

Ordeal on the Mountain

By Jim Taylor

At first he was aware of just the cold. Then he saw lights flickering in the darkness. He felt the pain and self-awareness begin returning and with its return he heard noises; cursing, sounds like a baby whimpering, someone crying, and the screaming. The realization flooded him that he was the one crying and whoever was screaming was very close by him. As his memory started functioning, the recall of what had happened suddenly rushed in on him with such force that it took his breath away and left him feeling weaker than before. The plane had crashed! He began to shake. He realized his teeth were chattering and he struggled to move, get up, and find warmth. As he did he became aware that he was no longer in the airplane and that somehow he was outside of it. He could not remember how he got there! It had to be warmer by the fires that were flickering in the darkness a short distance away.

As he moved, his memory continued to return and he realized that the noises he was hearing around him were from people who had been with him in the airplane, injured people! What should he do? The enormity of the responsibility made him momentarily panicky and briefly took his breath away. Not knowing what else to do, aware more than ever that he had been injured, he sat up, painfully rose to his knees, and cautiously got to his feet. Taking inventory he found that his legs, though painful, seemed to work OK. His left arm was not though and it felt as if his shoulder was broken. His whole body felt beaten and battered and his head felt numb. For some reason he was unable to see out of his left eye. And reaching up to wipe it, he brought away a bloody hand. Further exploration revealed a large gash on his forehead was running blood down his forehead and into his eye. He wiped the eye as best he could and then looked around for something to put on the cut in his head. Seeing a red cloth nearby he made his way unsteadily to pick it up. Even though it was only a few yards away, it seemed to take a long time to get to it. When he did, he discovered the cloth was actually a blood-soaked woman laying there screaming, hoarsely now, and then weaker. He knelt down to see if there was anything he could do, saying to her, "There, there. Someone will be coming to help. You'll be OK," not knowing exactly what he should say. He was never sure she was aware of him. She faded, getting weaker and weaker, until her mouth was just making the shape of screaming but no sound was coming out. Soon not even breath was coming out and she was still. He'd forgotten about the cut in his head.

Shaking, cold and hurting, he stood up once more and looked toward the fires. Some of the fires seemed to be dying down. He saw figures moving about and made his way toward them. Groups of people were

gathering near one of the fires while others were busily walking around. As he stumbled toward them someone said, "Hey! Come over here. We'll help you," and he turned toward the voice. Someone guided him into the group and gentle hands began to wipe the blood from his face while someone else applied a makeshift bandage to his head.

The fire felt warm but he could not stop shaking and remarked on it to no one in particular. A voice in the darkness, a woman's voice, said, "It's shock," but offered no advice. Later he figured she probably had her own shock to deal with. Whoever it was that bandaged his head also made a rough sling for his left arm from a scrap of fabric, apologizing that they had no painkillers to give him as they did so. About that time four men carried in another person that was bleeding badly and all attention focused on them. Looking around he saw that several groups of men were working to rescue any survivors of the crash that they could, gathering them and bringing them back close to the fire. He went to see if he could help.

"With your busted wing, I'm not sure" a man called Bob said when he offered a hand. "Why don't you see if you can find us some shelter? We can't stay out in this weather. It's fixing to become a blizzard and we may not be found real soon. If we can find someplace to get in out of the wind it would help. You look for shelter and I will get some guys started gathering firewood. We're gonna need it." And with that the man turned to the group of people around him and began assigning jobs.

Snow was falling faster now and the wind was picking up but he could tell that the airplane had come down on a fairly level place. It had slid through the trees and rocks tearing apart until what was left had impacted on a very steep rocky snow-covered hillside. The forward part of the airplane was buried into the snow of the hillside and could not be seen. The tail of the airplane lay slightly downhill from where they were, maybe three hundred yards or so, and parts of the fuselage were scattered along a shallow furrow in the earth where the main body had gouged its way until it hit the hillside. Along that track were bodies, luggage, papers, scraps of metal, parts of trees and rocks and it all looked like one big jumble in the moonlight. Looking around he could see no lights indicating a house or some kind of structure. The dark mountains seemed to drift in and out of the falling snow and it suddenly struck him that they were a long way from civilization. If they were going to have shelter they would have to make it themselves.

He returned to the group, found Bob, who seemed to be in charge, told him that there were no buildings of any kind that he could find,

and that he'd not seen any evidence of a cave they could use either. "We could use the fuselage of the airplane, but it's under that snow and there is a lot of snow above it on the cliff. It could be buried under an avalanche at any time" he said. Bob asked him if he had any ideas and he replied, "We'll have to build a shelter. There are trees and brush we can use. I'll need two or three people to help." Raising his voice Bob asked the people around the fire for a couple volunteers to help build a shelter while others gathered firewood. A teenage boy volunteered, and then a woman and an older man joined him. "How many people do we have?" he asked. "Right now we have seventeen alive, eight dead. There were twenty-nine on board. We haven't found everyone" Bob replied.

Leading his volunteers, he walked a short distance to a growth of young trees. Most of them were eight to twelve feet tall and fairly thin. He explained his idea for a shelter: "First, several of us clear an area here about this big around," as he made a circle some ten or fifteen feet across with the toe of his boot. "While that is being done the rest of us will strip as much wire, straps, cloth or whatever can be used as rope from the wreckage of the airplane. We'll use it to tie the trees. What we'll do is pull the tops over and tie them together. Once that is done we'll cover them with as much tree branches and brush as we can. What we want is a sort of wikiup like the Indians built. If we leave a hole in the center of the roof area we can build a fire in the middle and the smoke will go up out of the shelter. If we get a lot of snow it should cover pretty well and protect us from the wind. Questions?"

