

# **A Rock and a Hard Place Study Guide**

## **A Rock and a Hard Place by Aron Ralston**

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## Plot Summary

In late April of 2003, author Aron Ralston goes on a solo-hiking trip outside of Moab, Utah. After spending a portion of his day with two young women he meets on the hike, Ralston parts ways with the women and continues into Blue John Canyon. During his hike he dislodges a large chockstone, which pins his right arm against the canyon wall. After a variety of failed attempts to dislodge the chockstone, Ralston is left with limited options. He either can wait for an unlikely rescue or perform the unthinkable task of amputating his own arm.

With only a small ration of water and two burritos, Ralston survives the next six days. He suffers from dehydration, hypothermia, and starvation. Finally, with no other options and time running out, Ralston amputates his arm and hikes out of the canyon.

Ralston tells his story of despair as he agonizes over not just his current predicament but also its lasting effects on his family and friends. He also shares tales of other adventures. An avid mountain climber, skier, and hiker, Ralston has seen his fair share of brushes with death, including being attacked by a black bear, getting caught in a current in the Colorado River, and surviving burial in an avalanche.

Ralston's story is a testament to a true outdoorsman who views risk as a pivotal part of his happiness. His accident in Blue John Canyon is, however, a freak accident. Gut wrenching and honest, Ralston leads the reader from his early beginnings as an outdoorsman to his darkest moments in Blue John Canyon. News of his survival story spanned the globe. His story is as unbelievable as it is inspiring, as it speaks to the basic will to survive.



# Prologue "Circulating with the Robbers Roosters"

## Prologue "Circulating with the Robbers Roosters" Summary and Analysis

John Griffith is a member of Butch Cassidy's gang, the Wild Bunch. He has the marked characteristic of one blue eye and one brown eye. He is nicknamed "Blue John" by his first employer, where he worked as a cook for the Harris cattle operation.

Along with Blue John, Silver Tip and Indian Ed are part of a second string of men who aid the Wild Bunch. Following a shootout in Roost Canyon, all three men disappear. Indian Ed is rumored to have gone to Oklahoma, Silver Tip escapes after ten years in prison, and Blue John is last seen in 1899 traveling toward Arizona or Mexico, never reaching a suspected destination of Lee's Ferry. Blue John vanishes.

The prologue is a brief introduction to John Griffith, a man known as Blue John. The canyon that Ralston becomes trapped in is named after him.



# Chapter 1 "Geologic Time Includes Now"

## Chapter 1 "Geologic Time Includes Now" Summary and Analysis

The chapter begins with a quote from *Desert Solitaire* by Edward Abbey. Ralston will soon scratch the phrase on the canyon wall. Ralston recounts the beginning of his solo trip into Blue John Canyon.

The trip begins on Saturday, April 26, 2003. Ralston ventures through Emery County on his mountain bike, having left his truck in a parking lot more than an hour ago. He heads for Horseshoe Canyon. On his back is a heavier-than-normal pack filled with canyoneering equipment, rappelling gear, a multi-tool, a gallon of water, five chocolate bars, two burritos, and a chocolate muffin. The supplies are enough to get him through the day. Also in the pack are a headlamp, headphones, a CD player and CDs, batteries, a digital camera, and a digital video camcorder.

After reaching Burr Pass, Ralston locks his bicycle to a tree about a mile past the pass and ventures on foot into the canyon. Though the area is remote, Ralston meets two women who are out for a day's hike. He notes that the odds are slim that he would run into anyone in this area. He catches up with the women and introduces himself.

The two women are Kristi and Megan, and both are in their mid-twenties, close to Ralston's age. Megan is the friendlier of the two. They crack a couple of jokes, and Megan tells a story about Kristi misreading the trailhead and taking them an hour out of their way. Ralston tells the girls about working in Aspen at the Ute Mountaineer, an outdoor gear store.

Ralston and the women discover that they share a common respect for Edward Abbey, the conservationist quoted at the beginning of the chapter. They continue their hike, picking up raven feathers from the canyon floor. During a descent from a drop-off, Megan discovers that her pack is drenched because her water reserve is leaking due to a problem with the hydration hose nozzle.

Later, the three stop and share two of the chocolate bars in Ralston's pack. As they say their good-byes, Kristi asks Ralston to hike out with them and go for a beer. Ralston declines the offer, determined to follow through with his plan to make it to the Big Drop. He invites the women to join him, but they also decline.

Ralston tells the women that he will meet them when he has finished his climb at the Granary Spring Trailhead. All parties agree. Ralston carries *Canyon Hiking Guide to the Colorado Plateau* by Michael Kelsey. Kristi comments that the pictures in the book look like ghosts, and she asks him, "What kind of energy do you think you'll find at the Gallery?" (pg. 15).



Ralston tells the women about a Scooby party, the location of which is marked by a large, stuffed Scooby Doo doll, and then they part ways.

Ralston listens to his beloved Phish CDs and begins his solo descent into the canyon. With an estimated half-mile remaining before the sixty-five foot Big Drop rappel, Ralston reaches the midpoint through Blue John Canyon. After successfully making the rappel, he continues through the canyon until he comes across five sizeable chockstones about the size of refrigerators. He comments that it is unusual to see so many lined up in this amount of space. At another drop-off he comes across another chockstone that is about the size of a bus tire. He steps onto the chockstone and slides over the edge. He dangles on the stone and can feel it adjust to his body weight. Without other options, Ralston must push off the falling rock, keeping his head out of the way.

As Ralston drops, the rock smashes his left hand against the wall. Defensively, he jerks his left hand away only to have the boulder pin his right hand against the wall, the force of the rock tearing the skin from his forearm.

Hoping to exploit any adrenalin that has surged because of the accident, Ralston tries to move the boulder. He shifts the rock only about an inch. He is thirsty from the exertion, so he reaches for his hydration hose and discovers that his water reserve is empty.

A liter of water remains in a Lexan bottle in Ralston's pack. Reaching his water, Ralston unscrews the cap and takes a large gulp, then realizes that he has just consumed one-third of his remaining water supply.

Ralston surveys his injuries and concludes that he can move only a few inches in any direction. Trapped, he realizes that no one knows where he is because he didn't leave a detailed itinerary of his travel plans.

At 3:28 p.m., having been trapped for forty-five minutes, Ralston inventories what he has left. He has water, burritos, rappelling gear, headlamp, CD player, cameras, and a multi-tool knife.

Ralston goes over the possible outcomes of his situation. Other canyoneers could discover him and go for help, Kristi and Megan will think something is wrong when he doesn't meet up with them, or his friends in Aspen will notice that he's missing when he doesn't show up at the Scooby Doo party. Ralston realizes that rescue is not probable and that his options are to remove the rock or amputate his own arm.

Ralston justifies taking the camera equipment as a necessity because he is fond of nature photography and capturing the beauty of landscape. The camera equipment becomes an important part of Ralston's experience once he is trapped because it allows him to record the experience and settle his estate in the coming days.

Although Ralston claims that the pack is heavy and that it probably carries more than he needs, it will not be enough for the experience that follows. Soon Ralston will display enough ingenuity to make what he does have last.



While Ralston hikes with Kristi and Megan he picks up a raven's feather and sticks it in his hat. The raven is symbolic of the journey Ralston is about to take, which he must take alone. When the women try to get Ralston to join them for the day, he counters with an offer for them to join him. Neither side will budge because both want to carry on with their plans. Ralston sets out on his journey, which was meant to be solitary. Solitude will play an important part in the book. Making his way on his own is something Ralston has grown accustomed to over the years.

From the onset, Ralston establishes time as a major theme in the book. The first chapter is titled "Geologic Time Includes Now." Throughout the book, Ralston will use many methods to measure time. It becomes an obsession because, like precious water, time will run out.





## Chapter 2 "Beginnings"

### Chapter 2 "Beginnings" Summary and Analysis

Ralston describes growing up in Indianapolis. When he is twelve years old, his family announces plans to move to Colorado. After researching Colorado, Ralston views it as a rugged place with impossible mountain peaks where people have to ski through town after snowstorms. Finally, he admits to his family that he is petrified of living in Colorado. His parents reassure him that Colorado is a nice place to live and tell him he shouldn't be frightened.

The following summer, Ralston gets his first taste of the great outdoors during a backpacking trip in Rocky Mountain National Park. He falls in love with the mountains. During the trip, Ralston's mother assigns him the moniker "Animal" after the Muppet drummer because of his frantic energy. On the first evening of the trip, Ralston encounters a doe drinking from the creek, and he sketches her in his notepad. By the time Ralston leaves for college at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburg, he considers himself a transplanted native of Colorado.

Ralston tells of climbing Longs Peak, his first fourteener, which he identifies as "one of the fifty-nine mountains in Colorado higher than the magic line of 14,000 feet" (pg. 37). Along with his best friend Jon Heinrich, Ralston traverses the mountain and quickly discovers that he is not acclimated to the altitude and needs to rest. By two o'clock that afternoon, Ralston and Heinrich begin their descent. They reach an area where they can slide in the snow in their ski pants. With midsummer conditions making an avalanche a remote possibility, the two are more concerned with sliding uncontrollably off the edge. With Heinrich ahead of him, Ralston slides at an uncontrollable speed. Terrified, he digs his hands and heels into the snow and stops next to his friend. They immediately climbed back up the slope and slide again.

