

Go

MY JOURNEY
TO FIND THE LOST—
AND MYSELF

Find

S U S A N P U R V I S



**BLACK
STONE**
PUBLISHING

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To Pop. Since I left home at age seventeen, you visited me most Septembers, no matter where my feet were planted. You're a huge part of this adventure because you sat for endless hours in a rickety lawn chair amongst the turning aspen leaves, reading newspapers and drinking coffee, to play the victim for search-dog teams. You've lost your hearing, and now your memory. Pops, you now deserve to sit down in your chair and enjoy my story.

To Mom. Who really cares about all my dreams, achievements, and secrets, besides you? I walk through this world knowing your love lives on my sleeve. I wear it every day. You've offered me three gifts for a meaningful life: to love, laugh, and surround myself with supportive friends who care and listen. When I close my eyes, I feel your embrace and big smile. Since I left home, you've answered my telephone calls, even when I was worlds away.

To Tasha. For helping me find my way.



SEARCH: To look into or over
carefully or thoroughly in an effort
to find or discover something.

RESCUE: To free from
confinement, danger, or evil.



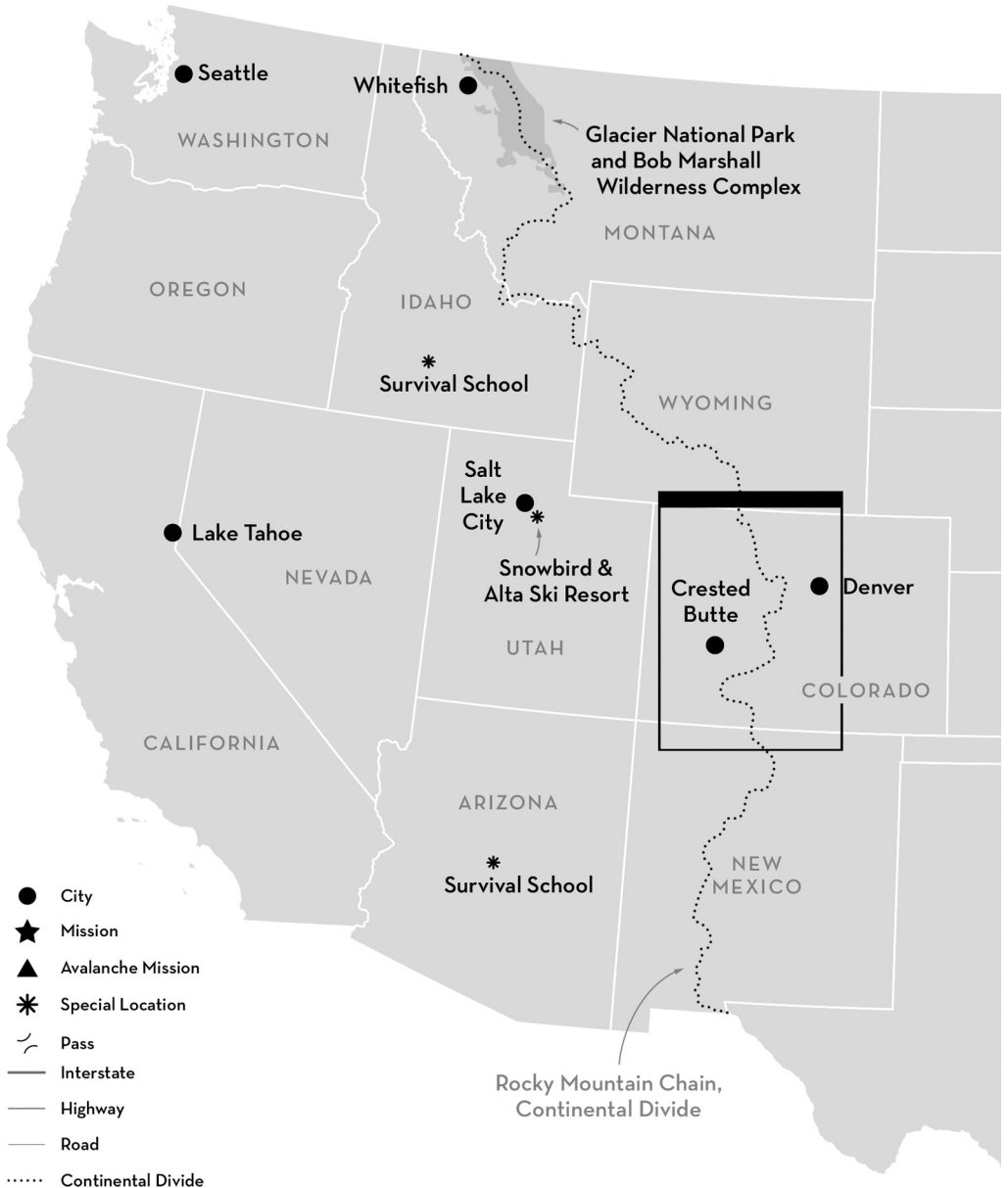
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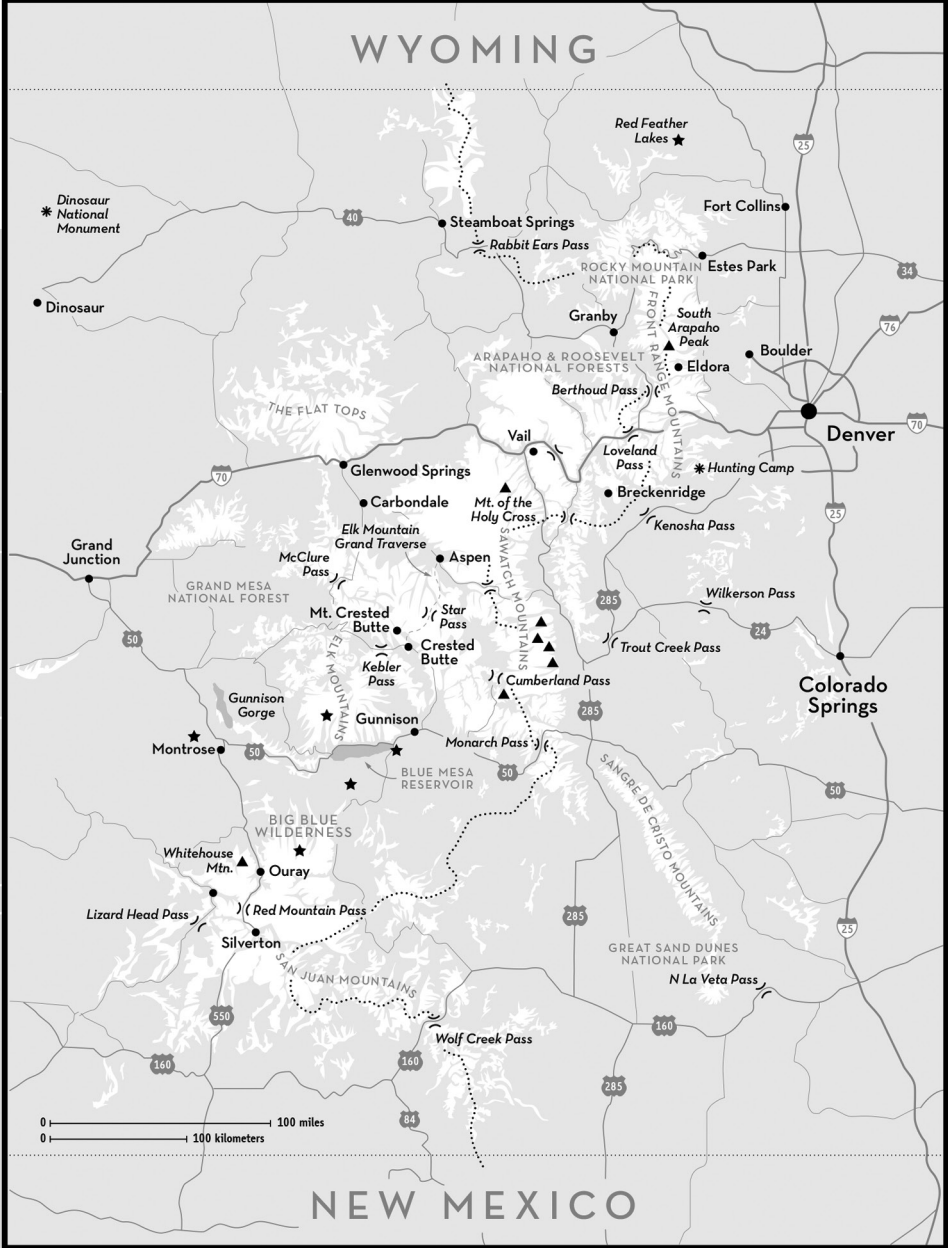
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The Western United States



