



The Lift by Patrick Carman

A late season storm bringing a foot of fresh powder to the mountains was a rarity. When it happened during the middle of the week and it forced the schools in the small town of Buckley to close, it was a gift from the snowboard gods.

At least that's how Adam Thomas and Dylan Smith looked at it.

They were obsessed with snowboarding. When they weren't snowboarding, they were dreaming about snowboarding. And when it was summer, they read boarding magazines and watched boarding videos. They even went so far as to build a ramp in Adam's backyard that ended in a pile of woodchips. It was a rough

landing, but it helped pass the time until the snow fell again.

Still, nothing compared to the real deal. Adam and Dylan weren't about to miss the opportunity for a day on the mountain.

Unless, of course, Adam got them killed first.

"Dude, slow down!" Dylan yelled above the music blasting out of the car's half-blown-out speakers. "The snow's not going anywhere."

The car was old but it went pretty fast, and as usual, Adam was taking the slick corners quicker than Dylan was comfortable with. He held on to the door handle as Adam threw the Honda into another slide around a blind corner on the narrow, snow-covered road.

"No worries, bro!" shouted Adam. "I got this!"

As the car drifted into the other lane, Adam screamed with joy and honked the horn. He punched the accelerator, and the tired engine roared in protest. The studded snow tires bit into the softer snow; the car clawed back into its lane.

A moment later, a delivery truck blew by in a hurricane of snow and debris.

"Five seconds!" Dylan yelled. "Just five little seconds and we'd have been face-to-face with that thing."

Adam didn't seem to hear Dylan.

Don't you feel it, bro? The mountain is calling us. "And today, I promise you, I'm gonna land that 360."

Dylan didn't **contradict** him. He wasn't stupid. Adam could brag all he wanted, and Dylan wouldn't let it slide because of one all-important fact: Adam had the wheels. Without Adam, Dylan was stuck – no wheels, no snowboarding. And Dylan had some serious tricks of his own he wanted to bring out of the backyard and up to the mountain. He reached forward and turned down the volume on the stereo.

"Just take it easy," he said. "The snow's still gonna be there whether we arrive in ten minutes or twenty. And either way, you know I'm gonna rule the mountain."

Because here was the thing: Adam might have had the wheels, but Dylan had the mad skills. He'd landed his first 360 two seasons earlier, and Adam had been eating powder ever since. Being younger by a year only made it sweeter.

“Remember what happened to Bobby Miller?” Adam asked, punching in the clutch and quickly down-shifting as they came to a hairpin turn. He wasn’t really asking, Dylan knew. This came up all the time with Adam, and Dylan had to learn to roll with it.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever.”

“I’m serious,” Adam said with a raised eyebrow. “He was the hot-shot boarder. I mean, he could do stuff that you could only dream about doing.”

“Is that right?” Dylan said, not sure if he’d been insulted or if it was just Adam blowing more hot air his way.

“He was awesome. You know he was. Until he ran into something he couldn’t beat.”

“A tree,” said Dylan, as if he’d heard it all before (which he had – many times). “I know the story, Adam. It’s not like it’s new or anything.”

Adam took his eyes off the road and started at Dylan.

“Dead. Yep. According to the stories, he was dead before he hit the ground – I mean, the snow. Broken neck.”

Dylan felt a chill flutter down his back. That part of the story always bugged him, even if he *had* heard it a bunch of times. He turned up the heat in the car and gazed out the window.

Adam took his eyes off the road and stared at Dylan. “Dead. Yep. According to the stories, he was dead before he hit the ground – I mean, the snow. Broken neck.”

Dylan felt a chill flutter down his back. That part of the story always bugged him, even if he *had* heard it a bunch of times. He turned up the heat in the car and gazed out the window.

As Adam slid the car around another curve, Dylan caught a glimpse of a person walking way off in the woods. He was holding his snowboard in one hand, dragging it on the ground. Whoever it was glanced over his shoulder as the car passed.

“Hey, did you see that guy?”

“You saw a person?” Adam said sarcastically. “Out there?”

“I’m telling you, there was someone standing out there. We should go back.”

“It was a tree,” Adam said. “Or Bigfoot. Just chill.”

“What if he needed our help?”

“Then he woulda been standing on the edge of the road! You’re seeing things.” He gave Dylan a wolfish grin. “Or maybe you just saw *Bobby Miller*?” He began to hum the theme song from that old shark movie *Jaws*.

Dylan felt that chill again. “Very funny. Just drive.”

“I know these two guys at school,” said Adam, anticipation rising in his voice. “On their final run down the hill last year, just as it was starting to get dark, they were chased. *Chased*, dude! By something . . . not quite human . . .”

“You’re starting to freak me out,” Dylan said.

Adam shrugged. “They said it was like a black shadow on a board, riding right through the trees, doing all sorts of bizarre tricks. You’ve gotta wonder . . . Bobby Miller always acted like he owned the place. And from what I heard, he didn’t like anyone showing him up.”

Dylan shook his head. "I don't believe in that kinda stuff."

"Yeah?" said Adam. "Well, maybe you should. My advice? If you're gonna tear it up, I'd get off the slopes before the sun starts to set. Just to be safe."

It was nearly noon before Adam's Honda slid into the parking lot at Bluewood Ski Resort. They grabbed their gear and snowboards, trudged up to the lodge, and got their day passes. Ten minutes later, they were standing in some of the best powder they'd ever seen. It was amazing snow – perfect for testing out new tricks. It'd be like landing in six feet of cotton candy.

"Welcome to Bluewood, boys," the lift attendant said as they waited in the line.