He figured he would not be much help clearing the brush with only one good hand so he and a woman headed toward the wreckage to salvage some wire. She told him her name was Marge, and that, after visiting her sister, she had been traveling by herself and was returning home to her husband and children. She had been banged up in the crash but was not seriously hurt. He introduced himself simply as "Pete." Last names were unimportant at this point. Listening to her talk as they worked took his mind off his aches and pains and, if it had not been for the circumstances, the conversation would have been pleasant. While they were sorting through the wreckage, he discovered a blanket. It had some dried blood on it, which he tried not to think about as he wrapped it around his shoulders. It helped keep the wind from chilling him so badly.

After they had gathered a large bunch of wire, seatbelts and rags he headed back to the shelter area and unloaded the bundle while Marge continued to recover more materials to use. He then headed back to the wreckage with three young men along to help him with the salvage effort. There were others helping clear the ground at the

shelter area and they began pulling the trees over to construct the shelter.

The snow was falling faster and heavier now and the wind was picking up. Within an hour the shelter had taken shape and brush was being piled on its sides and tops to form a windbreak. Several large pieces of metal from the wreckage had been dragged to the shelter and were used to form the side of the shelter where the wind was blowing the hardest. Seat cushions had been brought in, a fire started in the center of the shelter, and a stack of firewood was growing near the doorway.

The storm had begun howling intensely and everyone had moved or been carried to the shelter. Pete counted fifteen including himself. "I thought there were seventeen of us." Looking around Bob replied, "Two died just before we moved them. There are several others who may not make it through the night."

The wind drove snow through gaps in the branches of the shelter but as time went on less and less snow came through. As the night passed, the cold became more and more tolerable. People huddled together seeking body heat while the wind howled outside. Sometime during the night a seriously injured young girl and two older men died, leaving fourteen survivors. The bodies were taken outside and laid nearby to await the end of the storm. All that day and throughout the night the storm lashed the shelter. Those in pain moaned and slept fitfully. Some of the others tried to talk to take their minds off the hunger in their stomachs and the cold around them. One of the men had fashioned a couple of crude bowls from pieces of the aircraft skin and they used these to melt snow for drinking water but food was on everyone's mind.

Late that night Pete woke up to a strange sound – silence! The wind had stopped. Several of the people were snuggled up close to him for warmth. He tried unsuccessfully not to waken them as he got up to go outside. The night was clear and very cold. The stars were bright and unobscured by any ground lights. He brought in some more wood for the fire and then lay down trying not to twist his injured arm. He was hopeful. A clear day meant a chance for rescue! The rest of the night passed slowly. His sleep was intermittent; thirty or forty minutes and then he would awaken. The cold was seeping in from outside and while the side of him facing the fire was warm; any part of him exposed to the wall of the shelter was cold. His arm and head were constantly aching. And his thoughts of the prospect of rescue kept him from sleeping. He tossed and turned and took no satisfaction in the fact that everyone else was restless and uncomfortable also.

At daylight he was up, looking around outside. The snow was not as deep as he figured it would be, the wind having scoured some of away. There were deep drifts in places but overall it was not too bad. He considered the fourteen people in the shelter; three females and eleven males. And of the eleven men only six were mobile. Four men were injured badly and were still unconscious. One man had a broken leg and while he tried to help as much as he could, his main chore was to keep the fire going and snow melting on the fire for drinking water. Of the six that were mobile, Pete was the worst injured though with a broken shoulder. "Whatcha thinking Pete?" Bob asked, the words breaking through Pete's thoughts. "Rescue" Pete said, and then went on to explain that with this being the first clear day since the crash the rescue services would be out in full force. "I figure we should do something to help them find us," he said. Bob said he had the same idea and as they talked excitedly, the others gathered around listening to them. Someone remarked how hungry they were. All agreed so Bob said, "Why don't a couple of you search the wreckage and see if you can find some food? The rest of us will try to clear snow from the tail so it can be spotted from the air." A teenage girl named Sarah asked, "What about making a sign in the snow?" "Great idea!" Bob replied. "You work on that while we clear the tail, then we will help you."

The work helped keep him warmer even though he only had the use of one arm. It also took his thoughts off the hunger. Then as Sarah was making the giant SOS in the snow, she began yelling for them. The area where she had chosen to make the distress signal was in the debris path. As she was tramping through the snow she stumbled over various pieces of the airplane and luggage! They had not thought of it, but here was a way to keep warmer. They began searching for more luggage. Many suitcases had been broken open from the crash and their contents gone but there were others that were more or less intact. Some just seemed scuffed. To avoid unnecessarily invading someone else's property they took the luggage they gathered to a central point and removed only what was needed for survival, leaving the rest to be picked up when they were rescued. Before long everyone was wearing an odd assortment of jackets, coats, shirts, and other clothes to help keep them warm. Dry socks were a very welcome find.

The two who were searching the wreckage for food returned and reported their lack of success. They began to help the search for more luggage. As more luggage was found, a few candy bars were discovered along with some packages of cookies. They divided these between everyone. They all savored the food, little as it was, but their stomachs growled for more. As the search of the luggage continued a small locked container was found in one of the suitcases and Pete recognized it immediately as a gun case. He began looking through the

suitcase in an effort to find a key. All he turned up however were two boxes of .357 Magnum cartridges. Wishing he had two good hands he pried at the locks on the gun case until Marge took it away from him and said, "Let me try." Producing a Leatherman tool from somewhere, she worked for a few moments and popped the locks open one by one. Inside was a well-kept Smith & Wesson Model 19 with a 4" barrel. Marge handed it to him and asked, "Do you know how to use this?" With a grin he replied, "Yes ma'am. With either hand though only one is working at the moment." "Good!" she said. "Maybe you can get us something to eat." Pete looked at her for a moment and then grinned. "That's a great idea! Will you help me?" and she said, "Sure." "Where did you come up with that Leatherman Tool?" he asked her. She said, "It was in my carry-on luggage. I probably would have gotten into trouble if they had found it, but I had forgotten it was in there. After the crash I found my bag and last night as I was going through it I discovered it. I figured it would come in handy." "You're more correct than you know," Pete replied soberly.

