pull herself up. "Can you give me a hand?" she called out.

Pete snapped his attention to Dana. "Yeah." He hurried back to the shoulder of the road and grabbed her hand. Walking backward, he pulled her up and away from the edge. She took a few steps toward the road and stopped to catch her breath.

He needed good news and couldn't wait for her to rest. "You got a signal?" he asked.

Dana pulled out her phone and checked for strength bars. Her voice was haggard. "No."

Pete dug for any sign of hope. "Do you remember when we saw the last car go by?"

Dana stared southwards and took a breath. "Maybe forty-five minutes ago?" She walked onto the road a few feet past Pete as the wind picked up. "Let's move around the bend," she said. "We'll be able to see better from there." She walked south. Pete appreciated her fierce determination to survive and looked out to the far-off southern bend for himself. He spotted a wide pass where he had maneuvered a few minutes before the crash. It must have been a ten-minute trek away. He wasn't fond of the plan but had no better idea. Besides, the wind was gradually picking up force. The best defense against the cold

was movement.

Dana slipped on an ice patch and gasped. Pete reached out as she regained balance without his help. "You okay?" he asked. Dana nodded and picked up her pace. The skin on Pete's hands cracked. He could barely feel his fingers, so he cupped his hands and breathed into them. After rubbing them together a few times, he realized it made no difference. "Aren't you cold?" he asked.

"What do you think," Dana said.

A nasty blast of cold whipped across the road. Pete stopped to shield his face from the howling wind and whined. "We're screwed!"

Dana powered southwards. "Let's keep moving," she said.

The wind subsided for a moment, then came back with a vengeance. A ten-foot-high outcropping of rocks were protruding from the side of the road on a sharp turn about thirty feet ahead. They needed to survive by whatever means necessary. Those rocks would probably protect them from some of the piercing winds. Dana was going to have to be reasonable. Pete pointed at the rock formation. "We should huddle by the road around there and wait," he said.

Dana glared at Pete. "We won't be able to wave someone down in time without getting hit. We need to move to an open stretch."

He pointed his finger at the bend way off in the distance and shook his head. "There's no cover from the wind over there."

Dana sighed and reversed direction. She walked to Pete, looking him square in the eye the whole way. "Well, you can definitely deal with it." She stepped closer. "This is your fault."

Pete was stung. His face contorted. "I didn't put black ice on the road."

"You're the one who pushed us to make this trip after rush hour!" she said.

Pete was livid. "No, no. We all agreed. We wanted to hit the slopes at dawn with fresh powder."

Dana spoke over Pete's sentence. "Knowing there was a possibility of a storm rolling in."

Pete shook his head with force. "Oh no, don't put this on me! We all agreed to it."

"Fine!" Dana said as she took a step back. "Then I'm owning up to it. I'm not sitting on some rock and hoping for the best." She hurried off toward the bend ahead. Pete stood his ground. Staying alive was the best option. Since there was no way to know that they'd be able to flag a car down this late, the rocky shelter nearby was the safest bet.

Another series of violent windy blasts howled through the pass.

Klack! A thrashing bang of metal against rock echoed from down the hill. Dana halted and turned. "What was that?!" she asked.

Pete didn't allow his mind to think the worst. "I don't know." They listened.

Was that the SUV?" she asked as she jogged back to the hillside where they had ascended. The wind sustained an accelerated speed. Another terrible thud echoed from below. Pete felt it was a sound so ominous it couldn't possibly be benign.

Dana looked down to the crash site. "The wind is nudging the SUV!" She took a nervous step closer to the ledge. "We can't wait! We gotta get down there and get him out!" She stood transfixed on the site below. Pete moved quickly to the shoulder of the road and glanced downhill himself. He was horrified at the thought of what he might see. The SUV was still leaning against the protective boulder. Pete was partially relieved.

Dana dropped on her knees and swung a leg over the edge. The thought of climbing back down to the site petrified Pete. His heart rate doubled. Earlier concern for Tyler got pushed down deep. "No! We could die just trying to climb back down there!"

Dana halted and glared up at him. "Are you kidding me? You're his friend! You put him there!"

The third blame shift! Pete was outraged. "This was just as much your fault for stirring things up! No! I'm waiting up here and flagging someone down!"

Bang! The wind-blown SUV tilted on the roof and smacked against the boulder, then ground against it as the entire frame slipped backward. The vehicle twisted slightly and stopped, leaning at a less secure angle.

"It's getting closer to the drop!" Dana said. She swung her right leg down off the ledge onto a secure rock and shined the cell flashlight below to review the climbing path.

Pete shook his head. "Dana! It's not worth the risk!"

Fury was in her eyes. "You know what? It wasn't cheating with Anne that ended it between us. You don't do a damn thing unless it benefits you. Anne or not, we were done." She turned and placed the phone into her mouth, face-down. She descended.

