

Chapter Nine

Kevin pulled into the parking lot of Timberline Lodge late afternoon. It was still too early to start for the summit. His plan to get a room and sleep a few hours was as poorly thought out as the Steelhead fishing trip to the north side of Oregon. Getting a room without a reservation at a world famous resort, during peak season was impossible—no matter how much money was offered.

A diehard snowboarder working in the deli filled Kevin in on where the climbing register was and the time most people start for the summit. The young overactive waiter drew two different routes on napkins and packed some high carbohydrate snacks into zip-lock bags. Two bottles of water and the energy food filled the larger pockets of the red climbing parka. Above a huge fireplace, Kevin read a plaque about how the old lodge was built in 1937 without a nail, to keep men busy during the Great Depression. Every log was cut and hand fitted with only hand tools and the wage was one dollar a day. Kevin walked away wondering what the men and women at the Trask Trailer plant earned.

Back out in the parking lot, Kevin looked at both napkins. The south face was the easy route and didn't require ropes or much experience. That would be the route he would take to the summit. Although it was the middle of June, it was unseasonably cold outside. The big old, log lodge sat at the 6000 foot level; where trees quit growing—hence the name Timberline Lodge. Midnight, Thursday was a good climbing time and day, per the waiter; weekends could easily yield over two hundred hikers headed for the summit of Mt. Hood.

Back in his car, Kevin pulled the parka hood up and down over his forehead and eyes; he pulled the drawstring to block out the daylight. With the seat reclined Kevin peeked through the small opening; the white snow covered peak contrasted against the blue sky. *I'll start for the top at midnight, after I get some rest. Finally, something I can accomplish all on my own. Fate brought me to this mountain and an easy solo ascent on the last day of spring... There is no one I have to please or answer to—this is all about me...*

Sleeping during the longest day of light, proved unproductive. Kevin tried to sleep but his mind reflected on Danny's fate, then flipped to Richard Johnson, then flipped to going to work for his Father. Tina's sullied sexuality flashed in and out and mixed with the weekend trips his Grandfather took him on at age fourteen. Long after the sun went down; Kevin's exhausted body and brain gave way to some crucial needed rest.

An hour into Friday Kevin was awakened by the sound of car doors and trunks opening then slamming shut. About a dozen climbers with packs on were starting up

the trail just to the west of Timberline Lodge. Kevin stepped out into the dark damp air, the cold helped zap some life into his cramped up back and limbs. He slowly meandered across the parking lot. At the climbing register shack, he waited behind three climbers as they signed in, **1:20 am. June 21** was what Kevin filled in next to his name. Back at the Mercedes concept car; Kevin pulled out the Ice ax and day pack. He switched on a flashlight and waited for two individuals ahead of him to round the corner of the Lodge. Before Kevin even took his first twenty steps a group of five people jogged around him, they were followed by a group of eight. *Forget about any type of solitude on this mountain. I might as well take my time. I'm not going to be the first one to summit on this day. But, I was right about telling that Lilly woman, that Mt. Hood is known as a cake walk.*

After four grueling hours of a steady incline, Kevin was passed by thrity climbers, maybe more. The steep incline was boring and strenuous; almost like running the bleachers before basketball practice. The beams from head lamps and flashlights reflecting off the snow looked like bouncing dots from all the climbers ahead of him; a few of the shinning dots were already on Hogsback. Kevin found solitude in taking up the rear; being first, number one, or even an all-star basket player wasn't part of his DNA—he just wanted this one accomplishment for himself.