While the rest of the survivors worked on making an SOS sign in the snow and were searching for more usable items, he and Marge set out to find food. He had demonstrated to her the one-handed reload that most combat shooters knew by tucking the gun, cylinder open, in his belt and loading it with his good hand while his belt held it from slipping. She appeared to be duly impressed. As they began searching for signs of game, Pete led the way lower down the mountain toward a clearing he could see in the distance. Walking along, they found rabbit tracks and changed their course to follow them. Moving as quietly as possible they came through the trees. Pete suddenly stopped so fast Marge bumped into him. He made a "shush" sound and pointed. Ahead of them a rabbit was digging, clearing the snow so it could reach something to eat. Holding the pistol Pete rested his arm against the tree and lined up the sights, anxious since he did not know what distance the gun was sighted for. The shot was loud in the stillness and the rabbit leaped straight up and then fell back flopping and splattering bright red blood on the white snow. Marge grabbed his injured arm excitedly and said, "You got him! You got him!" At that Pete almost passed out from the pain. Yelling a short "DAMN!" he slumped down and as he did she burst into tears saying, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Recovering his breath Pete felt badly for her and put his good arm around her saying, "I know it was an accident. Don't cry." And pulling her close to him, tried to wipe her tears. They stood that way for a moment until embarrassment overcame them both. They jerked apart and then laughed at their reaction. "Let's clean the rabbit and keep hunting," he said.

Over the next couple of hours he shot three more rabbits. Marge cleaned them, never complaining about the mess. They talked little,

intent on being as quiet as possible. Hunger was of larger importance than communication. By now their feet were wet and cold. If they stopped for too long they both began to shiver, so they kept moving, slowly, looking for more food. Coming through some thick brush Marge spotted movement ahead and motioned to Pete. He moved to where he could see what she was pointing at and saw four deer! One was only about fifty yards away and resting his arm on a tree branch. Pete lined up the sights carefully and squeezed the trigger. At the shot, the deer kicked its back legs up, then jumped, and ran into the brush. All the deer had disappeared. "Did you hit it?" she asked excitedly. He nodded, never taking his eyes off the trees. "Let's go get it,," she said. Speaking in low tones Pete explained that they needed to wait for a while. If the bullet had not struck exactly where he was aiming the deer may only be injured. If they did not move or make much noise it would not go far and would lie down. Eventually it would bleed out and they could find it easily. If they went into the brush looking for it too soon, it could jump and run and make it difficult if not impossible to locate. So they waited, shivering and growing colder. At one point he said, "I'm getting cold" and seeking warmth they moved closer to each other. She put her arms around him and held him close while he put his good arm around her. Body heat helped, though his feet bothered him more than anything else. They felt like blocks of ice.

After what seemed like an eternity he said, "Let's go find that deer" and leading the way walked to where it was standing when he shot it. The deer's tracks were plain to see in the snow and as they followed them into the brush they could see blood also. They followed the trail for about one hundred and fifty feet, in through several places thick with brush until they came to a deadfall of logs piled and jumbled on top of each other. There at the base of it lay the deer. It had died trying to crawl under the deadfall. They stood there looking at it for a moment. Pete said, "Let's drag it out to the clearing and then I'll go get help." They each grabbed a leg and, with exertion that left them both winded, managed to get it about a hundred yards into a clearing. He explained to her how to clean it and talked her through opening it up and starting. After she had begun cleaning the deer, he started back toward the camp to get help. Stopping, he turned and said, "In spite of the circumstances, I enjoyed being with you today" and then turned and walked off before she replied.

When he arrived at camp, his head was throbbing, his shoulder ached and he was exhausted. Hearing of their success, three of the guys along with Sarah, and Jessica the other female, took off down the mountain to help bring in the meat. The thought of food gave everyone energy, at least for the time being. Pete removed his wet shoes and socks and tried to warm his feet by the fire. They looked red and swollen and felt numb. One of the guys helped warm them by

wetting a cloth in water that was heating on the fire and wrapping his feet. Feeling began to slowly return and it was painful, but that was supposed to be a good sign, right? By the time everyone returned with the rabbits and the deer, his feet had warmed up. Someone had given him a dry pair of socks and he had on some boots they had recovered from the wreckage. He was feeling more normal – meaning his head ached and his arm and shoulder hurt and he felt weak from hunger but he was not shivering from cold any longer. Marge looked miserable and he figured her feet were just as bad as his had been. While some of the group was butchering the animals, Pete and Sarah helped Marge get warm and dry. He heated water for warming up her feet and for drinking and tried to help as much as he could with one arm. Within a short while she had on dry clothing, her shivering had stopped and she was warming up and relaxing.