Ralston also describes a rafting trip he took with his father in 1993. Ralston takes to rafting immediately, and after returning from his sophomore year in college he takes a job as a raft guide. After gaining a fair amount of experience, he takes his friends on a midnight run through Brown's Canyon on the night of a full moon. Because it is so dark, hitting a rock or anything else in the river could cause one of his friends to go overboard and disappear into the black water. Without any natural light to guide the trip, Ralston relies on the reflection of the stars to indicate where the water speed changes. If the stars reflect the waters are calm, where there is no reflection indicates that there could be rocks or rapids. The trip is a success.

Ralston graduates with a B.S. in engineering and takes a job at Intel Corporation in Arizona. He later transfers to Tacoma, Washington, and then to Albuquerque. Prior to moving to Arizona, Ralston embarks on thirty-day road trip to ten national parks. He doesn't quite make it.



On his first solo overnight trip, Ralston sets out on a climb of the Middle Teton. On the Taggart Lake Trailhead, the snow is deep and gets deeper as he reaches higher elevations. He does not have snowshoes, which would have helped him greatly. A ranger warns Ralston that he will end up post-holing without them. Ralston doesn't know what post-holing is. Looking back on the tracks he has left on the trail, he quickly understands what the ranger means.

After fighting waist-high snow, Ralston finds a campsite about twenty feet from the shore of Bradley Lake. Hearing some unfamiliar sounds, he looks around and discovers that he's not alone. He peers out from his tent to find a medium-sized black bear.

Ralston's first instinct is to grab his camera and snap photos, but the bear is looking for food. As the bear comes within twenty-five feet, Ralston grabs his food pack and runs barefoot to stash the food. He cuts the arch of his foot on some ice, but with no time to spare he doesn't treat the injury and runs into the forest.

The bear follows, never letting Ralston get more than thirty feet ahead of him. Ralston locates a fallen tree with thick roots in the air. He tosses the food pack into the tree and heads back to his tent. Inside the tent, he checks his wound before putting on his boots. The bear already has his food pack.

Breaking off a tree root to defend himself, Ralston yells at the bear to return the food. He likens the bear's response to that of a quizzical dog, and the two face off. Ralston continues to yell at the bear and wave the stick. Surprisingly, the bear drops the food pack and leaves.

Sleep does not come easily that night, but Ralston manages. The following morning he makes his way through hip-deep snow up Garnet Canyon. Inclement weather forces him to return to his camp-base at Bradley Lake, where he discovers that the bear has returned, yet the food pack remains in its now safe location. Ralston finds bear tracks and looks to see where they go only to discover that the bear is watching him from up on a hill.

Ralston heads out with his map and compass. The bear follows, and due to a navigation error, Ralston hikes in a complete circle. With the bear only fifteen feet away, Ralston resorts to yelling at the bear once more. He tells the bear to leave him alone and paraphrases a line from *Pulp Fiction* by stating that he's "gonna get some hard pipe-hittin' rangers to come out and get medieval on your ass! They're gonna tranquilize you and ship you off to Idaho!" (pg. 51). Ralston then grabs a rock for defense and keeps moving.

The bear continues to follow, and Ralston throws the rock at the bear. He misses. Arming himself with a couple more rocks, Ralston and the bear continue along. Ralston finally throws another rock and misses the bear again. He finally hits the bear on the left side, and the bear takes off. Ralston continues to pelt the bear with rocks, yelling at the bear until he runs the bear up a tree.



Back at the ranger station, Ralston tells the park staff what has happened. They tell him that they have heard of this type of stalking behavior from bears in other national parks but that is the first account in the Tetons. Ralston is also told that "if you were to shout at a bear, wave your arms, stomp aggressively toward it, and then hit it with rocks, nine times out of ten you could count on getting mauled" (pg. 53).

The chapter begins with Ralston's Midwestern beginnings. He admits to being terrified at the prospect of moving out West, but once there he quickly develops an affinity for the area. Ralston goes rafting with his father, takes up hiking, and climbs his first "fourteener" with a friend.

When Ralston and his friend slide down the slope after reaching the summit of Longs Peak we get the first glimpse of Ralston recovering from a hair-raising experience. Though Ralston talks about the fear of going over the edge and not being able to stop, this doesn't slow him down when he realizes he's all right. The slide is fun, and he immediately wants to do it again.

Ralston clearly has a taste for adventure, which will become increasingly more evident as the book progresses. He also possesses incredible instincts, even if they are sometimes wrong, such as when he acts aggressively toward a black bear.



## Chapter 3 "The Night Shift"

### Chapter 3 "The Night Shift" Summary and Analysis

Chapter 3 returns to Ralston trapped in Blue John Canyon, an hour and a half into his confinement. He tries to assess how much of the chockstone's weight that his right arm is supporting. He tries to chip away at the boulder with his knife and then with the file on his multi-tool, only to discover that he's wearing the grooves away on the file instead of making any progress with the boulder.

Ralston soon realizes that this is a futile and that the only one way he will survive is to cut his arm off. Of course he doesn't want to do it. He knows that he lacks the tools to cut through bone, so he continues chipping away at the chockstone.

While he is working on the chockstone, Ralston remembers visiting Utah for the first time in 1990. It is a family trip, and Betty Darr, a friend of the family, joins them. Betty was paralyzed after contracting polio in the 1930s, and she is well-read and loves the outdoors. At the Grand Canyon, the family rises before dawn to see the sun come up over the canyon. Ralston wants to keep sleeping, but with Betty's gentle prodding and the sudden chill from the car heater being off, Ralston gets up and watches the sunrise. The event is so spectacular that he is forever grateful to Betty for the experience.

Ralston notices that his left hand has swollen from the hit it sustained from the boulder before he was trapped. He is also experiencing a good deal of pain on his left thigh, which is bruised and abraded from his trying to move the boulder earlier. Ralston finds the key ring for his bike lock in the pocket of his shorts. Knowing that he'll need his bike if and when he makes it out of the canyon, Ralston puts the key ring in his backpack. As he withdraws his swollen hand from the pocket, he drops the key ring and it falls into a hole near his foot. He takes off his shoe and sock and tries to retrieve the key ring with his foot, but the hole is too small. He then devises an alternate plan and uses the narrow end of a long stick to try for the key. He hooks it and loses it, then tries again. He finally gets the key ring out of the hole.

Ralston then tries to hammer at his knife with a small rock. When he makes a more forceful attempt, the rock breaks into several pieces and knocks the knife out of his hand. He retrieves the knife and continues chipping away at the stone. He switches back to the file to preserve the knife because the file is more expendable. After more than three hours of chipping, Ralston removes a dime-sized piece of rock.

Meanwhile, Ralston has had the melody of a song from an Austin Powers movie stuck in his head. At one-thirty in the morning, Ralston finally takes a sip of water, which he has been thinking about for a couple of hours. He decides to take a small sip of water every ninety minutes.



His legs fatigued, Ralston uses his repelling harness to make a seat, but first he needs to get his gear hooked onto something that can hold his weight. He makes several attempts at throwing the rope over the chockstone and into a crack in the wall. He finally succeeds, adjusts the knots on the rope, and for the first time relaxes as he sits down.

Ralston can only sit for fifteen-minute increments because the harness restricts the blood flow to his legs. He alternates sitting and standing to prevent a blood clot from forming. He continues chipping at the rock until morning, when he hears a raven fly overhead. He has survived the first night.

Chapter 3 marks Ralston's first night trapped in Blue John Canyon. As his ordeal progresses, Ralston will note the influences of day and night on his psyche. While he keeps track of actual time throughout the night, time moves relatively swiftly. In the beginning when there is more possibility of rescue or escape, however remote, Ralston measures time in large chunks, day and night. This will soon begin to change.

Sensing the futility of trying to move or chip away the chockstone, Ralston considers amputation. The reader knows that this is ultimately what Ralston does to survive. When Ralston asserts that amputation is impossible because he can't cut through the bones, he does not consider the obvious solution of breaking the bones. He is working within the confines of his survival instincts, and at this point there is still hope for salvaging the hand.

Ralston is levelheaded in a time of crisis. Though we do not know it now, we later learn that Ralston worked with a search and rescue team in New Mexico. He maintains calm under duress and stays practical and forward thinking, traits he has shown earlier in his concern about the bike lock. Ralston is not prepared to eliminate any options.

Ralston introduces the reader to Betty Darr, who is paralyzed. She is the first of two major figures who, despite their disability, continue to enjoy and explore the outdoors. This foreshadows Ralston's reintroduction to climbing after his accident.

Also established in Chapter 3 is Ralston's ingenuity. He makes the best of what he has. After dropping his key ring in a hole, he retrieves it with a stick and his bare foot. He later uses his climbing equipment to create a seat so that he can rest for short intervals.