The smell of sulfur was rolling down the mountain and polluted the light mountain air. Kevin remembered what the full time snowboarder, part time waiter had warned him about. *The sulfur fumes make a lot of people sick; some have even suffocated. After you cross the sulfur fields you will need your ice ax and crampons. The Hogsback route will turn to almost a forty-five degree climb. Be careful of falling rocks and loose ice.*

Kevin made it across the belching sulfur fumaroles and stopped to rest on a lava bolder. The sulfur fumes and the light air at the ten-thousand foot level smelt like a dozen road flares burning all at once. The sun was low in the sky and casted long shadows to the west. Kevin emptied half of his water bottle trying to wash the dense harsh sulfur from his throat. Three climbers passed by with scarfs across their mouths; they didn't say a word. A few minutes later another group of four quickly passed by; no acknowledgement from or directed at Kevin.

Next a seasoned looking man and older women stopped. "Son, about two hundred yards ahead and you will be completely out of the sulfur fumes." The old man spoke with authority.

"You will get ill if you stay here for too long. I have had to turn back twice over the years," said the woman. "There is still a high amount of sulfur still lingering here."

"Thanks..." replied Kevin. "I'm glad to know cleaner air lay ahead."

"Follow us son." The older man extended his hand to Kevin.

Kevin put out his hand and was glad to be helped to his feet. He followed the older

experienced climbers. Sure enough the burning in his throat eased. Finally, Kevin was drawing in clean light mountain air; he knew all about altitude sickness from earlier climbs but had not ever been through a sulfur field. A large lava bolder ten feet off the trail would become Kevin's second refuge; where he could check his gear and tighten his new hiking boots.

"Over there about a hundred yards is Hogsback. Then stay in the deep cutout through the Pearly Gates to the summit." The older man pointed with his ice ax.

"Thanks for getting me away from the crater area. That sulfur is bad stuff. The air is much better here." Kevin replied between short breaths.

"If you don't make it to the summit, there is always another day." The older woman warned. "It's not a do or die choice; no matter how much your psyche keeps nagging at you. Don't let a prideful conquest—conquer you.

"Thanks for the advice," replied Kevin as he leaned back against the large red lava boulder.

"Like my wife said, don't risk your life trying to prove something to yourself. Conquer pride not a stupid mountain." The older man turned and followed his wife.

"Thank you two," Kevin lightly yelled while filling his lungs with the thin cold air.

Wow, glad those two came along at the right time... Kevin watched the couple progress up the trail. Gargling more water helped get the foul sulfur taste from his mouth and raw throat. Two more climbers passed before Kevin's head had quit pounding. After twenty minutes he was acclimated to the ten thousand foot level and almost ready to move on. One ice spike on one of the crampons had worn a hole in the lightweight day pack.

The one hundred yards to the base of Hogsback required two rest breaks, so to suck in at the thin air. Kevin rationalized his slowed pace. *Sleeping in the car was not the way to rest. Stopping at that tavern, drinking and shooting pool took its toll... The three days on Lake Shasta was also a drain... I could use a nap.* Kevin moved off the trail to a staging cutout where climbers geared-up. He ate two protein bars and finished off most all the second bottle of water. Next Kevin pulled the crampons from the pack. Seven professional climbers were already coming down; their helmets were covered with summit decals from a variety of different mountains. Kevin waited for three more groups to descend down past him and head toward Crater Rock. The warm sun felt good beating down on his face—the firm ice was turning into loose slush.

Kevin looked all the way up the eight hundred foot cutout snow trail at the Pearly Gates. The two rock outcroppings were the narrow doorway to the summit. *I'm ready to do this...* The moment Kevin started to clamp on the ice spikes he felt something wet in his sock. It hurt to remove a boot. Pulling down his sock a blister about the

size of a quarter was forming on his heel. *Damn it! I knew these new boots were too big...* Over tightening the crampon strap made the ice spikes squeeze the loose boot hard against the blister. *I think I feel a blister on my other foot too. Damn it....*

A quarter of the way up Hogsback, four descending climbers hurriedly passed; it was like passengers getting by in the center aisle of a small plane. Ahead the path narrowed even more. The next group Kevin had to set his ice ax and moved up and out of the chute; so they could pass. Back in the narrow cutout it took Kevin twenty minutes to make the next fifty feet. Two climbers waiting above lost patience and yelled down, to let them pass. Kevin climbed out on to the glacier ice and kicked in the toe spikes and then let them pass.