Sipping a cup of hot water, she looked at him with a puzzled look on her face and asked, "Why are you staring at me?" He mentally shook himself and said, "I'm sorry. It's just that we have gone through some pretty wild experiences together and I don't know anything about you other than your first name." She looked at him for a moment and then smiled and teasing him said, "Well, I've done things with you that I've never done with any other man" and they both laughed. The smell of venison and rabbit cooking filled the air and someone called out "Come and get it!" which brought everyone to the fire. The meat was handed out and someone said, "Shouldn't we offer thanks?" All agreed and Bob led a prayer of thanksgiving for their lives, for the food and for the families of those who had died. He closed by asking for a quick rescue. Then everyone sat down and tasted the meat. Pete thought that he had never eaten anything so wonderful in his life. Soon everyone was quiet, concentrating on the food. When their stomachs began to feel full the conversations started and someone said, "What if they don't find us very soon?" Many at first dismissed that idea but Bob said that it was a good point, one that they had to consider. This was already the third day and they had not heard or seen any aircraft searching for them. The deer and rabbits they were eating were not going to last very long so they would need more. Pete was obviously a hunter and that would be his responsibility. Jessica said she had studied botany. She said she would try to find plants that they could eat but it being winter, there probably wasn't much. Others would dig into the wreckage on the hillside and see what they could salvage. They would make more signs in the snow, prepare signal fires, and search for food and clothing. A latrine would have to be designated. With the satisfied feeling of full stomachs they began to prepare for their various chores when a small cry stopped them. Inside the shelter Sarah was crying. Two of the seriously injured men were dead. She had been taking them some water and discovered it. Now there are only twelve of us, Pete thought sadly.

Evening was falling by the time the bodies were moved. The survivors gathered around the fire in a somber mood, either talking quietly or not talking at all. Then Marge spoke up and said, "Does anyone have an idea where we are?" At first they all looked at each other, no one saying anything. Then the discussion started but after a short time it was agreed that they had no idea. Somewhere in Northern California or Southern Oregon ... maybe. They could have been blown off course. They really had no way of knowing. None of the mountain peaks looked familiar to any of them. One of the men spoke up and said, "The plane should have an emergency crash beacon. It's supposed to be activated in the event of a crash to allow rescuers to home in on the crash site." "What if it didn't have one?" someone asked. The young man went on to explain that all commercial aircraft were equipped with them. The crash may have broken it but from what he knew that was almost impossible. Rescue should find them. In the meantime they would have to do everything possible to stay alive. As they continued talking they decided to divide the daily chores. There would be plenty for each one to do. Firewood had to be gathered and food had to be found. The business of keeping everyone alive and working for survival would be a priority. It was no time to get depressed. As he was thinking about what he could do to help their situation there was movement by him and Marge sat down. She smiled and said, "I really enjoyed hunting with you today. I have never done anything like that and never thought I would. I hated the thought of killing animals but when it came to a choice between starving and killing the animal, I found myself making the choice not to starve." He smiled at her as she went on. "My husband is not a hunter and I don't have any friends who are so I never had a chance to try it, even though I always thought that I wouldn't like it and I probably wouldn't have tried it anyway."

Suddenly she was quiet and Pete looked at her and asked, "What's wrong?" She stared at him for a moment and then, embarrassed-like said, "I am just babbling on. I don't know what's the matter with me." Several people around them began laughing and she grew more embarrassed. Someone spoke up and said, "It's stress. We have been through a life-threatening situation. We are all experiencing emotions that most likely we have never felt before. It's normal under the circumstances." Pete looked at her for a moment and said, "How long have you been married?" "Almost twenty years" was the reply. "You must have been a kid when you got married," he said. She laughed at that and it was as if a light had been turned on. "Keep it up you old flatterer," she said, "Flattery will get you everywhere" and with that she began to laugh again. Others around the fire joined in the laughter and the mood in the shelter was lifted. Soon everyone was talking, sharing stories of good times, of their lives and loves and of what they

did for a living. The talk went on for a couple hours and then gradually died down as everyone began to get sleepy. Soon only the crackling of the fire was heard, though every now and again someone whimpered in their sleep or moaned softly as unwanted images intruded into their dreams.

The noise broke through disturbed dreams and he was suddenly awake, though at first he wasn't sure why. Then it hit him ... the wind! Howling, screaming at times, plucking at the shelter as if it had hands, the wind was roaring like a hurricane. One by one others awoke and someone in the dark said, "What is it?" "A blizzard I'd guess" came the reply. His head was throbbing and his shoulder and arm ached so he got up and moved to the doorway of the shelter. A blanket had been draped to provide a door and he moved it aside, looking out. The best he could see it was driven snow and high winds. He lay back down and tried to sleep but drifted in and out the rest of the night. Others were restless also, some getting up from time to time to add wood to the fire or just to look out the doorway. He awoke to the smell of meat cooking and found several of the women fixing a meal. One of the men had crafted a cooking plate from some metal and they were frying some meat on it. Snow was melting into drinking water in homemade pans and everyone seemed busy with something. Pete figured they were all trying to ignore the howling wind outside and he wished he had a book to read. Voicing his thoughts one of the men said, "Here" and handed him a New Testament. He thought, "Why not? It's been a while" and opening to the Gospel of John he began to read, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The rest of the day he spent reading, stopping now and then to help out different ones with whatever they happened to be working on. One man was trying to make a small kettle. The problem with using the metal from the aircraft was that the aluminum was fairly thin and would burn through if exposed to heat for a long period of time. His idea was to make a double-layered pan so it would be able to take the heat better without burning through. From time to time someone would venture outside to drag firewood into the shelter. Others went out just from the sheer boredom of being stuck in a small shelter. They didn't stay out long, the heavy winds driving the cold through their clothing fairly quickly.