Detail Map of Western Colorado





Introduction

Lost.

I was lost once.

Fresh out of college with a geology degree, I signed up as a survival instructor in the high desert of southern Idaho. No, I didn't have any previous experience, but I thought it would be more challenging—and fun—than working in a photography store.

After running several twenty-one-day courses without incident, I was promoted to lead guide. Then came a particular trip, leading six troubled teenagers on what we jokingly called a “hoods in the woods” trek through sagebrush country. Strapped to our back, each of us carried a wool blanket, wrapped in a second-hand military poncho for shelter, and a tin can for cooking. Ten days into the outing, I broke the most important rule about survival: I separated from my tribe.

And I got lost.

I wasn't supposed to get lost. After all, I was the so-called expert, the person who knew how to use a map and compass, find the North Star, set animal traps, and forage for edible plants.

I'd first learned to use a compass at age ten when my dad took me fishing for lake trout in his twenty-foot boat on Lake Superior. With his grown-up hand resting on mine, he helped me guide the

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wheel. “Honey, keep the needle pointing north and drive straight ahead.” It was a big responsibility for a little girl who needed to stand on her tiptoes to see out the boat’s windshield. I knew that if I screwed up and got off course, especially in the fog, we’d collide with the white rocks and drown. I kept my eye on that needle and told Pops, “I’ll never lose my way.”

When I was fifteen, I learned to read a United State Geologic Survey 7.5-minute quadrangle map during my first backpacking trip to the Bob Marshall and Mission Mountain Wildernesses in Montana. As a teenager from the flatlands of northern Michigan, the grandness of the Rocky Mountains overwhelmed me. I stood at the trailhead, wearing a too-heavy backpack and holding a flat sheet of paper the size of a small poster. “How the heck do you read a map?” I asked our bearded guide. “I have no idea where I am.”

Back then, I was a follower. I took no responsibility for where I was or where I was going. But I wanted to learn.

My guide showed me how to orient both the map and compass north, and how to read topographical maps. He explained how lines could create a two-dimensional representation of both natural and human-made features on the earth’s surface. These maps, often called contour maps or quads, depict in detail the ground relief—the shape and changing elevation of the terrain—the rivers, lakes, forest cover, roads, and other features, using symbols, colors, and contour lines. Each contour line on the 7.5-minute series represents forty feet of elevation difference. The closer together the lines, the steeper the terrain. The farther apart the lines, the flatter it is.

Maps intrigued me and expanded my world, far beyond my clan of friends and the concrete sidewalks in my hometown. I set out to discover everything I could about finding my way. By studying topo maps, I could eventually see how these lines formed mountains, cliffs, and river valleys.

By the end of that two-week trip, I had learned to navigate

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through the wilderness on foot, using only a map and compass. This offered me a newfound confidence that made the start my junior year of high school a little easier.

Years of practice—hundreds of hours navigating hiking, backcountry skiing, and backpacking trips—allowed me to gain fluency in map and compass reading. (It's probably one reason I would later become interested in geology and gold exploration.) I could plot my location on a map anywhere in the world.

And I believed, on that day in the desert of southern Idaho, that I would always know where I was—that I would never get lost.

But I did.

The problem started when I made a hasty, unilateral decision to “take a shortcut.” I'd decided to bypass some rough terrain to escort Phyllis, an overweight sixteen-year-old girl who was emotionally and physically exhausted, to our next campsite. My coinstructor and I divided up our navigation equipment. He took the compass. I kept the map.