# Chapter 4 "How to Become a Retired Engineer in Just Five Short Years"

## Chapter 4 "How to Become a Retired Engineer in Just Five Short Years" Summary and Analysis

After opening the chapter with a quote from *Dark Shadows Falling* by Joe Simpson regarding "Deep Play," Ralston recounts his next set of adventures following the incident with the bear. He sets out to climb Humphreys Peak in Arizona in March 1998. As he approaches the summit, he encounters lightning and thunder. He can't stay on the summit because of the risk of a lightning strike, so he starts his descent in the storm. Ralston hears a hissing sound and soon realizes that his ski poles are strapped to his pack, which are attracting the lightning. He drops his pack and makes it back to his truck in two hours.

Ralston notes that patterns emerged during his solo climb on Humphreys Peak, including "traveling by myself, climbing through storms, making solid route-finding decisions in demanding situations, and getting lucky around lightning" (pg. 75).

After the Humphreys Peak climb, Ralston tells his friend Mark about his plan to solo climb all the fourteeners in Colorado during the winter. Mark teaches Ralston about rock climbing, avalanche awareness, and rope work.

In the fall of 1998, Ralston's sister Sonja starts college in Texas. Ralston invites her to join him on a trip to waterfalls in Havasupai Canyon. Over the Thanksgiving holiday, they hike through the canyon and find a campsite. They leave their belongings at the site and venture out to Mooney Falls. The view is breathtaking.

Ralston and Sonja continue to Beaver Falls. Leaving Sonja behind, Ralston, in his sandals, heads across the dams at Beaver Falls until he reaches an area that requires a ten-foot climb. On the opposite side of the rock wall are prickly-pear cacti. Ralston slips and falls into the cacti, which leaves him with many half-inch long barbs along his inner thighs. He spends twenty minutes removing the major thorns and then takes his shorts off to remove the hair-like thorns. After an hour and losing count after a hundred, Sonja tells him that other hikers are approaching. It is a week later before he is finally rid of the last thorn.

The day after the cacti incident, Ralston meets up with his friends Jean-Marc and Chad. They are heading out of the Colorado River, and Sonja is not joining them. Chad wades into the water to take a picture of where Havasupai Creek meets the Colorado River. Ralston decides to cannonball off a rock and into the water. Chad takes the photo, but Ralston is in trouble, not expecting the water temperature to be a hypothermic 50 degrees.



Chad and Jean-Marc check to see if Ralston needs help, but Ralston shrugs them off. He ditches his shoes, which have become lead weights in the water, and tries to swim, but he gets caught in the main current of the river and is in desperate need of help. Jean-Marc and Chad try to pull Ralston from the river by throwing him a line, but they are unsuccessful. Finally, the line reaches Ralston and he catches hold. Ralston returns safely to dry land after having nearly drowned. The event sends the men into giggles, releasing the tension. Ralston has to hike back to camp barefoot because he kicked off his shoes in the river. Chad offers Ralston his sandals from his pack. The sandals are too big, but Ralston wears them anyway.

That night at the campsite, Ralston confides in Sonja about how scared he was and how he thought he was going to die in the river. They cry together before falling asleep.

In December of 1998, Ralston attempts a winter solo of Quandary Peak, which he chooses because of its easy winter access and low avalanche risk. He reaches the summit and is struck by the fact that he may be the highest person in Colorado. He then considers that "virtually no one climbs fourteeners in the winter. Given that it's the off-season for the other high mountains of North America, I figured there were fairly good odds that I was the highest person on the continent, too" (pg. 86).

During a climb of Mount Shuksan, Ralston joins three companions from a climbing club. In the upper glaciers of the mountain, they hear a rumbling in the distance. A gigantic boulder is headed toward them. The group sprints out of the way and clears the boulder just in time.

Ralston moves to New Mexico a week after climbing Mount Shuksan and joins a search-and-rescue group. He climbs five fourteeners after Christmas and then heads to Florida for his fiftieth Phish show. He makes plans with friends to see Phish and hike to the top of Mount Fuji.

Over the next couple of years, Ralston continues pursuing his goal of solo-climbing the Colorado fourteeners. By late 2002, he has successfully climbed thirty-six of fifty-nine. In the spring of 2002, Ralston quits his job at Intel to climb Denali.

Chapter 4 introduces and defines "Deep Play," an idea that will cast a shadow over the entire book. Ralston's entrapment in Blue John Canyon, however, is not necessarily the result of taking too many risks. The boulder falling on him is a freak accident. Because Ralston's entrapment is accidental, it can be attributed to timing. He was at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Although the events in this chapter are frightening, Chapter 4 is one of the more humorous portions of the book. While Ralston is hiking with his sister, he falls into a patch of prickly pears. The next day he cannonballs into the river. While it's meant to be fun and a good photo opportunity, Ralston almost dies. In this case, the risk outweighs the reward.



## Chapter 5 "Day Two: Failing Options"

### Chapter 5 "Day Two: Failing Options" Summary and Analysis

It's morning, and despite not sleeping Ralston feels rejuvenated just from the brief exposure to sunlight. The understanding remains constant that this experience will likely end in death. He goes over the various ways that he may die, such as dehydration, which is the biggest risk; hypothermia, although it's not quite cold enough; drowning from a flash flood; or heart failure. Ralston isn't ready to give up on living, but he has given up on salvaging his hand. Now the risk is should he remove the boulder, there is a possibility that the toxins that have built up in his hand will infiltrate his body and cause his demise.

Still, Ralston spends the morning attempting to move the boulder. Casting knotted webbing over the chockstone, he makes several unsuccessful attempts to get the webbing to stick. After locating a fissure in the canyon wall, Ralston secures the webbing and gets an anchor that supports his body weight. He uses carabiners to rig a makeshift pulley system, but he still can't move the boulder.

Ralston hears far-off voices and yells for help. There's no reply, and Ralston realizes that he's imagined the voices. Fearing that yelling will cause him to panic, he resolves to holler for help only once a day.

That afternoon Ralston weighs his options for amputating his right arm. He attempts to fashion a tourniquet from the tubing of his CamelBak, but the plastic tubing is too stiff to knot properly. He then wraps a piece of the purple webbing around his forearm. With the help of a carabiner, he secures a functional tourniquet. Despite his efforts at planning the amputation, Ralston is left with the obstacle of cutting through the bones in his forearm. He lacks the tools, so any possibility of amputation fades. He also decides that because of massive blood loss, the act of amputation will be "a slow act of suicide" (pg. 106).

It is becoming more and more evident to Ralston that he will die in Blue John Canyon. He thinks of suicide to end the ordeal, but that quickly fades. He hatefully lists everything surrounding him with utter contempt until he realizes that he has created his situation. Ralston writes: "You created this accident. You wanted it to be like this. You have been heading for this situation for a long time. Look how far you came to find this spot. It's not that you're getting what you deserve - you're getting what you wanted" (pg. 108).

Ralston turns on his video camera and begins to tell the story of how he ended up in this situation, hoping that whoever finds his body will find the tape. He explains the accident and what function the makeshift pulleys and harness have. He details his unsuccessful attempts to chip away the stone and how he has contemplated cutting off



his arm. Finally, he apologizes and tells his family that he loves them. Instead of trying to get out of the canyon, he is waiting to be found or rescued.

Ralston spends most of his time trying to move the boulder. He demonstrates resourcefulness at rigging makeshift pulleys from his climbing gear, but to no avail. During this time he experiences what may be his first hallucination when he hears voices. He yells for help, but his cries are unanswered. His vow to call for help only once a day to conserve energy and prevent panic shows great command of the situation. Ralston is in control of his destiny.

Once again Ralston contemplates amputation and declares that in doing so he may as well be committing suicide. Everything that Ralston has gone through has led him to this moment, and whether he realizes it, he has everything he will need to accomplish what he still considers the unthinkable. Ralston's return to the video camera shows his desire for preservation. Even if he dies, what he has experienced will live on.



# Chapter 6 "Winter Rhapsody"

## Chapter 6 "Winter Rhapsody" Summary and Analysis

After climbing Denali, Ralston returns to Aspen and takes a sales job at the Ute Mountaineer. He climbs Castle and Conundrum peaks the day after Christmas in 2002 and spends January of 2003 scaling other fourteeners. One of them is Mount Holy Cross, where he narrowly escapes a horseshoe-shaped set of rocks that plummets down the mountainside. After returning from the climb, Ralston learns that one of his friends has been in a terrible skiing accident and is in critical condition. When he goes to visit his friend at the hospital, Ralston learns that another of his friends is there to undergo surgery from a snowboarding accident. In light of his friends' accidents, Ralston is reminded of the luck that he's sustained on his trips.

Ralston makes his way up Longs Peak and hasn't yet gotten out his ice tool or put on crampons, which are metal spikes attached to boots to enable ice climbing. They are in his pack. As he reaches the summit, he fumbles a throw of his pack across a blockage and the pack falls one hundred feet, stopping in a two-foot wide crack before hitting a two-thousand-foot deep chasm. Unsure of how he will get his pack, Ralston takes in the view from the top of the mountain and snaps some photographs.

Without the crampons, Ralston's descent is difficult and slippery. He falls, and miraculously his axe catches on something and brings him to a halt. While searching for what the axe has caught on, Ralston can only discern that he put so much pressure on the granite with the axe that he literally welded the axe tip to the rock. This is the only explanation Ralston can give for what happened. He then is able to retrieve his pack and descend the remainder of the way to meet his friend Scott at the trailhead.