When the double-layer "kettle" was finished they melted snow in it, then added bones from the deer. Some had been smashed to get at the marrow. The bones were boiled to not only soften them, but to make a soup as it were, a broth that would be warm and nourishing. By that evening Pete had finished reading the Gospel of John and had even shared some passages with the group at their request, reading aloud the part about the Last Supper and the Crucifixion. When he had finished Bob stood up and said a prayer, asking for help for the rescue

team to find them and get them off the mountain. He asked the Lord to keep the rescue teams safe and to comfort the families of everyone on the airplane. There were not many dry eyes when he said, "Amen" and everyone echoed it. Bob looked around and said, "It's fitting. Today is Sunday," which surprised Pete and evidently several others. He was not sure what bothered him the most, the fact that he had lost track of what day it was, or the fact that he had not realized he lost track. A voice interrupted his thoughts and he said, "I'm sorry. I was thinking about something and wasn't paying attention." Marge repeated her statement. "I said, you were sure quiet today." He thought for a moment and said, "Well, I guess it's partially the noise of the wind. And partially it's ... I just felt quiet today." "Do you read the Bible much?" she asked. "Not as often as I should", he admitted, "but I have been thinking about it more the last couple days." He smiled at the statement and then started to chuckle a little. "It's funny how when we are in trouble we turn to the things that we should have been doing before trouble happened. It's just that we get so busy or wrapped up in our own lives that we often let the important things go. Then when something tragic happens we try to make up for the lack." Marge was quiet for a moment and then said, "Yes, I see that quite a bit. I have done it myself from time to time." Curious he asked, "What kind of work do you do?" and the answer was a surprise to him. "I work with my husband who pastors a church." "Really! What do you do?" he asked and she said, "I have a degree in counseling and work with him. It's a program our Church runs. We do marriage counseling, both pre-nuptial and family." He showed his surprise saying, "I would never have guessed it." "Well," she asked, "What is it that you thought I did?" He looked at her a moment and then smiling said, "I would have thought that maybe you were a model." She began to laugh and running her hand through her hair said, "There you go flattering me again. I believe you are a flirt! Just what is it you do for a living?" Pete shifted so he could see her face better in the light from the fire and said, "I have done a lot of things. I raise a few cows. I shoot and hunt a lot and I write for a firearms publication." He paused, "At least I did. I haven't written anything for the last year." "That sounds interesting", she said, "Why did you stop writing?" He was quiet for a long moment and then said, "My wife died about a year ago and I haven't done any writing since then. I just have not been able to get motivated." She placed a hand on his arm and said softly, "I'm sorry. I can see you miss her. How long were you married?" "Thirty-five years" was the reply and she said, "You must have been a kid when you got married." He looked up and saw the grin and then burst out laughing. Others around joined in the laughter and he said, "OK. You got me." Leaning close he whispered, "Thanks. I needed that." Her eyes twinkled back at him as she smiled.

That night was a long one. Sleep was difficult. The wind drove the cold into the shelter. It howled along the ground outside and raced through the treetops. It seemed as if it would never stop. Inside the shelter the survivors huddled in small groups or snuggled together for warmth and slept restlessly, some muttering, others crying out from time to time. Morning seemed a long time coming. Pete did not think he slept but apparently he did for something woke him and as he looked around he saw a couple of the ladies cooking over the fire. Several pans of snow were melting for drinking water, and wonder of wonders . . . the wind had died down at some point in the night. Going outside he saw that the clouds were down on the mountain and visibility was no more than a couple hundred yards at best. The wind had scoured the ground and in places there was no snow at all! It had been blown on to some other place. It did not seem as cold as it had been and the trees were dripping. By noon it had not changed much and as they talked they all agreed dejectedly that chances of rescue today were unlikely. Since they were running low on food Pete decided to go hunting again and asked Marge if she would like to go along. She agreed and suggested a couple others go along to help. Two of the younger men, Bill and Todd, and the teenage girl Sarah were eager to get out. They dressed as warmly as they could and each took an extra pair of socks along.

They hunted for several hours bagging five rabbits but did not see any sign of larger game. With only a couple hours of daylight left, Pete wanted to try hunting lower down the mountain. Talking it over they decided Bill would take the rabbits back to camp and let everyone know that the rest of them were continuing to hunt. If they did not make it back by noon the next day a group should start looking for them. Pete gave Bill a general idea of where they would be. As Bill headed up the mountain, they started down. The fog was thinner here and visibility was better. They moved slowly, walking about fifteen or twenty feet apart with Pete in the center. They had covered a mile or so when Sarah signaled for them to stop. She motioned for Pete and he worked his way over to her. Softly she whispered, "I saw something moving down by that dead tree." Pointing to a clearing a hundred yards or so below she indicated where she had seen it. "It looked big" she said. Todd and Marge came up to them and Pete explained what was going on. Then he told them to stay where they were and he would sneak down and try to find whatever it was that Sarah saw. "If you hear me shoot, come on down," he instructed. "A few prayers might be in order. We could use the meat." And with that he started toward the clearing. He tried to move as quietly as possible, not stepping on sticks if he could help it. He put his toe down first and then his heel, allowing him to feel what was under his foot before transferring weight to it. He did not go fast or cover a lot of ground walking like that, but it was quiet and that was the first priority. It

took him close to half an hour to come up to the deadfall where Sarah had seen "something". Moving around the dead tree his breath started coming faster, for the rooted up stump and digging told him that there had been a bear here! It looked like it had been digging for grubs in the rotted wood. Now he moved even more slowly and cautiously. The pistol in his hand felt small and he wished for two good arms and a rifle. Easing ever so slowly through the trees, careful not to make a sound, he would take a slow step and then stand there for the count of five. One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand, four-one thousand, fiveone thousand. And then he would move one more slow, cautious step. He had moved maybe fifteen feet in this manner and was standing near an evergreen tree, about to take another step when something stopped him. He could hear water trickling in a small stream nearby, but along with that he heard something else. Through the trees to his right something was moving! Snuffling, grunting quietly as if talking to itself, the bear came into view. His attention focused in on it until he was not aware of anything else. Pete knew the shot had to be absolutely perfect. The pistol was just not all that powerful and the bullet had to be put exactly in the correct place or he would lose the bear and maybe get chewed on in the process.

