

Chapter 7

It was about 3:30 am in the dark of night when Vince approached a tunnel on the old highway that ran along the mountain's edge. From a distance, in the gloom, lit only by the truck's headlights, it looked like a very old tunnel. Ivy was growing around its mouth, and there were many broken pieces of **concrete**⁸⁷ lying in the roadway. Vince could tell that a lot of the fallen pieces had once been part of the tunnel itself.

There was no traffic on the road at that early hour, so Vince slowed down to try to see if there was a clearance sign posted to indicate the height of the opening. He remembered Sal telling him that the truck's trailer was eleven feet in height. On top of the truck's wheels and **chassis**⁸⁸, Vince figured that the overall height had to be nearly fifteen feet. The tunnel's top had to be higher than that for the truck to fit through.

As he rolled the truck slowly toward the entrance, he saw what he thought was a sign. Vince **squinted**⁸⁹ his eyes upward, but its letters and numbers were still **indistinguishable**⁹⁰ from fifty yards away, where he had stopped. The faded sign, that once must have been bright yellow with black painted letters, was unreadable. The numbers on the sign appeared to have been worn by years of rain, snow, sun, and wind. Paint was peeling off at the corners. Vince pulled the truck forward to within ten yards of the opening. The truck's air brakes whispered a squeak as it stopped.

Vince grabbed a flashlight and jumped down from the truck's **cab**⁹¹. He walked around in front of the tunnel **archway**⁹², scanned the flashlight, checking to see if there were any other signs. Finding none, he decided to try and compare the height of the tunnel's opening with the top of the **trailer**⁹³, just by sight. They appeared to be just about the same, but Vince wanted to be sure.

Not wanting to damage Sal's truck, Vince carefully climbed on top of the truck's cab to get a better look. He stepped softly on the roof, as he knew his friend slept just below. From the top of the truck, looking around, Vince could see the **faint**⁹⁴ rays of the sun beginning to creep over the horizon. Vince grasped the **leading edge**⁹⁵ of the trailer as

⁸⁷ **concrete** is the material made from sand and rocks used to make sidewalks, walls, and tunnels

⁸⁸ **chassis** is the word used for the base (bottom) frame, usually made of metal, of a motor vehicle

⁸⁹ **squint** means to squeeze the eyelids narrowly together to better focus one's vision, to see small or far away things better

⁹⁰ **indistinguishable** means that the viewer cannot be sure what something is

⁹¹ **cab** is the place where the truck drivers sit, in front of the cargo trailer

⁹² **archway** is an opening like a half-circle

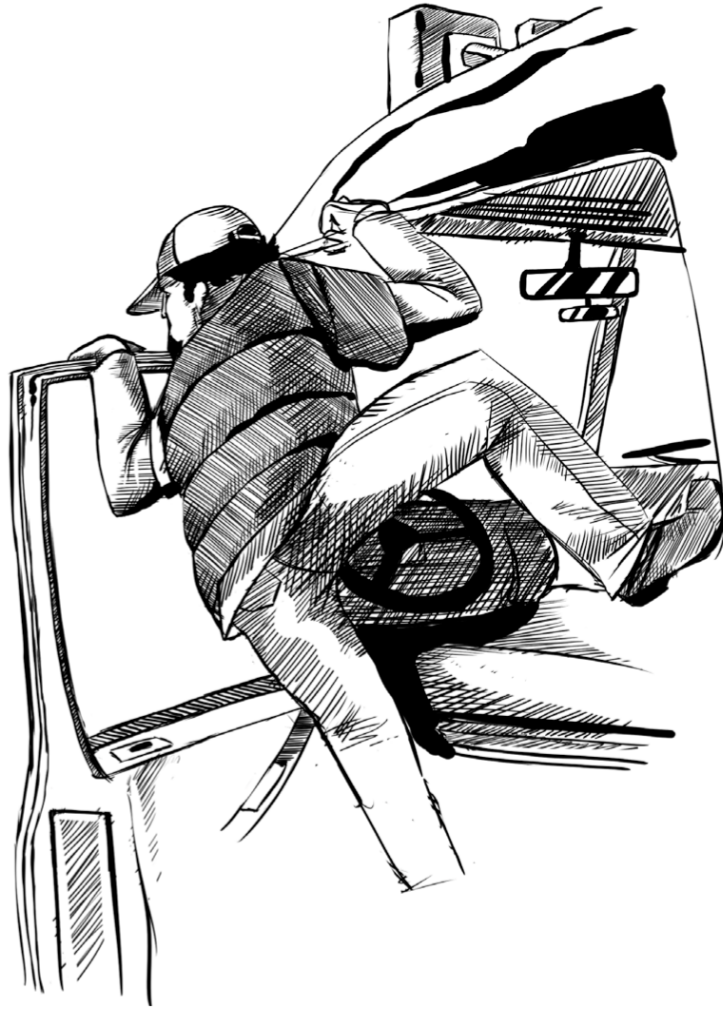
⁹³ **trailer** is the name given to the long rectangular box part of the truck used to carry the cargo

⁹⁴ **faint** means visible, but hard to see

⁹⁵ **leading edge** means 'front edge' of an object as it is moving forward, like an airplane wing or skateboard nose

he stood **perilously**⁹⁶ on top of the damp metal surface of the truck's cab. He bent his legs a bit for balance. He could see his own breath as he exhaled in the cold mountain air. He eyed the tunnel's highest point again from his squatted position, and then turned carefully atop the wet metal roof to look again at the leading edge of the trailer just behind him.

To Vince, it appeared that the truck could just barely make it through. He almost slipped off the hood of the truck as he lowered himself back to the roadway.



The thought of trying to turn the truck around on this narrow mountain road made him **shiver with worry**⁹⁷. The last U-turn he made was done with six lanes of space and a man directing him with a flashlight. Here he wouldn't be able to do it at all. He **sighed deeply**⁹⁸ when he considered how long it would take to finish the journey if they had to

⁹⁶ **perilously** means in a position of danger where caution should be taken

⁹⁷ **shiver with worry** means to shake inside, like when you're cold, and maybe nervous about something

⁹⁸ **sighed deeply** means to show disappointment using body language, making your shoulders go down, and letting out a long breath

have another truck hook up to theirs from behind and pull it backwards down that road, and then take another highway hundreds of miles away to get to Los Angeles. He wondered why neither of the CalTrans highway workers had warned him about the tunnels, but Vince figured that no one had told them either. Or maybe they didn't notice the height of Sal's truck....

While he had been **surveying the situation**⁹⁹, a car pulled up behind the truck. It was an older blue Volkswagen bus with a crack in the passenger side of its windshield. The **VW**¹⁰⁰ couldn't go around because the truck was blocking the tunnel opening. Vince couldn't see the driver very well, but it looked like a tall man was behind the wheel. It couldn't get around the truck, and there wasn't enough room for even a small car to get by. Vince figured more cars would come along soon, and that he'd better do something.

⁹⁹ **surveying the situation** means to look at a problem for a long time, hoping to come up with an answer

¹⁰⁰ **VW** is short for Volkswagen, which sort of means 'car for regular folks'