In February of 2003, Ralston climbs Capitol Peak in sub-zero temperatures. Prior to reaching the peak, he leaves his skis at K2, a subsidiary peak. Afterward he returns for them to ski off K2 for his descent. He notices that something is wrong with his hands and discovers that he has frostbite on his fingers and thumbs. Instead of stopping to eat prior to completing his descent, Ralston hurries home. He sustains partial and full-thickness frostbite on eight fingers, including his thumbs.

Ralston admits that he should have gone to the hospital for treatment, but instead he went home to treat the injury himself. He takes medication for the pain and then submerges his hands in a basin of hot water. He screams in pain as his fingers turn black and red and green. Examining his fingers over the next hour, Ralston hopes for blisters to form, a sign that the tissue would recover. In the meantime, he decides to take five weeks off from climbing to heal.

Two weeks later, Ralston takes a ski trip with some friends from the Albuquerque Mountain Rescue Council and some of their relatives. They travel to Fowler-Hilliard Hut on Resolution Mountain. After dining on heavy appetizers and spiked hot cocoa,



Ralston, Mark Beverly, and Chadwick Spencer head to Resolution Peak and scale the peak before dark. This is Ralston's first trip with Mark, and he greatly admires Mark's climbing ability. When Ralston tells Mark about his goal of solo-climbing all of the fourteeners, Mark replies that he wouldn't do climbs such as that, but it is okay if it makes Ralston happy. Ralston replies that he's living his dream.

After a quick group photo at the top, the group begins the ski descent. Ralston decides to ski the bowl and encourages the other two to follow. Chadwick follows first, and Mark takes a turn on the upper slope. They hear the disconcerting "hollow whoomph" (pg. 133) that typically means an avalanche has been triggered. With the snow steady around them, Ralston moves to take a photo of Chadwick when they hear what sounds like a loud diesel engine. Suddenly all three are buried in an avalanche.

Chadwick is the first to get free and rushes to help Ralston, who is trying to dig himself out from the snow. Once Ralston is free, he and Chadwick work together to reach Mark using their beacon devices. Pressed for time, they frantically continue the search. Ralston spots a ski tip, and Ralston hurries to Mark, but he doesn't have the shovel. Chadwick throws it to him. Mark's head is above the snow, and Ralston works to free him. Chadwick lost his gloves in the avalanche and is having difficulty using his hands because of the cold.

Mark is not breathing, and Ralston spots movement at the hut about a third of a mile away. They yell for help, and Chadwick administers two rescue breaths and Mark revives. All three had survived a Grade 5 avalanche, which is the highest ranking for Colorado. The following morning Mark and Chadwick depart from the trip, and Ralston writes that neither have spoken to him since the incident.

In March, the *Aspen Times Weekly* prints story on Ralston called "For Whom the Bells Toll." The article is about Ralston's plan to climb the Maroon Bells, twin peaks with a high risk of avalanches.

Wearing his cold-weather gear, Ralston begins his day at 3 a.m. with oatmeal and protein powder and then starts up the debris field. Locating a gully that will give him access to the Bell Cord Couloir at 11,200 feet, Ralston dodges a falling ice block roughly the size of a bowling ball. A few minutes later, another block of ice shoots toward him. As he tries to exit out of the gully, he encounters a forty-foot frozen waterfall that spans the entire gully. Not wanting to descend back through the gully, Ralston continues a treacherous ascent. He loses his left glove after neglecting to put the wrist loop around his hand. He uses spare liners to cover his exposed hand to prevent any further frostbite damage. He reaches the summit in time to see the sun rise off Pyramid Peak. After completing his ascent of the South Maroon Peak, Ralston makes his way to the North Maroon Peak. He recalls the first time his climbed the "Bells" in the summer of 2000. Now, having just completed his winter climb, he relishes that he has just completed the Maroon Bells ridge "not just once but twice in the same day, and five hours faster in the winter than I had done it in the summer" (pg. 147).



Ralston discusses how lucky he has been after visiting two friends in the hospital who have suffered severe injuries from their outdoor activities. It is difficult to ascertain, perhaps even for Ralston, whether Ralston is lucky in getting trapped in Blue John Canyon. In light of the boulder falling being a freak accident, one would consider Ralston unlucky; yet, his ultimate survival against all odds would speak to the contrary.

This contradictory idea of luck is further illustrated by Ralston's experience with catching a fall with his axe, just as are his experience with contracting frostbite on K2 and later being buried by an avalanche. Indeed, Ralston is lucky for escaping close calls, but the opposite holds true as well.

When Ralston suffers frostbite to eight fingers, he treats the condition at home. He knows what needs to be done, but he also knows that he should have gone to the hospital for treatment. Ralston's determination for self-preservation is evident, and this determination will help him get out of Blue John Canyon.

Ralston's personal award for his "Deep Play" is evident at the close of the chapter when he reveals that not only has he reached the Maroon Bells summits, but that he has done it in less time during the winter than he has in summer.



# Chapter 7 "Day Three: 'Push on Till the Day'"

## Chapter 7 "Day Three: 'Push on Till the Day'" Summary and Analysis

Ralston is inundated with mosquitoes. He makes a sport of killing them, even considering the possibility that he could eat the insects if he so wanted. With most of his two pre-made burritos still available, however, he chooses not to.

At this point, Ralston has lost the will to continue chipping at the boulder and is coming to terms with his fate. He expects that he can survive another day and a half, perhaps two, with his rations. This slow death is not what he expected, and he muses that the death he saw for himself included an abrupt end such as a fall, not this.

Ralston takes sips of water every three hours, and at this juncture he has ten ounces remaining. He notes that it seems colder than it was at the same time the day before. Since he won't be working on the chockstone overnight, he needs to come up with a plan to stay warm. He punches out the stitched-end of the cloth bag that held his digital camera and creates a sleeve for his left arm. He puts the webbing on his right arm and fashions makeshift pants from the rope.

For the first time since the ordeal began, Ralston prays. He wonders if this ordeal is a test to teach him a lesson. He reflects on something his friend Rob Cooper says to him, "It's not what you do, Aron, it's who you are" (pg. 155). The two volleyed back and forth over what this meant, neither able to persuade the other of their interpretation.

As night falls, Ralston experiences bouts of shivering. In an effort to keep warm, Ralston resorts to putting his left arm inside the fabric tube of his rope bag and his head under the flap. He generates enough warmth to stave off the shivers in fifteen-minute intervals. Later, he opts to continue chipping away at the rock to generate body heat.

The next morning Ralston makes another attempt at the pulley system, this time using a six-to-one system ratio. Once again, he is unsuccessful.

Ralston thinks about the five-gallon jug of water and grapefruits he left in his truck. His thoughts return to amputation, and, should he be successful, the climb he will still have to make to get out of the canyon. He creates a better tourniquet out of the elastic tubing insulation of the CamelBak. Determined to make a go of it, Ralston takes out his multi-tool and tries to cut into his arm, but the knife doesn't break the skin. He releases the tourniquet, defeated.

At 8:15 a.m., Ralston sees a raven fly overhead. The raven had flown over the previous morning at the exact same time. Each day, Ralston gets a brief window of sunlight for



about ten minutes. He can reach his leg behind him to make direct contact with the sunlight. He calls this his "sun salute break" (pg. 166). Afterward, for the first time in two days, Ralston feels the urge to urinate and does so.

Ralston reflects on Warren MacDonald, an Australian he met at the Banff Mountain Film Festival. MacDonald lost both of his legs in a hiking accident in Tasmania when he was pinned by a boulder. Thinking about MacDonald's survival spurs on Ralston's will survive.

That afternoon Ralston takes out his video camera and begins to record. He gives an inventory of his water and food supplies and details how long he has been trapped. He tells his sister that he is proud of her and tells the camera that he has been thinking about what his friend Rob said about it not being about what you do, but who you are. He talks about how he does what makes him happy, but that he has come to the realization that doing what makes one happy can also make one the opposite. He then uses the video camera to make a last will and testament.

A short time later, Ralston needs to urinate again. This time he saves the urine in his empty water reservoir, regretting that he hadn't done the same earlier. He reserves the urine to drink when the water runs out.

Though it is not obvious to Ralston at first, the swarming mosquitoes indicate the presence of water. This will become crucial when he gets free. He is now measuring time by the amount of water he has left.

Ralston continues to chip away at the boulder through the night. He is no longer hopeful that doing so will result in his freedom. His goal now is to generate enough body heat to stave off the cold. He further demonstrates his ingenuity by breathing in his rope bag to create more heat.

The raven returns to signal morning, and Ralston notes that the bird flies over at the same time it did the day before. This is the first introduction of the raven, although symbolically the raven made its presence known when Ralston picked up the raven feathers upon entering the canyon with Megan and Kristi.

Ralston talks about someone who has overcome a disability for the second time. This time it is Warren MacDonald, an Australian hiker who lost both legs after being trapped by a boulder. Though Ralston feels empathy for what MacDonald went through, MacDonald's story assists in Ralston in knowing that, should he make it, he can survive without the arm.

Ralston is also bordering on life and death decisions. He dictates a last will and testament to his video camera and begins to save his urine for his survival.