Three more climbers appeared at the top of the narrow chute—Kevin waited. The sun beaten ice had softened enough that Kevin felt foot slippage. The ice ax felt lose also! The climbing rule was before noon the one way chute was for ascending and past noon it was for descending.

Forty minutes later three climbers that were roped together stopped. "You can rope us with us," offered the lead climber. "The ice is getting dangerously soft. Everyone else is descending on the Wy' East route; it is shaded this time of day.

The elder woman's words of 'do or die' hadn't sent the warning to Kevin's oxygen starved brain—just the opposite, they were words directed at his pride. Finally, he would be achieving sometime in pure selfness, no climbing guide, no basketball team, no Trask Enterprise, no parental meddling, no grandfather mentoring—this accomplishment would be all Kevin Trask.

"You're not going to try a solo summit today are you?" asked the roped-up climber.

"No, I'm turning back," Kevin lied. "You three go on past. I'll rest for awhile, maybe take a few pictures and then head back down."

Kevin waited... After they were a distance away, he carefully moved back into the snow ditch. When he set the toe spike, it didn't get a good hold. Kevin immediately raised the ice ax overhead; the ten inch steel pick went all the way into the soft ice. He slipped about a yard before the crampons caught hold. "This is not good," Kevin mumbled to himself. He set the ice pick into the shaded side of ditch sidewall and then set the left side toe spike. He carefully worked himself back down to the bottom of Hogsback. About a quarter mile to the east, Kevin noticed climbers coming down the Wy' East route. *I'll take that route.*

It took about forty-five minutes for Kevin to backtrack to the Y on the trail above Crater Rock. Kevin made it a hundred yards up the Wy' East route without slipping. The sun was way past its high point; the shade had re-hardened the slush and the wind cooled off the mountain. Kevin loved the solitude and feeling the elements. The long days of June left the window for a late afternoon accent possible. Kevin had climbed mountains more difficult and even hunkered down through an overnight

snow storm on Mt. Rainier. Something deep inside told Kevin that he could do this—just for himself.

The wind and shade lowered the chill factor by more than twenty degrees. Kevin needed to snap on the light weight snow pants. A flat rock outcropping just ahead looked like a secure location. Kevin worked himself on to the rock ledge—it was like sitting on the ledge of a sky scraper. He could see far into Eastern Oregon and to the south he could see down the Cascade Mountain range. The Timberline Lodge four thousand feet below looked like a small wood box. Kevin's legs dangled over the edge; the heel of his left boot struck back against the rock ledge. "Ouch! Damn that hurts!" Kevin's lone voice rang out into the cold remote solitude.

With his pack off there was now plenty of room to slide back against the rock wall. Kevin removed the left crampon and then he removed the boot; pain shot all the way up the back of his leg. Blood covered the entire heel of the white sock! *Good thing I packed extra socks.* Kevin moved the pack sitting next to him and one crampon got accidentally pushed off the ledge. "Crap!" Kevin yelled as the crampon bounced and flipped end over end. He watched carefully... The metal spikes reflecting off the sun helped to track its flight. It abruptly smacked about twenty feet up on Crater Rock and dropped to the base. A higher bounce and the crampon would have been lost forever inside the semi-active Mt. Hood crater.