There was too much tension for Pete to manage all of the emotions he experienced. The three most potent were: guilt over Tyler's predicament, fear of death, and deep anger at Dana for digging at him again and again over their ex-relationship. Guilt gnawed at him the strongest. He supposed that was the one he'd have to deal with first.

The icy chill was grating. Pete blew into his hands and rubbed them to give himself another second to chew on a final decision. "Hell!" he uttered to himself. He dropped to his knees at the ledge and swung his legs over the side. Angling them, he stepped onto a couple of rocks below. Dana was five feet further down the slope, making her way in haste.

Near the bottom, Pete navigated a couple of body lengths above Dana. He had one thing to be thankful for. The winds had calmed somewhat during the descent. When Dana was a foot from the ground, she let go of the last holding and hopped to the snowy clearing. Pete lowered himself a few feet as she ran over to the crushed door and window frame on Tyler's side by the front passenger window.

Pete jumped from the wall and ran to join her. She reached into the window and patted Tyler's arm. "Tyler?" she asked and banged on the door frame in an attempt to wake him up. "Tyler?" He didn't respond. She moved to the rear passenger door and kneeled.

Pete's eyes bulged. "You're going in?" he asked.

She hand-brushed a few shards of glass from the snowy sand. "Yeah, I'll get him free," she said without hesitation and climbed into the rear window.

She hollered outside. "Try leaning up against the back trunk to keep it from sliding." Pete hurried to the back hatch and leaned up against the car. He wondered whether his effort was a futile act. This vehicle weighed two tons. Three? No single person would be a match for the wind and a 6000-pound hunk of tattered steel. He stooped and looked through the crushed rear hatch window to glimpse whatever he could of Dana.

She patted Tyler, then jerked in reflex. "Aah!" she yelled.

"You okay," Pete hollered. He let go of the hatch and jogged to the passenger door.

She inhaled through her teeth as Pete leaned into the window. "Yeah...I think I cut my leg on broken glass," she said. Pete saw a tear in her left calf's pantleg. Blood was surfacing near a slice on her skin. The culprit was a large rectangular shard of glass lodged between the top of Tyler's seat and the ceiling. A couple of ultra-thin defrost wires ran parallel through the glass.

Pete felt bad. "Yeah, you did."

Dana shifted her body near Tyler but couldn't angle herself to see the wound. "How bad?" she asked.

Pete looked at her leg again. Based on the moderate amount of blood, the cut wasn't too bad. However, a growing sense of guilt took hold. He knew he should probably jump in and take over.

Stronger gusts of wind whipped across the ridge again. A cold wash of resolve-killing cortisol flushed through Pete's being. Fear rushed back. He didn't want to get in the vehicle.

"It looks minor," Pete said through a wind gust, hoping Dana would offer to stay inside. Despite his nerves gaining a stronghold over him, he couldn't suppress feelings of moral obligation. The core of his being convicted him. He shouldn't have let Dana go back inside in the first place. He stammered, "Why...don't you come out and...and I'll get him."

Dana was curt. "No. I'm already inside."

Pete struggled with the temptation to accept her answer.

Dana continued, "I can do this--"

"No." Pete's voice was shaky. "It's my vehicle. I know my way around it," he said.

This thin argument seemed enough for Dana. She inched back toward the door. "Be fast!" she said while crawling in reverse out the window. She brushed the snow and dirt from her knees and stepped away from the SUV. "I'll try to keep her from sliding," she said, eyeing the rear hatch.

Pete knew that Dana was no match for the power of the titling SUV. He replied with little confidence, "Right." Dana hurried to the back of the vehicle without stopping to examine her injury. The SUV was steady at the moment, so Pete stooped onto his knees and crawled through the window. He moved to upside-down Tyler and reached up for him. Patting his friend's arm, he said. "Tyler?" Tyler was totally unconscious. Pete patted his arm again. "Hey, buddy," he said.

In a gush, the canyon winds raged hard. The SUV tilted and creaked. Pete's heart rate accelerated. The vehicle shifted, its front swung upwards as the whole interior creaked like a tired, abandoned ship. The side of the SUV jostled and smacked into the boulder, generating a sickening moan unlike anything before. Pete swore the vehicle was sliding sideways. His palms perspired profusely.

"What happened?!" he yelled. The SUV screeched. Creaking and grinding sounds now swirled through the cab from all directions.

"Hurry up!" Dana hollered. "I can't hold it much longer!"

"How close to the edge?!" Pete yelled back. Another icy sting of panic jolted his heart. It was almost impossible for him to maintain focus.

"Just drag him out!" Dana hollered. "Don't worry about hurting him any worse now!"

Pete pressed Tyler's buckle release. Would it be jammed? No! Tyler's belt released instantly. Pete grabbed onto Tyler's strap and guided it through his coat as it retracted. All the while, Pete took Tyler's weight on his shoulders as the belt no longer offered support. Pete gasped and grunted. Adrenaline was pumping hard as he maneuvered Tyler's frame down onto the ceiling. The SUV screeched again in ear-deafening volume.