They knew this guy by sight. He was one of the regular workers who crawled out of some cave or bar or mountain cabin every fall, worked through the winter, and then disappeared again. He was dressed in oil-stained snowmobile coveralls and he had a ratty beard that looked like dirty dishwater. *Clifton* was stitched across the front of the overalls. Dylan had never been sure if it was his first name or last.

"Incredible snow, Clifton!" Adam yelled.

"Powder as far as the eye can see," Clifton agreed. "Enjoy it while it lasts. S'pose to warm up tomorrow, then it'll turn to mush."

One day of powder, that was it. Dylan and Adam looked at each other and knew they had to make the most of it.

Clifton smiled, leaned in close to the boys, and said "A smart man might make sure he's off the mountain before ol' Bobby decides to take a few runs." Clifton's cackle followed Adam and Dylan as their chair started up the hill.

"What a freak," Dylan muttered under his breath.

"He's harmless," Adam said. "And funny. So, the usual plan?"

"Sounds good to me," Dylan said with a shrug.

"The usual plan" meant that if they happened to get separated, they'd make sure to keep in touch using the walkie-talkies they both carried.

In fact, Dylan usually went out of his way to ditch Adam. He actually preferred snowboarding alone. There was nothing quite like coming across a slope covered with fresh powder and knowing that he didn't have to share it with anyone.

Adam managed to keep up for the first two runs, but on the third, Dylan saw Adam flip over his nose and disappear into a cloud of snow near the edge of the trees. Instead of stopping, Dylan pointed his board straight downhill and took off.

Hours passed and the boys saw each other here and there, but Dylan was so on and powder was so great, he just had to take the toughest routes and get as much big air as possible. Somewhere around five P.M., with only enough remaining light for a run or two, Dylan's walkie-talkie sounded off.

"Where are ya, dude?"

"Almost at the top," Dylan answered. "You okay?"

"I had an awesome wipeout. You shoulda seen it!"

"Yeah, sorry I missed it," Dylan half lied. "If we don't meet up, I'll catch you at the lodge after the last run. I'm gonna try and get in a couple more."

“Let’s run together. I’ll meet you at the bottom.”

Dylan wasn’t so sure. The good snow would be gone by the next day, and anyway, they weren’t coming back up until who-knew-when. He needed to make the most of what little time he had left.

“Let’s just meet at the lodge, if that’s cool,” said Dylan.

A long pause on the walkie-talkie followed, and then Adam’s voice returned.

“Okay . . . yeah, sure. I might wait for you at the lift, anyway.”

He sounded disappointed.

Dylan felt a little bad for ditching, but the feeling quickly passed as he raced down the mountain.

The next two runs seemed almost like a dream. Dylan was having the best afternoon of his life. He was snowboarding like those guys you see in Warren Miller movies. He kept finding open glens with fresh snow, and jumps, drops, and ledges that let him try out all of his tricks.

In fact, Dylan almost wished Adam – or someone – had been around so they could see how awesome he was doing. But the mountain was starting to empty of people as it got colder and closer to dark.

When Dylan stopped to catch his breath after a particularly great landing, he suddenly had a strange feeling – like he was being watched. He scanned the trees and the slopes behind him, and felt that familiar chill in his bones.

But he was completely alone.

After a long minute of absolute stillness, Dylan spied someone weaving fearlessly through a tight stand of trees and, feeling sort of spooked, took off after him. But when he lost sight of the guy and tried to follow his path through the trees, he couldn’t find any tracks in the snow.

Weird.

It was closing in on darkness when Dylan coasted to the lift. There was no line, only Clifton stomping his boots to keep warm.

“Technically, the lift is closed,” said Clifton. He looked every which way, as if the cops might show up and haul him away for letting a kid ride up one last time. “You wanna go once more, I’ll look the other way.”

As Dylan started to dig out his walkie-talkie, Adam came barreling past and pulled to a stop right where he’d be able to hop onto the next chair.

“Hey man! Haven’t seen you in a while.” Dylan was actually relieved to see his friend. He’d been on his own long enough; it would be good to travel to the top one more time with his buddy. Dylan lined up next to Adam and waited for the two-person chair to swing around and pick them up.

“Last run!” said Clifton, waving to them onto the lift. “See you at the lodge.”

Adam kept his helmet and goggles on as Dylan sat down beside him. He seemed upset.

“Some good runs today?” asked Dylan, but Adam just stared off into the trees without answering. It was darker and colder on the lift as it snaked through the tall trees.

Dylan looked up the long line of empty chairs in front of him and shivered as he was buffeted by a gust of wind. He was starting to think this might not have been the best idea.

“Let’s stick together on this one, okay?” Dylan asked his friend. Adam stayed silent, unmoving, and Dylan started to think maybe he’d taken one too many runs on his own. Maybe he’d been a little too brash about his skills.

“Sorry I ditched you today,” Dylan said, his teeth chattering.

And then a strange thing happened.

Dylan’s walkie-talkie started blaring in his pocket. He fumbled into his jacket and pressed the button on the side.

“Adam?” he said, looking at the figure slumped in the chair next to him.

There was a long, static-filled pause.

And then Adam’s voice, coming through the walkie-talkie.

“Hey, if you can hear me, I’m waiting for you at the lodge. You there? Hello?”

“Yeah,” Dylan said very quietly, a tremble in his voice as the cold started to clamp around his limbs. “I’m heading up for one more run.”

Another long pause, then finally Adam was back, quieter this time.

“Just get off the mountain, okay? It’s getting dark.”

Dylan twisted around in his seat and looked at the line of empty chairs going all the way down to the bottom. Clifton was gone.

Everyone was gone.

It was like Dylan was the only living thing on the mountain.

Him and whoever – or *whatever* – was sitting next to him.