With the gun raised and sights lined up he waited. He knew the front leg covered a bear's heart and that to attempt to shoot through the heavy leg bone with the pistol would be foolish. What he was waiting for was for the bear to take a step forward. At that moment the heart would be accessible with a shot going through the chest wall. There would be no large bones to protect it. The shot had to be timed just right and so he waited, trembling slightly, sights aligned, hammer back, finger lightly on the trigger. Suddenly without thought the gun went off! He was not conscious of pulling the trigger. The bear had moved and the gun had gone off almost involuntarily. At the shot the bear roared and growled, rolling around on the ground and then it jumped up and he fired again, this time into it's throat just below the chin as it looked his way. And just as quickly as it started it was over. Quiet. And Pete was shaking. It wasn't fear as much as it was excitement and adrenaline but he was shaking never the less and continued to shake. He didn't realize all he'd done and that he was no longer standing. A little while later Marge, Sarah and Todd came rushing to where he was sitting, leaning against a tree. Marge knelt by him with concern on her face and asked, "Are you alright?" He laughed and said, "Yes ma'am I am!" and laughed some more. Sarah and Todd were looking toward the bear and asked, "Are you sure it's dead?" He assured them, "Yes," he remembered. "I checked it." They all gathered around it marveling at its size and then set to work. Pete helped as much as he could with one arm. Skinning the bear turned out to be quite an ordeal. Having only Marge's Leatherman and a pocketknife recovered from the luggage did not make it any easier. By the time

the bear was skinned it was getting late and they knew they would never make it back to camp. "We're going to have to camp here," Pete said, "so why don't Todd and I work at getting camp set up and you two finish cleaning the bear?"

The ladies had the bear cleaned and were washing by the time a lean-to was constructed. Marge had taken the bear's bladder out intact. She had rinsed it out and was using it to carry water back from the stream. The lean-to that Pete and Todd had created was like half of an A-frame. Constructed of tree limbs and covered over with pine limbs it was sort of like a tent half, having three closed sides. They had a fire going in front of it and the rear half provided shelter from the wind. It would keep any rain or snow off them also. Sarah carried some meat from the bear over to the fire and showed it to Pete and Todd. She had the heart and liver and what she wanted them to see was where the bullet from Pete's shot had torn a huge hole through the bear's heart. They impaled the meat on some sticks and began cooking as darkness fell on the mountain. The fog was closing in again and a chill was in the air. After eating their fill they sat around the fire and talked. They talked about the crash and of those who had died. They talked of rescue and of foods they wanted to eat and drinks they missed and of family and friends and of good times. The night air was fairly still for a change but was damp and chilly. After a time they huddled together for warmth and fell asleep on the pine branches and grass with which they had lined the floor of the lean-to. Todd had piled wood nearby so no one had to go far to add wood to the fire during the night. Pete woke up from time to time, as did the others. Usually someone just added some wood to the fire and then lay down again. It was a routine they all seemed to have adjusted to in the last few days.

The sunlight shining in Pete's eyes woke him with a start. It was a clear day. After cooking more bear for breakfast, it was decided that Sarah and Todd would each take a shoulder from the bear and pack it back to camp. There they could organize a group to come back down the mountain and get the rest of the bear. Marge and Pete would work on getting the bear reduced to manageable portions by the time Sarah and Todd returned. As Sarah and Todd started back Pete and Marge began working on the bear. They were unsure of how long they worked, but eventually the bear was reduced to portable portions. They had removed the back legs and cut the body of the bear into six parts. After they removed the head, Pete discovered what he had suspected. His shot to the throat had broken the bear's neck.

They walked to the stream, washed up and then sat on the grass enjoying the sunshine. Marge asked if his shoulder was bothering him and he said, "A little." She moved around to his side and began to massage his neck and back, taking some of the tension out of it. He