Kevin's heart raced—the lone hiking boot teetered on the edge. The shoestrings were moving in the wind, his hand shook! Kevin carefully leaned forward and cautiously reached for the boot. He just snatched the shoestring a millisecond before the boot teetered off... *That was close! Lose that boot and I'd be done. I'm not prepared for digging in overnight, let alone being bare footed.*

Adrenaline and anxiety subdued the pain of the bleeding blister as Kevin methodically worked himself back from the ledge. Putting on a fresh pair of socks was the least of his problems. Climbing down to retrieve the crampon without a rope would be dangerous. Kevin leaned back and closed his eyes. *Hopefully someone coming down off the mountain will have a rope.* Kevin looked up the Wy' East route there was no one coming down. A frightful void pushed into his soul. This void was way beyond any solitude he had ever sought after. Being alone physically was one thing but to be alone spiritually would be like falling into a dark bottomless hole, like the crater just below—never to be found.

A few minutes turned into almost an hour—no one would be coming down with a rope or to help. The yellow sun turned into an orange ball as it started down into the haze over Portland Oregon. *Jesus I trust in you. Jesus I trust in you. Jesus I trust in you, was the mantra Kevin started repeating. The silent words pushed out the singleness he was looking to find on this solo ascent to the summit.* Kevin stood and started down the Wy' East trail.

The strong wind blew the sulfur fumes away to the west. Kevin made it to the top of

the Palmer Glacier only slipping and falling twice. Finally, Kevin could rest and take a break—the parking lot was within a mile. *I'm taking off the crampons; between over tightening the straps and these oversized hiking boots. My heels are thrashed!* Kevin pulled off the day pack let it drop to the ground and then sat down. His left foot had oozed fluid all over the back of his sock. Kevin carefully pulled off the blood soaked sock; a big hunk of skin stuck to the white hiking sock. *Wow that looks bad. I'm taking off the boots and I'll walk down in this soft snow.*

The Palmer Glacier snow field was groomed for year round skiing and had about three inches of corn snow over ice. The corn snow numbed the raw flesh and Kevin made the three-quarter of a mile trek with only socks on in less than an hour. The snow field ran out about a hundred yards from the parking lot and a good distance east of Timberline Lodge. Just three steps on to the red sharp lava rock and Kevin's feet screamed, *no-way*.

Kevin removed the pack and used it as something to sit on. The small scrub trees; the only thing that grew at the six-thousand foot elevation, hid him from view. The white hiking socks were soaked pink from blood and wet snow. The bottoms of the socks were covered with red lava gravel. Kevin pulled the pack out from under his butt; he dropped further out of sight. In the distant he could hear a few car doors slamming shut, engines start and then he listened to the tires on pavement sounds fade away. Kevin stood and looked over the tops of the stunted scrub trees... *Looks like the dayshift is leaving, reminds me of the parking lot at the Trask plant at quitting time.* Kevin plopped back down on the red loose sharp gravel. *I'll have to put on the boots to make it down to my car. I'll just rest for awhile...*

The SL600 had been sitting in the parking lot for over a day and already had one ticket under the wiper blade for not having a national parking pass. Kevin had been on the mountain twice the normal time to climb Mt. Hood. He hadn't been in a bed or slept for thirty-five hours. Kevin laid back and used the pack as a make shift pillow. *I'll just close my eyes for a few minutes before I put the boots back on. I'm so close to my car, even if it gets dark, I can make it from here.*

More cars left the parking lot; some were workers and some were tourists. Most all the midweek climbers had been long gone, way earlier in the day. In less than six hours the entire climbers parking area would be filled; it was Friday and the weekend-mountaineers would be arriving at Timberline Lodge. A hundred feet or a hundred yards didn't matter—falling to sleep barefoot, wet and out-of-site with the temperature dropping was perilous.

Kevin felt something pushing at his shoulder; his tired eyes locked on an arm and big hand extending from a blue flannel shirt sleeve. Kevin sat up and rubbed at his wind-burned forehead. A wirier tall person spoke, "You must be Trask."

"Yeah, I'm a Trask." Kevin replied.

"Lilly said that you came up here and told me you had a fancy car. I've been watching you with binoculars from the parking lot for the last hour."

"An hour? I only closed my eyes for a minute or two."

"It's been more like thirty minutes! Good way to die from exposure."