A horrible idea. Shortcuts, I'd learn later, can be an important teacher of what not to do. One step forward and two steps back.

We should have just stayed together at our location and camped. Instead, I watched five students and my colleague hoist their bedrolls to their backs and disappear into the forest.

“See you in a couple hours,” I yelled after them, plotting my route on the map. “We're going to take the road north, then traverse west to the campsite.”

Boy, was I wrong. I never met up with the group again. They were right where they were supposed to be. But Phyllis and I were not.

Twenty-eight hours later my boss, Glenn, found us walking down a dirt road, dehydrated and exhausted. We had scrambled over boulders, climbed steep slopes, and descended into a tangled

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watercourse during our ten-mile journey. So much for bypassing rough terrain.

On the positive side, Phyllis would tell me later that her life had changed on that trip, because she was forced into survival mode. When she had to focus on the task at hand, marching one foot in front of the other, she forgot about the old ways etched into her brain.

However, Glenn confronted me in the pickup truck, “How’d *you* get lost?”

I responded in a calm, confident tone, “I wasn’t lost. We just got turned around. Look, we’re here, aren’t we?”

Because tragedy was avoided, I never really thought about the question again ... until twenty years later, when I started to write this book.

The writing process made me question such a cavalier answer. I was wearing a plate of armor around my heart to protect my ego, my all-business, always-competent persona. I know I didn’t have it in me back then to admit I was a scared twenty-three-year-old woman, feeling like that little girl driving the boat. At the moment when I answered him, I had suppressed my feelings, buried them deep to save face.

If only my boss had explained to me, on the bumpy ride home, about the stages of being lost, I might have found the clarity to understand the situation much sooner. But back then nobody in my world was talking about it.

If he had known about Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who talked about the stages of loss in her book *On Death and Dying*, or Laurence Gonzales, who offered a dozen revelations in the stories in *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*, then my boss might have said, “Oh, Susan. You are in such a state of *denial*. This is the first phase of being lost. You were disoriented and, like most people who are confused, you just pressed on as fast as you could go. You

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were trying to make your mental map fit what you saw.”

If he'd said that, I would have admitted that I had pressed on that evening and the entire next day, that I had set a death-march pace, allowing no breaks, determined to continue until I recognized something, anything. When nothing I saw matched the topo map or my mental map, I just said, “Let's keep going.” Deny, deny, deny—that was my coping mechanism.

Most people who are lost can't let themselves see that they're lost, don't want to hear about it or feel it. And when they deny reality, they keep themselves from learning from it, from solving the problem that's right in front of them.

Next, I slipped into *anger*—or what might be better called *panic*. As darkness settled that first night, urgency to find my way blossomed into a full-scale survival emergency. I panicked, thinking, “What if I kill Phyllis? What if I kill myself trying to take care of her?” And I cursed her for being slow, tripping and falling, keeping me from reaching my destination.

I pushed us onward, trying to find terrain that fit either the map in my hands or the map in my head. I didn't consider staying right where we were, because stopping would mean that I was admitting my lostness. Instead, I was so in denial that staying put, starting a fire, and questioning how I got myself into this mess never crossed my mind.

Laurence Gonzales writes that everyone who dies lost, dies of confusion. Lost is then not a location; it is a transformation. It is a failure of the mind. It can happen in the woods, or it can happen in life. I'd gotten off my path that day. I'd lost my way. I thought if I didn't get back on that path, I'd lose myself too. So, I pressed on through last light.

The third phase of lostness is *bargaining*. As fatigue and mild hypothermia crept in on that rainy evening, I formed a strategy for finding someplace that matched my misguided mental map,

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even though there was no such place. We roamed the desert aimlessly. I silently pleaded with the terrain, as if it could answer me, “I’ll never let this happen again. Help me find our way out.”

I stumbled upon a wickiup, a structure made of grass and mud, built by the survival school in case of emergencies. This shelter bought us needed comfort from the rain and allowed me to get my head on straight, breathe, and reassess where I had been and where I was going.

Had I not bumped into the wickiup, my untrained, deteriorating, irrational, and emotional mind might have fallen into *depression*, the fourth stage of being lost. When all your strategies fail, and you just give up—when you no longer know how to cope with the situation.