was suddenly aware of her, of her soft hands, her smell, her closeness and turning, he looked into her eyes a few inches away. She stared back at him for a moment and then leaned forward and kissed him full on the lips and then hugged his neck. He put his arm around her and she nestled her head on his neck. They sat there for what seemed a long time until she let go of him and sat back as he released her. Not looking at him she said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that." "Don't say that!" he protested. "It was nice." Raising her head and looking at him she said, "Yes, but I'm a married woman and shouldn't be thinking the things I have been thinking the last couple days." "About me?" Pete asked, surprised. "About you and me." she said in a voice so low he could barely hear her. Reaching over he took her hand and held it while he spoke. "Look, we have been through a lot this week. We were nearly killed. People have died all around us. We have been thrown together in a tough situation where we may not come out of it alive even now. It's understandable. Our emotions are raw and open and vulnerable right now. Don't beat yourself up." She was crying softly now and he was not sure exactly why until she said, "Thank you, but I know the Lord is not pleased with me and the things I have been thinking about." He sat there listening as she went on. "I have counseled women who have gotten involved with other men besides their husbands and never understood why they would do such a thing. Now I think I know." He did not know what to say and sat there, holding her hand while she wept silently. When her tears slowed he raised his hand and wiped her face and then cupped her cheek. Looking into her eyes he said, "I would never involve you in something that you feel is wrong." She dropped her eyes and said simply, "I would give myself to you if you wanted me." and started crying again. He did not understand all that was happening and was beginning to feel a bit frustrated with the way this was going. Trying to be tactful he said, "You are a beautiful and desirable woman but this is neither the time nor the place. Let's work on surviving and after we are back in civilization we can decide what we want to do with our lives. Okay?" Sniffling she nodded her head and said, "I'm sorry I started this. I shouldn't have said anything." Helping her to her feet he put his arm around her and pulled her to him, saying, "Don't apologize. I'm flattered that a lovely lady like you is attracted to an old fart like me," and they both began to laugh. "How old are you?" she asked and he shot back, "Ninety seven!" "No. I am serious. How old are you?" He smiled at her and said, "Sixty one." "Really?" she asked with doubt in her voice. "Yes. I am old enough to know better but too young to resist," he joked. "You did a good job of resisting as far as I could tell," she said dryly. He looked up quickly and seeing a small smile on her face he smiled back, not sure of what he should say. He tried steering the talk to something less dangerous. "I hope we can pack that meat back to camp this afternoon." She looked at him and then began laughing in earnest and shaking her head started walking back to the

lean-to. Pete felt relieved to see Sarah and Todd along with three others already there. They had started to load up, getting ready to pack the meat back to camp. "Where have you been?" Sarah asked. "We were almost ready to start looking for you." "Cleaning up from the butchering" Pete answered. "We were a mess." As they were leaving to head back, Marge was busy working on something by the bear remains. It was getting late and someone said, "Come on Marge. We need to go." "Go ahead" was her reply. "I will catch up with you in a couple minutes." Sure enough, they had been walking about ten minutes when she caught up with them, breathing hard from the exertion. "What were you doing?" Pete asked. "Oh, just checking on something" was her reply, and she said no more about it.

It was getting close to dark by the time they arrived at the camp and Bob had bad news and good news. The bad news was the two unconscious men had died during the night. While this saddened them, the good news cheered them. "We heard helicopters today!" "Really!" Pete exclaimed. "Yep. They were searching several miles down the valley east of here. Hopefully they will come up this way tomorrow. We have signals ready and everyone is excited." That night they feasted on bear. One of the men had fashioned a pan of metal from the airplane and they roasted the fatty part of the shoulder in it. The greasy drippings were especially tasty and everyone went back for more. Marge was excited about the prospect of rescue and asked, "Do you really think they will come?" No one had an answer other than they sure hoped so. Several times during the evening Pete found himself alone with Marge when he went outside for something. While he felt a little awkward, she never indicated that she was in the least bit troubled. In fact she acted as if nothing had happened. He was confused and not sure how to act at first, but in the end figured she had the right idea. Act as if nothing had happened.

No one was sleepy that night and while people dozed from time to time, all through the night there was always someone awake and talking with someone else. The feeling was almost electric. Waking up early, Pete went outside to get some firewood and found large snowflakes falling. While there was not much wind, it was overcast with low clouds and that would obviously hamper any rescue efforts. He accepted it for what it was and set about collecting firewood and dragging it close to the shelter. He was hesitant about going back inside for he knew the weather would cause many of the survivors to feel depressed, especially because their hopes had been so high the night before. He just did not want to be the bearer of bad news, so he broke what firewood he could and waited. Eventually they found out about the weather and one by one came out to look at it. Several maintained an optimistic attitude while others were obviously downcast. He watched Marge and was surprised to see her so cheerful.

The teenagers were the most depressed and Marge spent time with them, encouraging them and cheering them up. By 10:00 a.m. many of the people who had stayed up all night were napping and Pete was feeling bored. He asked Bob about the signal fires and was surprised that no one was out there, ready to light them if any aircraft came within sight. He told Bob he would go and stay close to them for a few hours "just in case," and took matches and paper to stand guard. There were three signal fires laid out, ready to burn. They had twigs and dry wood with wadded rags and paper under them so they would start fairly quickly. Green pine branches with the needles on them lay nearby to be used to create smoke once the fires were going. It was hoped that the fires could be lit fast enough so that their smoke would be visible to any aircraft that came within a couple miles. It was certainly worth a try.

The snow fell heavily for a while and then lightened to just flurries. Every once in awhile it would start to snow heavily but it usually did not last for more than ten or fifteen minutes and then it would slow down. As Pete was checking the fires he heard someone coming and looked up to see Marge walking towards him. He smiled and said, "Hi," He wasn't sure what else to say. She smiled back and said, "Hi". Walking up to him, she handed him a bag and said, "This may help get the fires going quicker." In the bag he saw several bottles of fingernail polish, a can of hair spray and some rubbing alcohol. Surprised he asked, "Where did you get this?" "It was in some of the luggage" she told him. "I figured it would help." Looking up at him out of the corner of her eyes she added, "And I wanted to spend some time with you. It was a good excuse." He held her gaze for a minute and said, "You don't need an excuse. You are always welcome company." She seemed to relax at that and he understood that somehow it was important to her to have that assurance. They chatted about nothing for a moment and then he showed her the fires and how they were to work. "If we need to light them and you are here with me, dump the alcohol on the rags and paper. I will light a match and you hold the hair spray in back of it, pointed at the match. It will act like a blowtorch and we can get these fires going really fast."