"That wouldn't happen; my car is right down there. Kevin got to his feet and pointed.

"Sure thing," the tall seasoned man replied. "What happened you twist your ankle?"

"No, these new boots wore blisters on the back of my feet." Kevin pointed down at the heel on the bloody socks.

"Ouch! I always break in my boots. Couldn't afford to have my corks gave me blisters like that."

"Corks! What are Corks?" Kevin replied, still trying to get a bearing.

"They're logging boots, got spikes on the bottom to walk on logs. They're like Billy's ice spikes. The ones you rented from Lilly.

Kevin extended his hand. "I'm Kevin."

"People, call my Kenneth or Ken. I'm not too particular."

"Glad to meet you Kenneth." They shook hands.

"Ken bent down, grabbed the pack with one hand and then came up under Kevin's arm with his massive shoulder." "Keep your arm over my shoulder. I'll help you off this damn mountain." Ten steps down the mountain Kenneth could feel Kevin twanging from pain with every step. Kenneth stopped and asked, "How much do you weigh?"

"About one hundred seventy-five pounds." replied Kevin gritting his teeth.

"How about I throw you over my shoulder?" Kenneth suggested.

"No, I can make it? But the lava rocks are sharp." Kevin replied.

"Are your boots in the pack?" Kenneth unzipped the pack, pulled out the almost new boots and threw them on the ground. He kept digging around. "What happened to the other crampon?"

"I lost it..." Kevin replied. Then quickly recanted. "It's not really lost. But I needed a safety rope to climb down and get it."

"You know where it is?"

"Yeah, right at the base of Crater Rock." Kevin plopped back down; needing to get the weight off of his bare feet. "Maybe they have an ATV or four wheelers down at

the lodge that can get me back to my car?"

"They probably do. But you can't drive something with rubber tires up on this mountain. Thank the environmentalists for that... They'd let you die up here first." Kenneth was now examining Kevin's boot. "You going to want to keep these? Looks like they're real expensive."

"No, when I bought them I thought they felt too big." Kevin replied while looking up at Kenneth. "I'll be throwing them away."

Kenneth already had a knife out of his pocket and opened. "You sure you don't want these boots?"

"Yes, I'm sure that I don't want them." Kevin answered in a tired voice.

Kenneth used the razor sharp blade on his pocket knife to quickly cut out the heel section of one boot. "Here try this," Ken handed the boot back to Kevin.

Kevin looked at the big hole in the back of the boot. Fatigue was finally taking its toll. Exhausted Kevin pulled the boot on. "I wish I would have thought to do that," Kevin watched Kenneth cutting at the other boot.

"Do you got a knife on you?" Kenneth asked.

"No," replied Kevin, dropping his head; not in discredit but overwhelming tiredness.

"Well, I guess you weren't too prepared to climb a mountain," Kenneth said as he cut at the other boot. "You had no business being up there!"

"I've climbed three other mountains," Kevin replied in a weak, defensive tone.

"All alone!" Kenneth snapped back. "So, you climbed three other mountains; hopefully those times were with a guide and a climbing party. But, you went up this mountain alone and unprepared. That makes you stupid..." Kenneth handed the second boot back to Kevin.

A fracture of irritation was boiling inside. Too weak to argue Kevin just pulled on the boot and stood up. "Thanks, they feel okay now. I can make it to my car." Kevin grabbed the pack and started for the parking lot. On the third steps Kevin stumbled over the untied boot laces and fell onto his hands and knees.

From behind, Kenneth's massive hand clenched Kevin's shoulder. He helped Kevin up and with minimal effort threw Kevin over his shoulder. Tears began flowing from Kenneth's deep blue eyes and down his weathered face. The tears turned the red lava dust into blood looking droplets. This was the second time he carried an adventurous, risk-taker off of Mount Hood—these do or die individuals often leave behind an unbearable hurt with their egocentric legacies.