# Chapter 8 "I'm Goin' to Utah"

## Chapter 8 "I'm Goin' to Utah" Summary and Analysis

After his experience with the avalanche, Ralston regains his confidence about avalanche awareness by taking a ski trip to Mount Sopris with a friend and colleague, Rick Inman.

In March of 2003, Ralston and Gareth Roberts compete in the Elk Mountains Grand Traverse. Caught in whiteout conditions, Ralston digs a snow cave to wait out the storm. More than 40 percent of the teams competing drop out due to inclement weather. Ralston and Gareth are the sixtieth team to finish the race, with the winning teams having finished the route nine hours earlier. Still, they celebrate finishing the race.

A few weeks later, Ralston decides to return to Mount Sopris for a ski trip over a long weekend. He tells his friend Brad that a planned trip to Holy Cross was cancelled and that he's going to Utah, but he doesn't yet know what he's going to do.

On Friday morning, Ralston drives into Moab, Utah, for a biking trip on Slick Rock Trail. He joins four experienced bikers and rides with them for some time. When they begin a trail that exceeds Ralston's technical abilities, he has minor problems controlling his bike.

By the time Ralston reaches the Green River exit, he has made plans to join Brad and Leah for the Goblin Valley Party. He stops at a convenience store, and buys a couple of bottles of Gatorade, and heads out of town.

That night, after traversing a long and curvy road, Ralston makes the turn for Canyonlands National Park.

Chapter 8 marks a change in the timeline of events. So far, the book's chapters have alternated between Ralston's entrapment and his adventures in climbing, hiking, skiing, and rafting. This time Ralston embarks on the trip to Utah. The alternating timelines of past and present are merging. For the remainder of the book, Ralston concentrates on his time in Blue John Canyon, alternating with the perspective of his family and friends as they discover he is missing and begin the search.



# Chapter 9 "Day Four: Out of Food and Water"

## Chapter 9 "Day Four: Out of Food and Water" Summary and Analysis

Sleep-deprived and trapped for more than fifty hours, Ralston has had one song from Austin Powers stuck in his head. The lyrics are "BBC1, BBC2, BBC3, BBC4, BBC5, BBC6, BBC7, BBC Heaven!" (pg. 188). He can't sleep or stay fully awake. His mind drifts as he remembers a trip to Paris, a Guns 'N Roses concert, and a trip to Mount Princeton for endurance training.

As night falls, Ralston debates whether to drink his own urine. When the mosquitoes return, he figures there must be standing water somewhere nearby, although he did not pass any on the way into the canyon. He checks his map and sees that there is a small pool at the bottom of the Big Drop rappel. He hopes that there is water there should he actually get out of the canyon alive.

Ralston fidgets and rests to get through the night and generate enough body heat to maintain warmth. He continues to use his rope bag to help stay warm, but he is mindful not to stay in the bag too long, lest he suffocate.

After much deliberation, Ralston takes a sip of urine at midnight on Tuesday, April 29. He still has some water left, but he wants to know if he can stomach drinking the urine. It's not pleasant, but he can. He will wait until the water is gone, however, before drinking urine again.

Dehydration is setting in, causing Ralston's eyes to be sunken and dry. His contacts are a constant irritant. His heartbeat has weakened and becomes erratic. With only three ounces of water left, Ralston prepares for his ritual sip at 5 a.m. The bottle catches on his harness, and the battle slips into his lap. He loses half of his remaining water supply, and the effects are psychologically devastating. Water is life.

Ralston hears his mother shout for his father, Larry. Ralston sees her running downstairs with terrible news. He cannot decide if the image is something that has already happened or is occurring now.

Dawn breaks, and Ralston turns back to the camera. He explains that he thinks Leona, his roommate, has realized he's not back and that something may be wrong. Soon, he will be missed at work. It's a matter of time before someone contacts the police, but there will be a twenty-four-hour period before the police will do anything, and Ralston doesn't have that kind of time.





Ralston tells the camera that he tried to amputate his arm, but couldn't break the skin with his knife. He talks to his family, remembering good times, explaining how much he loves them and enjoyed the time they spent together. He even mentions that the possibility of a flash flood still exists. He doesn't think he'll make it to Wednesday.

In a burst of anger, Ralston tries again to move the boulder, but it doesn't budge. He then places the tourniquet back on his arm and gets out his knife. With a violent stabbing motion, he drives the blade into his arm and punctures the skin. He feels around inside the arm and taps the knife on the bone. He examines the arm, rewards himself with the last of his water supply, and disengages the tourniquet.

Back to the video camera Ralston explains what he has just done and that he's out of water. He knows he can't cut through the bones and is suddenly concerned about infection from the dirty knife. At 8:31 a.m., Ralston notes that the raven is fifteen minutes late.

Ralston reminisces about times spent with friends, which gives him a surge of hope. He remembers going to Winter Park for jazz festivals, climbing Longs Peak, and a road trip with Jon and Chrystie to the East Coast. He remembers going to Washington, D.C., with Sonja, his trip to Denali, and the trips he took with his family. Ralston thanks his family and friends for everything they've given him. Having to urinate again, Ralston transfers the remainder of the saved urine into the Nagalene and urinates into the CamelBak.

On Tuesday afternoon, Ralston prays and vows to see this experience through to the end, whatever the outcome. Realizing he has left one of his friends out of the video, Ralston hits record and addresses Mark Van Eeckhout. He talks about skiing Williams Peak and a trip to Wolf Creek. He makes final arrangements for stocks that can be donated to the recovery team when he is found. He also makes it a point that his parents probably know that he is missing by now. He states, "I want my parents to know that when they found out I was missing, I was still alive" (pg. 212).

Ralston continually makes a mental tally of the time he has been trapped and his hours without sleep. When the mosquitoes return, he realizes that there must be a water source somewhere close. Again, Ralston struggles between accepting his death and looking to his escape. With the prospect of water nearby, Ralston examines his map and discovers that there is a shallow pool at the end of the Big Drop rappel. By morning, however, he is again talking to the video camera and says goodbye to his family. His message is gut wrenching and heart breaking. He has identified Wednesday as the end of his journey because he doesn't expect to live past that point.

Fueled by this revelation, Ralston again turns to amputation. He stabs his arm, determined to break the skin this time. Though he still has not figured out how to break the bones, he examines the interior of his arm, educating himself for what may come. Following the stabbing, the raven flies overhead, but today the bird is late.



# Chapter 10 "Stirrings of a Rescue"

## Chapter 10 "Stirrings of a Rescue" Summary and Analysis

Ralston explains what happened while he was missing. Kristi and Megan, the women he encountered at the beginning of his journey, end up off course and looking for Ralston. They assume that he has already made it out of the canyon, although Megan isn't convinced. They decide to meet him at the Goblin Valley party, but they change their minds about going, figuring they'll see him the next morning at Little Wild Horse Canyon where they had discussed going.

The next morning the women come across Ralston's truck. They contemplate leaving their e-mail addresses on the windshield in case they don't see him the next day. They decide to wait and see if they run into him at the canyon the next day.

Meanwhile, Brad and Leah leave Mount Sopris and head for Goblin Valley. They get a flat tire. With a low spare tire, they decide to skip the party and pull over and camp for the night.

On Monday, Leona, Ralston's roommate and coworker, is preparing to leave for Boulder for the off-season. A going-away party is planned for that night. During the party, Elliott Larson, who is getting ready to move into the house, asks if anyone has seen Ralston.

Tuesday morning, having missed work, Ralston's manager, Brian, calls Leona to check on Ralston. Leona checks in at Ute hourly. They agree that if Ralston doesn't show up the next morning for work they will call his parents.

On Tuesday evening, Brian and Joe, Ralston's other roommates, wonder about Ralston's whereabouts. They file a missing person's report, giving the police Ralston's description and vehicle information, including the license plate number. The police file a report, but Ralston hasn't been missing long enough for them to do anything yet.

For the first time, Ralston switches to a third-person narration of what occurred while he was missing. Based on his account of the events, luck was not with him.

Kristi and Megan decide not to go to the Scooby Doo party. Ralston's friends Brad and Leah do not make it to the party because of a flat tire. The first people who would have noticed his absence are not where they needed to be to notice that Ralston was missing.

At Leona's going away party on Monday, Ralston's absence is not particularly noticed until his friend Elliott asks about him. Ralston's other roommates do not officially report him missing until Tuesday night. Time is working against a successful rescue, but there is hope.



# Chapter 11 "Day Five: Trance Sanctuary"

## Chapter 11 "Day Five: Trance Sanctuary" Summary and Analysis

Ralston begins hallucinating, feeling as though he is on a roller coaster or crowd surfing. He sees his friends and transparent ghosts in the canyon. They don't cause him to feel fear, but he is suffering from the psychological effects of dehydration and insomnia.

Night falls, and Ralston drains off the top layer of his reserved urine, leaving the sediments in the CamelBak. He fantasizes about daiquiris and margaritas, fruit juice and milkshakes. He is losing track of time, noting that he has lost touch with his typically reliable internal clock. Time is moving very, very slowly.

Ralston pictures himself as a little boy at his grandparents' house drinking 7-UP. He flashes to another memory of drinking sweetened sun tea and to drinking a Slurpee at the 7-Eleven.