They moved over to a fallen tree and sat down and waited. Just a few flakes were falling now and again. As they sat there Marge began to talk about her kids and how she missed them. Pete watched her as she talked, half listening and more taking in the woman herself than what she was saying. She was a desirable woman he said to himself. Intelligent, able, attractive, and full of life, and he felt the want in him building. Getting up he moved away two steps and said, "Don't stop. I just need to move," knowing that he had to put a little distance between them and focus on something else or he would take her in his arms – arm, he corrected himself – and he knew where it would go

after that. As she was talking about her son and his plans for college Pete suddenly turned to her and said "SSHHH! Listen!" and they both heard it. The familiar whop whop whop of helicopter blades coming up the valley! Marge grabbed the bag and ran with him to the first fire. He fumbled with the matches as she poured the alcohol on the rags and by the time he had the match lit she had the can of hairspray ready. Holding it in back of the match she pointed it at the pile of rags and paper and pushed the nozzle button. WHOOSH! Flame shot out and immediately the rags and paper were engulfed, the fire licking up to the twigs and small branches ahead of it. They ran to the next fire and repeated the procedure and again at the third fire. Then, out of breath, they ran back to the first fire, which by now was going pretty well, and began to pile the green pine branches on it. Smoke began billowing into the sky. Just then Bob and some of the others came running and took over the chore of making the other fires smoky. During all this time the sounds of the helicopter were getting louder and Pete wondered where it was. "Can anyone see it?" he yelled, but no one answered.

For the next twenty minutes the sounds of the helicopter alternately got louder and then quieter and then louder again. Pete figured out that they were searching a grid nearby. Whether or not they would search this part depended on how the grid was laid out. Everyone worked at keeping the fires going, milling around and talking and wondering. Then the sounds of the helicopter began to grow quieter and quieter. It was moving away. The disbelief ran through the group like water. Angry voices rose while some openly sobbed. Pete and Marge looked at each other and both had the same thought. Why aren't you disappointed? Neither voiced it however, and at that moment a low flying airplane came down the valley in front of them at about their altitude. It suddenly rolled to its right and turned flying across and then around their clearing. It then flew straight away dipping its wings, turned and came back across them at lower altitude. Now everyone was yelling and waving coats and branches! As the airplane continued to circle their location they heard the helicopter coming. It came in just over the treetops and hovered, then landed gently in the snowy clearing. It looked beautiful. Most of the people just stood there looking, almost afraid to believe it was real. Bob though approached the landing zone. Several people got out of the aircraft and met him. They were carrying medical bags and looked as if they knew what they were doing.

The next hours were a blur of activity. The more severely injured were treated first and were flown out in the helicopter. They wanted Pete to go since his head injury was infected and his shoulder looked as if it

needed immediate treatment but he insisted the women go first and raised such a fuss about it that they took Bill, the man with the broken leg as well as Sarah, Jessica and Marge. As Marge went to board the helicopter he hugged her and said, "I would rather be marooned on a desert island with you than with anyone else in the world. I will never forget you." She started crying and without saying anything turned and got on board and that quickly she was gone.

Other helicopters began arriving, bringing in Sheriff's Deputies, the Coroner's Department, Airline personnel and the first of the reporters. They loaded the remaining survivors on a large helicopter and in a very short time Pete found himself being offloaded at a hospital. His wounds were treated and the doctors said they were going to hold him for a few days until the infection in the gash in his head was under control. When they were starting to clean him up, one of the nurses discovered the pistol in his pocket and he thought she was going to have a heart attack. He unloaded it for them and then had them call a Deputy. He explained to the Deputy how he had obtained the gun and that it belonged to someone who evidently died in the crash. It had saved their lives however and Pete wanted the family to know that. He would not let the Deputy leave until he had put it down in his report.

The hospital stay of a couple days turned into a week but the time went by rather quickly. People from the Transportation Safety Board interviewed him first, wanting to know what he remembered about the crash. Then people from the airline interviewed him. The Police came and took a statement from him, as did someone from the Transportation Security Administration. By the time the TSA people came, he was ready to tell them to just copy his statement from the last group that was there. Several lawyers called and two actually came to his room, wanting to know if he was interested in suing the airline company. He declined and offered no explanation to either one. No one from the plane crash came by to see him except Bob, who brought his family along. They had an emotional visit and then said their goodbyes.

Eventually he was released from the hospital and made his way home. The airline offered free passage but he said no thanks and rented car. The drive was quiet, scenic and somehow restful. It took him four days to make the trip to New Mexico. He did not push it and stopped whenever he felt like doing so. Several nights he dreamed of the bear. Once he dreamed of Marge and woke up with a longing inside. In the morning the details of the dream had faded but it took a while for the longing to go away.

When he arrived home the house seemed large and especially empty. He felt lost at first. Gradually he merged back into the routine of his life and within a month felt fairly normal, except for those times when something would remind him of the crash, and the cold, and surviving. Sometimes the reminders would suddenly come out of nowhere and blindsides him, like the day he received the small package with no return address. He opened it to find a large bear's claw attached to a silver pendant on a silver chain. There was a short note that was unsigned. It said simply, "I will always love you."

LASSEN COUNTY NEWS

Authorities say the body of a man found in the mountains northwest of Susanville may be that of Peter Nellis of Raton, NM. Nellis, 74, has been missing for 2 months. The medical examiner issued a statement saying that the body is that of a white male, approximately 75 years old, who apparently suffered a heart attack while hiking. There was no evidence of foul play. There was no identification found on the body. The man wore a bear claw necklace. The bear's claw was in a silver mounting and had a silver chain. The body was discovered near the area where a commuter plane crashed almost 13 years ago killing 19 of the 29 aboard. Anyone who can help identify this person please call the Lassen County Sheriff's Department.