Later, I would learn that in the final stages of lostness, when you run out of options and energy and become *resigned* to your plight, you *must* make a new mental map of where you are. You *must* become Robinson Crusoe, or you will die. To survive, you *must* find yourself. Then it won’t matter where you are.

I could have survived in the shelter for days if I had stopped to build a bow-drill fire and controlled my panicked mind. Eventually, a search-and-rescue team would have found us. That day in the wilderness, it was impossible for me to admit I was lost because I didn’t have the experience, the mental map, or the maturity to know that my survival depended on accepting what was actually going on. Instead, the one thing I decided that day was that I’d never get lost again, even if it killed me.

It took me years to learn that lostness doesn’t only apply to losing the trail and going off the map in the wilderness. I didn’t know then that people can get lost in emotion, in a relationship, in a marriage, in a business, or in a life. I was convinced that just happened to *other* people.

But I was about to learn just how lost one person could be.

CHAPTER 1

Last Ditch Effort

Summer 2005

Ouray, Colorado

If the helicopter shifts, we're dead. Dead like the guy we're looking for.

So much can go wrong up here. Peering out the open door, I look down at the fast-moving, unforgiving terrain. Far above the tree line, where the air is thin, volcanic rock breaks into huge spires and fins. Freeze-thaw cycles have crumbled the cliffs into strange, gargoyle-like shapes, and every crevice is filled with snow.

Tasha, my black Labrador retriever and avalanche-dog partner, is wedged between the pilot and me. Her bum presses against the pilot's right hip while she digs her furry elbows into my thighs and settles her barrel chest onto my lap. Her webbed feet, splayed wide from years of digging in avalanche debris, dangle off my leg and out the helicopter's open doorway. In our haste to hot-load the helicopter moments ago, I had nixed Tasha's restraining device. As the helicopter blades shave the air closer to the towering 13,492-foot peak, I vise-grip her neck with my arm, pulling her closer, concerned she'll try to jump or scramble onto the pilot's lap. Wiggling my toes inside my ski boots helps to keep them from falling asleep. That's all I dare move. If Tasha or I make a sudden movement, the two-seat crop duster helicopter, used to spray pesticides on cornfields, might fall out of the sky.

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We're about to land by putting one skid onto a couloir, a steep narrow gully, hemmed in by sheer cliff walls on the upper flanks of Whitehouse Mountain in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado.

As we near our forbidding landing site, I try to avoid looking down at the four-thousand-foot drop, where dawn just turned to daylight over the towering evergreen trees, now shrunk to matchsticks. Warm air turns to cold, and my knuckles are blue as I squeeze the grab handle above the door frame.

Thirty-nine days earlier, a single-engine plane crashed on Whitehouse Mountain, killing all four passengers on board: Richard Mills—the man we are looking for—his four-year-old son, and his parents. Days of bad weather, coupled by avalanche hazard and extreme terrain, had thwarted any rescue effort. Eventually, members of the local search-and-rescue team, Ouray Mountain Rescue, were transported to the wreckage one by one. Over several weeks of searching they found, strewn over a half-mile-long path, pieces of twisted metal, clothing, children's books, and three partially buried bodies. The team located all but Richard. Then, deeming the recovery mission too dangerous, the local sheriff had suspended the search. Until now.

All hope is on my sixty-pound retriever and five-foot-three me.

We're the last-ditch effort, and we've got one hour to find him.

After a decade as my search-and-rescue partner, Tasha has a few gray hairs on her chin, but still looks and acts like a pup. In human years, she's seventy and I'm forty-three. Her career is almost over, and then mine will be, too.

Tasha and I are one of a few elite high-altitude volunteer search-and-rescue dog teams in the United States. We live in Crested Butte, Colorado. We don't get paid for our work, not even a bag of kibble, yet we're up here risking our lives.

Inside the helicopter, Tasha's silky ears flap against her

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blocky head as air blasts through my side of the helicopter. Her chest swells and retracts, panting breathlessly as the air thins. Her tongue is pasty white. Her breath stinks. I can't tell if her excessive panting is from nerves or the food she gobbled down last night when she nosed open my suitcase and devoured eight cups of dry kibble, plastic bag and all. Her bloated belly feels like a stuffed sausage.