Ralston applies lip balm to preserve any moisture left in his lips. He thinks to put the balm on his tongue to keep it hydrated. The lip balm makes him salivate, which is encouraging.

In another trance, Ralston sees his friends looking up from their conversations at him. He sees himself with his best friend from high school, and together they walk through the canyon wall and to a janitor's closet, which Ralston thinks is in a hospital. His friend tells him not to knock on the door because the doctors and nurses on the other side are on another plane. Ralston returns to his body.

The next morning, Ralston takes a self-portrait and documents his progress on the video camera. He considers the remoteness of his location and says that even if a search is in progress, because no one knows exactly where he is, five more popular sites surely will be searched first.

Ralston records his memories about the 7-UP and shuts down the camera. He writes, "96 hours of sleep deprivation, 90 hours that I've been trapped, 29 hours that I've been sipping my urine, and 25 hours since I finished off the last of my fresh water" (pg. 241).

By midmorning, Ralston has a new idea. He decides to smash a rock against the chockstone to break the boulder. After hoisting a twenty-pound-plus rock onto the boulder, it bounces off, narrowly missing his feet and causing little to no damage to the boulder. Ralston hammers against the boulder with a smaller rock and bruises his left hand. He stops.

Ralston returns to the camera and tapes his last requests. He wants to be cremated and his ashes spread at various places by his friends and family.



That night, above where he carved "Geological Time Includes Now," Ralston adds "ARON OCT 75 APR 03 RIP." He slips into another trance, where he sees himself picking up a little boy who he knows is his son. Ralston lifts the boy with his left hand and right stump, and he is overcome with the belief that he will live.

Returning to the first-person narrative, Ralston explains his hallucinations. He is conscious of documenting how much time has transpired and how that amount breaks into increments within that timeframe.

By the end of the chapter, Ralston has accepted his fate and writes his own epitaph. It is his most definitive measure of time, yet it will soon prove inaccurate. When Ralston closes his epitaph as APR 03, he doesn't realize that it is after midnight and he has actually made it to May.

When Ralston slips into another trance, he incorporates future time as he envisions himself with a small boy who he views as his son.



# Chapter 12 "Firestorm"

## Chapter 12 "Firestorm" Summary and Analysis

When Ralston doesn't arrive for work for a second day, Brian calls Leona. They discuss who will call Ralston's parents, and Brian takes on the task. He calls Donna, Ralston's mother, and explains the situation. They agree to stay in touch with any new developments.

Donna phones her friend Michelle, who comes over at once. They decide to check Ralston's e-mail account for any information about where he might have gone, but first they have to figure out how to change his password so that they can access the Hotmail account.

Brian contacts the Aspen police and reports Ralston missing. He then calls Elliott to search Ralston's desk and room at home for clues. Elliott calls the park service to see if he can get the names of the people on Ralston's climbing team. The park service cannot give out the information.

Brian finds a printout of e-mails to Ralston's team and locates the addresses he needs. He sends out an e-mail detailing Ralston's disappearance and asks that anyone with information about his whereabouts contact them at once. Brian is also preparing to leave for Australia, so he asks Elliott to field any incoming e-mails regarding Ralston.

Having successfully changed the Hotmail account password, Donna gives Brian the new password so that they can send out a mass e-mail about the situation.

From Brian's e-mail, Elliott receives a response from Jason Halladay stating that when he had talked to Ralston about canyon trips in Utah, Ralston had mentioned a number of places. Blue John Canyon is not on Jason's list.

Dan Hadlich forwards the last e-mail he received from Ralston that shows that during the time Ralston has been missing he would have been at Holy Cross. Dan does not know that the Holy Cross trip was cancelled.

Elliott calls Donna to find out Ralston's license plate number because the Aspen police say that the license number they provided was incorrect. Donna double-checks the information, but the information she has is wrong.

Donna contacts Ralston's father, Larry, in New York, where he is on a business trip. She explains what they know thus far.

After gathering bits of information from other friends and offers to help with the search, Elliott leaves a note on Ralston's door that reads: "Aron, you're missing. Everybody's looking for you. Knock on my bedroom door or call my cell phone the minute you see this note" (pg. 269).

Ralston's friends and family continue to search for him, unsure of how much time they have left.



# Chapter 13 "Day Six: Enlightenment and Euphoria"

## Chapter 13 "Day Six: Enlightenment and Euphoria" Summary and Analysis

On Thursday, May 1, 2003, Ralston is surprised to still be alive. He has made it through another night. By 8:30 a.m., the raven has not flown overhead.

Ralston decides that he wants to die listening to music. He pulls out his CD player only to discover that the player and the disks are in a half-inch of sand. The disks are scratched and won't play. The CD player doesn't work, and after changing the batteries, Ralston figures the player was damaged during the fall.

Once again Ralston turns on the video camera. He tells his sister that if she still wants him to play piano at her wedding, there are tapes of him playing at their parents' house.

After another frustrating attack on the chockstone with the rock, Ralston reassesses his situation. He sticks his right thumb with the knife and discovers that the blade cuts through the flesh easily and gases escape. The hand is rotting. Realizing that the infection in his hand will spread through his body, he wants to get rid of the hand. Suddenly he realizes he can free himself if he breaks the bones in his arm.

Ralston gains leverage and tries to bow the arm so that it will break. He needs to break both bones and does so. After applying the tourniquet, he cuts through the skin and tissue, saving the main nerve for last, "sort, pinch, rotate, slice" (pg. 281).

Asking himself why he hadn't thought of breaking the bones sooner, Ralston now understands that had he done so, he probably would have bled out before reaching safety. The decay on his arm has enabled him to amputate successfully. Twelve hours after writing his own epitaph, Ralston is free.



# Chapter 14 "Homing In: "We Have His Truck"

## Chapter 14 "Homing In: "We Have His Truck" Summary and Analysis

Donna calls the Hanksville branch of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and leaves messages and files a report with the St. George police. An all-cars bulletin goes out in an "attempt to locate" Ralston.

In Aspen, Adam Crider obtains Ralston's debit card history and learns that the last purchase was made at a City Market in Moab.

On Thursday, Steve Patchett calls the Emery County Sheriff's Office and talks with Captain Kyle Ekker. Kyle reveals that the first search had warranted nothing, but he promises to keep Steve up to date. Kyle calls the Hans Flat ranger station to inquire about Ralston's Toyota Tacoma. Ranger Glenn Sherrill recognizes the vehicle description and says he has seen it at Horseshoe Canyon. Later that morning, Elliott receives news that Ralston's vehicle has been found.

Donna and her friend Ann Fort work on a missing person's flier, complete with a photo of Ralston from the *Aspen Times* article and the truck description with the proper license number. Ranger Steve calls and notifies Donna that the truck has been found.

Using the National Association of Search and Rescue (NASAR) guidelines for assessing the urgency of a rescue, NPS and the Emery County sheriff determine that Ralston is an experienced climber, but because of his week-long absence and history of solo climbing in winter, the search is classified as an emergency response. A helicopter is chartered from Durango, Colorado, piloted by Terry Mercer from the department of public safety.

Terry flies through the canyon and reaches the Green River with no sighting of Ralston. At 2:50 p.m., Terry heads toward Horseshoe Canyon.

Chapter 14 continues the third-person narrative of the search for Ralston. It also marks the arrival of the helicopter, which is crucial in the next chapter.





## Chapter 15 "A Date with Destiny"

### Chapter 15 "A Date with Destiny" Summary and Analysis

Ralston fashions a sling from the empty backpack after wrapping his arm in a sack and yellow webbing. He takes the necessities, including the empty water reservoir, the bottle of urine, the video camera, and the knife. He takes photos of his severed hand before heading out of the canyon. It is approximately 11:30 a.m. on May 1, 2003.

Ralston heads through the canyon until he reaches the Big Drop rappel. He is exposed to the sun for the first time in six days, which causes some light-headedness. The sun exposure also accelerates the dehydration process. As Ralston prepares for the descent, he spots a shallow pool of water.

After clipping himself into the anchor, Ralston untangles the remaining 170 feet of rope. He slides the rope over the edge of the drop and carefully prepares for his descent. He hears the rope sliding downward and quickly steps on the rope to stop it from going over the drop completely. If he loses the rope he will be forced to go back through the canyon the way he came in, which he won't survive.

Ralston regains his composure and readies himself for the descent. It is a challenge with one arm, and he eases goes over the edge. There is no room for mistakes.

On the ground, Ralston moves into the shade and empties the urine, rinses the container, and then fills it with the brown water from the shallow pool. The water is cool and sweet, and he drinks a few liters.

The water is a relief, but it does not last. Ralston still faces an eight-mile hike to get to help. He fills up his water reserves and dumps the broken CD player and CDs to lighten his load. After checking his map for the next source of water, he realizes that it will be at least two hours before he reaches another water source, assuming water is there.

Ralston starts hiking. After a mile he has consumed one liter of his water supply and is as parched as he was prior to first finding water. Not long after consuming the water, Ralston discovers that the water has quickly moved from his stomach and into his bowels, and he tends to the call of nature.