Winds stirred with more ferocity. The vehicle slid and groaned more and more with each passing second as Pete pushed Tyler's body toward the back window exit, panting with each thrust. He struggled to keep Tyler's jacket covering around him, not having time to put Tyler into it properly. They were three feet from the window as the SUV whined like a dying beast. With the continuous rocking and sliding, Pete sensed it was moving closer and closer to the cliff edge.

Dana ran from the back to the side window and dropped on her knees. "Hurry!" she said while reaching in to clench any part of Tyler's body.

"Can you grab him?!" Pete yelled. There was no way they could squeeze through the window together. He heaved Tyler to the window opening. Dana grasped for a good grip on him. Pete could barely catch his breath as he shoved Tyler again and slid him further through the window.

"Got his arms!" Dana said. She grunted and leaned back, using her body weight and gravity to give her extra power on the pull. Tyler's feet were just about through the door.

Pete gave Tyler a final heave through the window. Tyler was free. Dana fell back on the ground from Tyler's weight. She groaned. Pete dove to the window as the SUV wailed, its steel bending and

squealing as the driver's side rear door burst inwards from the pressure on the boulder. The jolt knocked Pete off all fours onto his flat stomach. His head stuck out the window just enough to glance at the rear of the SUV while trying to get back on his knees. The back quarter of the SUV was already hanging from the cliff. The SUV would slide off in a second.

Pete was terrified. "Get me out of here!" he screamed and thrust himself further through the window. He pushed with his forearms and toes and panted while reaching out for Dana. Horrid metallic belches and whinnies pierced his ears.

Dana rolled Tyler over and flung herself at the window. She tried to grab one of Pete's hands, but he was moving so frenetically that it was near impossible to latch on. "Grab hold!" she hollered over agonizing screeches. Pete grunted. He lunged with everything he had. Dana pulled hard.

They both screamed.

Swoosh! The front of the SUV scuffed against the boulder as the rear tipped off the cliff. The whole vehicle flew backward into the great void.

The world went silent. The wind calmed almost in jest to flaunt its victory.

A slight breeze crossed the ridge.

Kaboom! The SUV crashed like a bomb into the dark canyon below.

Pete exhaled. Dana breathed. Pete sat up, his legs stretched out in front of him on a patch of freezing sand a few feet from the cliff. Dana sat up, cross-legged, and rested a hand on Tyler's arm. They stared in stupefied silence. Pete looked to the sky as his heart rate settled.

"Thanks...for saving me," he said.

"If you hadn't come back for Tyler and me, we would've—"

Pete interrupted Dana's compliment. He turned to her, all too aware he didn't deserve it. "Yeah." He stood up and pointed to a steeper part of the rocky hill ahead. It would offer some shelter from the winds. "Let's move him over there," he said. The two of them lifted Tyler gently to a sitting position, Pete keeping him upright as Dana put Tyler's arms into the sleeves of his jacket. Pete lifted Tyler's torso, Dana rose and took hold of his legs. They walked over to the hill and carefully rested him against the wall. Fear of the full magnitude of Tyler's injuries crept into Pete's mind.

Winds gusted again. A coyote wailed far off in the distance down in the canyon. This predator cry made Pete more aware of the surrounding darkness.

He was feeling introspective. In a state of mind that often only comes after passing through a hard trial, he realized Dana was right about many things. She had tolerated a lot of his wrongdoings in the past. He asked her earnestly, "Do you really think I'm a selfish SOB?"

Dana looked at him and half-smiled. "Yeah..." She hesitated before continuing. Pete felt her probe his face. She nodded once, her smile widening. "Sometimes."

Pete's thoughts ran back to the incident an hour or so ago. Tonight, most likely, Dana hadn't made the Conan joke as a backhanded remark. They enjoyed watching the late show together when they were dating, long before the Anne incident. There was sudden self-realization: His tendency to entrench in his own POV without making room for other perspectives had led to a lot of trouble over the years—problems far beyond dating.

He nodded and replied to Dana, still half in thought, "Huh." Taking a couple of steps closer to the hill, he looked up to the road. "I'm going to climb back to the top and try to flag someone down." He glanced at Tyler. "Keep him warm." Then he walked a few steps to the narrower section of the hill that ascended to the road.

"What if no one comes 'til morning?" Dana asked. "We might not make it through the night."

Living in the glow of survival after the near-death experience had fueled Pete's newfound hope that someone would come by tonight. Yet, it was freezing. Sunlight was probably seven hours away, at least. Their only protection was collective body warmth and jackets.

He turned to her and said, "I don't know."

Dana bent down to care for Tyler. Pete took a step up onto the hill and started for the road.