

# CHAPTER 1

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**N**ever had I seen so many angry trees in one place.

Through a gondola window covered with spider cracks, ominous mountains loomed in the darkened distance. One peak in particular, a white, snowcapped giant, laughed at me with his frozen face and pointed pines, pompous with knowledge he had risen to life, fallen, and rebirthed his dominance over countless millennia.

Ignoring the familiar tug to spiral down another rabbit hole of negativity, I instead envisioned myself racing down a crazy-steep, treeless, triple black diamond slope at the summit of Mammoth Mountain: Huevos Grande.

Passengers continued to pack inside the already-full car, oblivious to our collective need to breathe oxygen, already limited in the high altitude air that smelled of sweaty gym socks.

“And I don’t see *you* wearin’ no helmet,” Kevin said.

“Enough about Sonny Bono already, that was a long time ago,” I said, glancing down at Kevin, who, at a foot shorter than me, sported matching black ski pants and jacket with a rainbow-colored voodoo doll embroidered on the back. The snowboarding boots boosted his height by two inches, bringing his height up to five feet five inches.

My closest friend for the last two decades and best man at the wedding of my disaster of a marriage, we’d met at track practice during senior year of high school.

With my last shred of patience wearing thin, I waited with Kevin in the front corner of the room-sized orange cube, near the sliding doors. Skis propped and steadied with one hand, I gave his down-insulated shoulder a friendly punch with the other and said, “Stay positive, man. We need as much optimism as we can handle.”

“Glad you finally gettin’ your head outta them clouds,” Kevin said. “Sooner you forgive Margaret, sooner you can get on with your life, Johnny Jackass.”

“You know I hate it when you call me that.”

“Exactly.”

Two months ago, he’d suggested this trip to some of California’s highest slopes in order to check off the last item on our mid-life crisis bucket list.

One final group of skiers jammed inside, jerking the box that would soon glide us up to the peak of peaks. My heart flopped around inside my chest as I ignored the instinctive urge to go back to our room and down a double bourbon. Instead, I adjusted my black beanie, giving Kevin a forced smile. A tinge of alcohol withdrawal headache pinged my noggin. I dug out two Tylenol gel caps from my inner jacket pocket, popped them into my mouth and swallowed without water.

I tightened my lips and turned my head, glancing through a different gondola window, up to the 11,000-foot peak riddled with wide, white, invincible slopes.

But a shiver crawled up from my legs to my neck, deflating any remnants of confidence.

I tapped open a weather app on my phone. “This might be the last run. That huge storm front’s almost here.”

“Word.”

We both enjoyed the occasional humorous embellishment of stereotypical hip-hop culture, even though Kevin had two masters’ degrees from Berkeley, one in American history and another in theater arts.

After separating from Margaret three years ago, the entire divorce process continually marinated in my head, but I wanted—needed—to lick my mental wounds, get on with my life, and find a new purpose. Hence my agreeing to this trip.

Heads bobbed among the other snow enthusiasts, along with a colorful assortment of mirrored goggles and insulated garments. My height allowed me an unobstructed view of my fellow sardines.

“Think of all the times they said it was supposed to rain back home in Newport Beach,” I said. “Nothing. Just a few drops here and there. Damned drought’s horrible.”

A man with dark, heavy-lidded eyes stood five feet away from us in the rear of the gondola, wearing a baby blue sweater and black jeans. Then for no apparent reason, he started tapping his forehead repeatedly on the gondola wall.

Dude wore no ski jacket.

No ski pants.

*Odd.*

Short and thin-framed, as he rubbed the nape of his neck, his entire presence screamed of fear and anger. Black-rimmed glasses sat atop his nose, above a thick Freddy Mercury mustache, his face flushed red.

Kevin bounced up and down several times, arms crossed, rubbing his outer shoulders, probably to increase his blood flow. Too much caffeine for him. Again.

“So tell me ’bout this good news you got,” Kevin whispered, shivering. The primary reason we’d listed this ski trip on our bucket list five years ago was an excuse to spend some “bro” time away from work, away from our real lives. Now it served as a way for me to hide from my memories of Margaret.

But it wasn’t working.

Leaning in close to Kevin to make sure nobody else heard our discussion, I said, “We got a big real estate deal set to close on a sweet piece of beachfront commercial property. Killer views. And with that single commission, I’m planning to rebuild my brokerage.”

A thought wandered into my mind, of creamy smooth whiskey flowing gently over my tongue and down into my gut. Something to sooth my frayed nerves.

Kevin smiled with his huge, toothy grin and jumped again. “That’s what I’m talkin’ about.”

I don’t know why, but the overall appearance of the mustached man in the corner, coupled with his darting glances and multiple throat clearings, gave me the willies. I turned away, trying to ignore him and his negative vibes. Finally, the line to the gondola had shriveled to two skiers, a mother and her young son. The kid had a smile the size of a crescent moon as he crossed the threshold from the loading platform to the gondola. But his boot snagged on the lip of the doorway. He landed hard on his knees in front of me and, with a loud grunt, rolled onto his side.

I leaned down, extended my arm, and helped the hundred-pound fella to his feet.

The kid smiled, thanked me, and I patted him on the back. “No worries.”

His mother placed her hand over her chest and gave me a thankful glance. A pleasant warmth filled my heart.

The lady in charge of the gondola stuck her head inside and gave a brief speech about the trip lasting fifteen minutes,

staying inside the safety areas, avoiding out of bounds markers, and something about having fun.

“What’s up with this cracked window?” a man interrupted with a raised voice, pointing to the rear corner.

“Scheduled for repair tomorrow.”

“Jesus,” the man muttered to himself, waving off the woman.

Seconds later, the doors slid shut and we started our ascent.

Halfway up to Mammoth’s highest ridge, the inside of my right shoulder started throbbing. Strong. Like never before. After dropping forty pounds over the past six months, every joint of my now two-hundred-pound body ached and moaned whenever I moved. I hoped the Tylenol would work its magic soon.

A loud metal-on-metal screeching noise filled the air and with a thundering thud, the haul cable crashed to a dead stop. Everyone covered their ears.

Our car continued its forward momentum. We swayed up, peaked, and arced backwards, like a giant, slow-moving pendulum on an old grandfather clock.

Passengers screamed.

I braced my back against the gondola wall and scanned the surface of the tiny sea of forty or so shuffling, mumbling human souls, all of us suspended mid-air and clinging to life by a thin, wobbly, and probably frayed cable.

I craned my head and peeked downward and immediately wished I hadn’t. My stomach lurched. A jagged, rocky crevasse stared back up at me from hundreds of feet below us.

“I knew we shouldn’t have come up today,” a woman said.

Emergency amber lights flashed and a broken tin-can voice shot from inside a wall speaker. “. . . worry . . . got . . . down . . . soon. Sorry for . . . thank you . . .”

Human voices mumbled. Our car continued to sway back and forth. Kevin stared at me with rapidly blinking eyes.

Wire tension ebbed and flowed, bobbing us up and down .

The mustached man standing in the opposite corner of the gondola rubbed his temples, bared an assortment of mangled teeth, and banged his fist several times against his forehead. His eyes darted left to right. He squatted and I lost sight of him behind a rather hefty woman wearing an all-pink jumpsuit.

I leaned toward Kevin. "Something's wrong with that dude."