After making his way a mile through the canyon, Ralston has consumed five of his six liters of water. This leaves him with one liter of water for six miles. He remembers reading a story about a Mexican Indian from the Tarahumara tribe who was an ultra-marathon runner. The Indian would run through the desert without food or water, instead keeping a mouthful of water in the mouth the whole time, humidifying the lungs. Ralston tries this and finds that it helps.



Soon after 1 p.m., Ralston completes the second mile of his journey. He must stop to empty sand from his shoe, which has been untied since he took it off in the canyon days earlier to retrieve the fallen bike key. The sand has rubbed his foot raw.

Coming across a barbed-wire fence, Ralston figures he is at the boundary for the national park. At mile four he reaches a muddy rivulet and refills his water supply.

The blood from Ralston's arm is dripping, and he is in a great deal of pain. Though tempted to stop and rest, he knows time is of the essence and continues hiking.

At mile six Ralston sees three people, the Meijer family from Holland. Ralston hollers for help and hurries toward them. He explains who he is and what's he just done. Eric, the father, explains that the police informed them about a stranded hiker and that they should watch for him. They agreed to do so, but they didn't expect to find him.

The family gives Ralston water and two Oreos that were left from an earlier snack. Though Ralston continues with the Meijers, he needs to reach help more quickly. Monique, the mother, is the fastest runner, so she agrees to run ahead for medical help. Their son Andy follows.

An excerpt from a letter written by Eric Meijer gives his account of what happens.

Ralston continues the narration of the story by explaining that he needs to remove the sand from his shoe once again and that he needs Eric to retie his laces. By 3 p.m., Ralston has lost a lot of blood and doesn't think he can hike the rest of the way through the canyon. Just then, he hears the familiar sound of a helicopter.

After the helicopter finds a place to land, Ralston makes his way onto the helicopter for transport to a hospital in Moab. He is lucid and explains to the emergency room staff what has happened and exactly what he has done. Ranger Steve asks if there is anything he can do, and Ralston asks him to call his mother and let her know that he is okay.

Ralston also tells Ranger Steve where he was trapped, what he left behind, and that someone needs to keep track of the backpack. Ralston says that he estimated the chockstone weighs approximately 200 pounds. He later will learn that it weighs more than two tons. Soon after, the anesthesiologist arrives with pain medication.

Ranger Steve calls Donna Ralston and tells her that Ralston is alive and explains what has happened.

Later Ralston awakes in a hospital room, reveling in the fact that he is alive. He has lost forty pounds and 1.5 liters of blood. He has been transported to a hospital in Grand Junction, and his mother is there. Their reunion is joyous and emotional.

The sun intensifies Ralston's dehydration. Time is now moving quickly for Ralston. He can replenish his water supply, but he can only carry so much on his hike. This time the water doesn't last as long because of his exposure to the elements.



Ralston finally meets the Meijer family, and they assist him in making it to help. He notes that if the helicopter had arrived an hour later, he wouldn't have survived.

After relaying his experience to the park ranger in the hospital, Ralston learns that the raven, likely the one he saw during his ordeal, was found dead in a pool of water off the Big Drop rappel.



# Epilogue "A Farewell to Arm"

## Epilogue "A Farewell to Arm" Summary and Analysis

With international news coverage of Ralston's ordeal, Ralston receives an outpouring of support. One woman writes to him to tell him that he inspired her to not go through with suicide.

Ralston's friend Chris Shea sends him a cake from Portland that is shaped like his right hand. Ralston enjoys the cake with visiting friends in the hospital, and they dub the ceremony "the Last Dessert" (pg. 333).

After making a comment about wanting a margarita at a press conference, Ralston is inundated with an outpouring a generosity. He receives gift certificates to restaurants, margarita mixes in the mail, and even a battery-operated blender.

Ralston contracts a "potentially lethal bone infection" (pg. 334) and is re-hospitalized. After making arrangements with his doctors, Ralston is released to the care of his parents so that he can attend Sonja's graduation. The hospital staff teaches Donna how to inject the antibiotics. Ralston makes his sister's graduation in Lubbock, Texas.

Returning to Denver, Ralston needs one more surgery. Following an angiogram, doctors transplant muscle from Ralston's left inner thigh into his right arm. He returns home for good on May 25 and admits that his recuperation is tough, not only for him but also for his parents, who are providing round-the-clock care.

In July, Ralston does photo shoots for *GQ's* "Men of the Year" issue and *Vanity Fair's* "People of 2003" issue" (pg. 340). In August, he gives a reading at his sister's wedding. Four days later, he climbs Mount Moran in Wyoming with eight friends. In September, Ralston and his mother watch the video he made in the canyon.

On the six-month anniversary of the accident, Ralston, some friends, and a team from *Dateline NBC* return to Blue John Canyon. Ralston is interviewed by Tom Brokaw. He also scratches out where he'd written "RIP OCT 75 ARON APR 03" (pg. 341).

Working with Hanger Prosthetics, Therapeutic Recreation Systems, and Trango (a climbing equipment company), Ralston helps design a prosthetic device that allows him to climb. He plans to finish his goal of being "the first person to solo-climb all fifty-nine of the Colorado 14,000-foot peaks in winter" (pg. 342). Since his accident, Ralston says he is performing as well as before, and in some instances better.

The epilogue gives the reader an idea of the media frenzy that followed the news that Ralston had survived being trapped for six days with little water and had amputated his own arm to survive. His experience makes him an instant celebrity.



The epilogue details Ralston's road to recovery and his return to mountain climbing. Again, due to Ralston's resourcefulness, he works with prosthetics companies and a climbing company to develop a special prosthetic arm to enable him to continue climbing.

Six months after the accident, Ralston returns to Blue John Canyon and scratches out his epitaph.



# Characters

## Aron Ralston

Aron Ralston is the primary character of *A Rock and a Hard Place*, which is his story. He is young, intelligent, and hardworking. He graduated at the top of his class, earning a B.S. in chemical engineering and double-majoring in French. He minored in piano performance.

Adventurous, determined, and resourceful, Ralston became interested in climbing and rafting soon after moving to Colorado and considers himself a transplanted native. He was attempting his dream of being the first person to solo climb the fourteeners in Colorado during winter before his accident, and he continues that effort today.

## The Ralston Family

As a character, the Ralston family emerges as a collective whole. Not much is revealed about Larry Ralston, the father, except that he is out of town on business when he learns that his son is missing. What little indications are provided, Larry appears to be a family man who cares for his wife and children.

Ralston's mother Donna is supportive of her son's outdoor pursuits, but she'd rather not know the harrowing details of every adventure, as evidenced by her telling Ralston to tell his friends about where he's going. Ralston describes Donna as impatient, just like he is. She is proactive in leading the search to find her son. Donna seems to share Ralston's determination.

The reader is introduced to Sonja through her brother's eyes. Their bond is strong, and Sonja is a confidante who Ralston admires greatly. She is smart and cares for her brother.

## Elliott Larson

Elliott Larson is Ralston's friend who is moving into the house that Ralston shares with his other roommates. Though Elliott is dedicated to helping the search in any way possible, Elliott is also a source of comic relief. His honest and simple one-liner that he should have been sitting down when he learned that Ralston amputated his arm perfectly accompanies the release the reader feels knowing that Ralston has survived the ordeal.



## Kristi and Megan

Kristi and Megan are the two women who Ralston meets when he first hikes into Blue John Canyon. They enjoy a nice time together and agree to meet up later for a drink and perhaps hike the following day. Ralston views the women as his angels because they tried to convince him to go with them and not into the canyon. Had he done so, the accident would not have happened.

## Mark

Ralston tells his friend Mark about his plan to solo climb all the fourteeners in Colorado during the winter. Mark teaches Ralston about rock climbing, avalanche awareness, and rope work.

## Donna

Donna and her friend Ann Fort work on a missing person's flier, complete with a photo of Ralston from the *Aspen Times* article and the truck description with the proper license number.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Blue John Canyon**

Blue John Canyon is where Ralston is trapped for six days before amputating his arm.

### **The Chockstone**

The chockstone is a boulder that dislodges underfoot as Ralston makes his way through the canyon. It strikes his left hand and then pins his right hand against the canyon wall.

### **The CamelBak**

CamelBak is the brand name of a product used to hold water and backpacks. Ralston uses his water reservoir to hold water and urine and to protect his stump post-amputation.

### **Video Camera and Digital Camera**

Ralston carries a video camera and a digital camera on many of his excursions, including the one into Blue John Canyon. He uses this equipment to document his ordeal, recording messages to his family and taking photos before and after the amputation.

### **Multi-Tool**

The multi-tool contains the knife that Ralston uses to chip away at the chockstone and amputate his arm.

### **Fourteeners**

Fourteeners are mountains with an elevation peak at more than 14,000 feet. There are fifty-nine fourteeners in Colorado.

### **The Raven**

On two consecutive mornings a raven flies over Ralston at the same time. The bird flies by at a later time on subsequent mornings, and it is later found dead in a pool of water by a park ranger who goes back for Ralston's belongings.