I want to wring her neck.

How could she do that to me? Ten years of training, sacrifices, and proving our worth to a community of doubters, many hoping I would fail. This mission is the pinnacle of our career, and because of Tasha's gluttony we might fail, if we don't die first.

The pilot reduces power, and the helicopter edges closer to the mountain. Boulders as big as cars litter our search area with fresh gray rubble, evidence of violent daily rock fall. Because of the danger, we only have to get in, find Richard's body, and get out: the morning sun shining on the avalanche path will cause snow to melt, releasing rocks that could pierce our flesh and crush our bones.

"Sue, see that speck down there?" The pilot's voice crackles in my headphones. "That's Bill." He points to a narrow, snowy couloir in front of us. "He's chopping out a landing zone." The pilot stares straight ahead at the colossal mountain and concentrates on placing his skid onto the thin landing strip—no wider or taller than I am. I squint out the bubble-shaped window but can't see Bill.

A sharp wobble of the helicopter jolts me with adrenaline. My body jerks. I cling to Tasha. I don't dare let go. To calm my nerves, and her nerves too, I hum a soothing melody into her ear, one she's been hearing for a decade. "Good girl, Black Dog, *doo-tee-dooo* ... I love you." I shut my eyes, praying the blades don't hit the slope. I put my boot against the bubble window and press an

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imaginary brake pedal to stop our forward momentum and brace for impact. The chopper edges toward the sheer wall. Somewhere on this peak, a family's despair is buried beneath tons of avalanche debris. Will *my* family soon join in their despair?

Suddenly, I spot Bill running toward a rock wall, protecting himself from the rotors and shielding his face from the growing blizzard of blowing snow. He's engulfed in the white tornado whirling beneath the chopper blades. I lose sight of him. The helicopter's skid thunks onto the landing strip. Tasha jerks up and digs her nails into my legs. It's painful, but I don't move a muscle.

My eyes fixate on the pilot for direction. He focuses on the blade whapping an arm's length away from the snow. "Time to go," he yells.

Yanking off my helmet with one hand, I pin Tasha into my lap with the other. The deafening roar of the engine makes giving verbal commands to Tasha impossible. I rely on our years of communicating through eye contact and hand signals to show her when to exit. Bill crawls on hands and knees to meet us. He waits in a crouch, as directed by the pilot, until the bird steadies.

"You're going to have to jump!" the pilot shouts at me.

"Jump?" I worry about Tasha's distended abdomen. She could rupture her gut if she lands on her belly. Then I remember the raspy plea of Ed Jones, the uncle of the missing man. "I'm not leaving Colorado until all my family members are accounted for. I've been scouring these mountains for over thirty days." Ed's desperation had convinced me I had to come out here. We're his last hope. Ten years ago, when I blindly launched into this volunteer search-dog career, I promised I would never leave anyone behind. I've kept my word so far.

The helicopter shudders. I clutch the handle and, for an instant, I question what I am doing here. My husband's pissed. He told me not to come, tried to order me not to get on the

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chopper. Yet here I am, in the path of an avalanche, risking Tasha's life and my own. Somehow, I find it easier to jump out of a helicopter than to talk to my husband about our relationship. Is my ego driving this? My promise to the family? Or is it that I have something to prove?

My eyes lock onto the pilot's. He nods, *now*. Before I ease Tasha into Bill's extended arms, I look to her to tell me something. Anything. I know I'll never bond with another being like I have with her. Everything we've struggled for hinges on this moment. Her kind brown eyes, full of confidence and foggy cataracts, stare into mine. Her calmness quiets my shaking body.

"Tasha," I whisper into her ear, "Time to go."

After cuing her with a wrist flick, she lunges out and spread-eagles onto Bill's face and chest, knocking him backward. The two regain their feet and run together toward the rock for protection. Slipping off my seat, I sit on the floor. One at a time, my boots find purchase on the icy skid. Slinging my pack over my shoulder, I let go of the safety handle, then jump.