# Themes

## Survival

Undoubtedly, Ralston's story of becoming trapped in Blue John Canyon and surviving for six days with little water and food only to amputate his arm and hike out of the canyon for help is an incredible testament to the will to survive. Ralston's experience with survival is not limited to his most dramatic tale, however. He escapes a hungry bear by aggressively challenging the bear, not a recommended way to deal with a bear. He jumps into the Colorado River for a good photo opportunity only to get sucked into the current and nearly drown. He is buried in an avalanche that nearly kills him and two friends. Considering his experiences, it is a wonder that Ralston lived to enter Blue John Canyon on April 26, 2003.

## Risk

Ralston is a risk taker. From solo climbing in winter to navigating rafters down a river on a midnight run of a new moon, Ralston regularly puts himself in harm's way. Despite the close calls and adversity, Ralston continues to pursue his dream because what he does makes him happy.

Ralston discusses deep play at length. He understands that he reaches a point where the risk outweighs the reward, yet he continues with it.

Many would consider Ralston's quitting a lucrative job at Intel Corporation to pursue his adventures his biggest risk. Though admirable, leaving a good job because of lack of sufficient vacation time to enjoy outside interests is not something everyone would do.

## Time

Time is an important theme in *A Rock and a Hard Place*. One of the most critical obstacles Ralston faces is his race against time. Everything he does is time sensitive. The fact that he would have died if he had amputated his arm during the first few days seems ironic, considering that the only way he manages to survive is by amputation.

Ralston marks time in larger increments at the beginning of his accident, but time seems to move more quickly than in the later part of the experience. He measures time by counting hours, intervals between sips of water, hours of sleep deprivation, ounces of water, and even the amount of remaining urine he will drink after his water supply is depleted.

The raven's flight overhead is time sensitive as well. Twice the raven flies over at the same time, which Ralston notes as somewhat odd and figures that the raven's nest must be nearby. The longer Ralston is trapped, the later in the day the raven's flight. On



the day of his escape the raven does not appear, and a dead raven is later found nearby.

The timing of the helicopter's arrival for Ralston's rescue is critical. Had the helicopter searched that area the day prior or even if the helicopter had reached Ralston an hour later, Ralston probably would have died. His time had run out.



# Style

## Point of View

*A Rock and a Hard Place* is a first-person narrative of Ralston's confinement in Blue John Canyon. His narration is direct and brutally honest, and he spares no detail. The narration from the canyon grabs the reader and holds him there until Ralston's release. Ralston truly shares the experience vividly with the reader.

Two timelines work in tandem through the first half of the book. Ralston alternates between his time in the canyon and his outdoor adventures leading up to that point. When the timelines merge, Ralston alternates from first- to third-person narration depending on the focus of his writing.

## Setting

Ralston's story captures the attention of a world-wide audience. It is an incredible true story of man vs. nature, one of literature's classic themes.

Nature plays an important part in the setting of the book. Virtually the entire book takes place in the American West, primarily in the remote, exterior locations where Ralston climbs. Ralston's accident occurs in Blue John Canyon in Canyonlands National Park in Utah. The mountains Ralston climbs with peaks topping 14,000 feet are in Colorado.

The landscapes are barren desert and the tundra and rock of the mountains. Against this backdrop is the solo journey of a man. The story is not solely about his near-death experience in Blue John Canyon but also about his life as an avid outdoorsman.

## Language and Meaning

Ralston's tone is conversational and accessible. He takes the reader into his world and spares no details when it comes to effectively telling his story. A natural storyteller, Ralston interjects humor, a seemingly difficult challenge considering his situation, that at times is self-deprecating.

With regard to the details of the amputation, Ralston's explanation is graphic, but not overtly so. The specifics are neither clinical nor overly garish. For the easily queasy reader, there are approximately two and a half pages that are gory. Despite this, it is Ralston's farewell to his family that is the most difficult to read because it becomes exceedingly apparent that Ralston has great love for his family and they for him.

## Structure

Ralston includes an extended quote from Homer's *The Odyssey* and two maps in his story. One map is of the Four Corners area and the other is of the Horseshoe Canyon District, Canyonlands National Park, which serves as a visual timeline for locating where everything happens.

The book contains a prologue, fifteen chapters, and an epilogue. Also included are a biographical chronology of Ralston's life from 1987 to 2003, a glossary of climbing terms and other terms used in the book, a page of acknowledgements, and a recommended reading list.

Each chapter begins with a quote from a variety of sources, including climbing guidebooks, travelogues, popular fiction, and current cinema. Each quote indicates the tone and/or the direction that the chapter will take.

## Quotes

"We are not grand because we are at the top of the food chain or because we can alter our environment - the environment will outlast us with its unfathomable forces and unyielding powers. But rather than be bound and defeated by our insignificance, we are bold because we exercise our will anyway, despite the ephemeral and delicate presence we have in this desert, on this planet, in this universe." Chapter 1, pg. 7

"Over the course of the winter, I learned about the concept of deep play: wherein a person's recreational pursuits carry a gross imbalance of risk and reward. Without the potential for any real or perceived external gain - fortune, glory, fame - a person puts himself into scenarios of real risk and consequence purely for internal benefit: fun and enlightenment." Chapter 4, pg. 94

"You chose to turn away from the women who were there to keep you from getting in this trouble. You created this accident. You wanted it to be like this. You have been heading for this situation for a long time. Look how far you came to find this spot. It's not that you're getting what you deserve - you're getting what you wanted." Chapter 5, pg. 108

"We go through life ignoring these subtleties because there are a million things we survive every day without recognizing we were ever at risk. Then we have a close call, and we become acutely aware of what that fraction of an inch or that split second means." Chapter 6, pg. 119

"Mark was saying that he didn't aspire to do winter solos, and it seemed like he was making sure I was doing them for the right reasons - climbing not for bragging rights, or the perceived admiration of others, but because it made me happy. It was a subtle check that I had cleared in myself a long time back, but I was grateful for his reminder." Chapter 6, pg. 131

"Rather than regret those choices, I swore to myself that I would learn from their consequences. Most simply, I came to understand that my attitudes were not intrinsically safe. Without fully evaluating a decision for potential danger - i.e., when I had made a decision in which attitude overruled a complete understanding and mitigation of risk - I was playing the odds." Chapter 6, pg. 141

"I had been lucky so many times that even the glimpses of my final destiny had become a toy I played with to bring on a certain intense feeling, the ultimate contrast between the fear of immediate doom and the desire to live fully." Chapter 7, pg. 150

"I had fallen prey to the mentality that places sole value on achievement while overlooking the process of achieving." Chapter 7, pg. 156



"It's early Monday evening. I've been awake for fifty-seven hours. I've been trapped for fifty hours. And I've had the same song stuck in my head for forty-three hours." Chapter 9, pg. 187

"What makes the human brain respond to death with reflection? I always figured people saw images of their family as a way of saying goodbye, but considering what the memories have done for me - giving me a surge of positive energy, smiling, feeling happy - I ruminate over an ulterior purpose." Chapter 9, pgs. 208-209

"There is only one emotion in hell: unmitigated despair wrapped in abject loneliness." Chapter 11, pg. 238

"As I stare at the wall where not twelve hours ago I etched 'RIP OCT 75 ARON APR 03,' a voice shouts in my head: I AM FREE!" Chapter 13, pg. 285

"In recounting the story, I begin to wonder about the timing of the helicopter and how it found me in the canyon at the perfect moment when I needed it. If it had been an hour later, I would have died waiting for help. Or, if I had figured out how to cut off my arm two days earlier, when I stabbed myself, there wouldn't have been a helicopter, and I would have bled out before getting to my truck, let alone Green River. I had been right on Sunday when I said on the videotape that amputating my arm would have been a slow act of suicide." Chapter 15, pg. 321

"I can hardly believe I'm telling this story. I'm dumbfounded that I'm lying on this table, given the odds that I would survive six days of dehydration and hypothermia, then survive cutting my arm off, rappelling, and hiking seven miles through the desert. And that helicopter. That was a miracle." Chapter 15, pg. 325



## Topics for Discussion

Ralston talks about "Deep Play," where the risk outweighs the reward. How does this influence your overall impression of the book?

Many Native American cultures regard the raven as a symbol of magic, a bringer of courage to face a void called the Great Mystery. In light of this, discuss Ralston's journey in connection with the repeated flights and subsequent death of the raven.

Nearly everything that Ralston experiences in Blue John Canyon is influenced by time. Is time a separate character in the book? Why or why not? Explain.

Ralston asserts that had he amputated his arm earlier in his ordeal it would have been a slow act of suicide. Discuss the relevance of timing from Ralston's initial thoughts of amputation to when he goes through with it on day six.

Discuss the risk and rewards of Ralston's project to solo climb the fourteener of Colorado in winter. Is this a worthwhile goal? Is it "Deep Play?" Why or why not? Explain.

Do you think Ralston's survival instinct is superior? Would anyone - given the circumstances - do the same?

Ralston experiences many near-death experiences, such as being stalked by a bear, buried by an avalanche, dodging falling boulders on mountains, and nearly drowning in the Colorado River. Would you consider Ralston lucky or unlucky given these circumstances? What about with regard to his entrapment at Blue John Canyon?

Ralston quit a lucrative job at Intel Corporation to pursue his dream. How would you apply the same scenario to your life? Could you have made the same choice?

Is Ralston's story cautionary, inspirational, or both? Explain.