

Chapter 1

Rumbling water echoed through the canyon steady and dense, snowmelt plunging toward the sea. Zack Pruitt felt the river in his bones. Big water over granite. He hoisted his pack and started down the trail.

The trip was on.

Fellow river guides, clients, and a gear-laden pack train followed behind. Pounding footsteps, dust stirring in the mountain air. As he descended into the canyon, Zack felt excitement, fear, and a primal connection to the landscape.

The river grew louder. His excitement became less and the fear more. Just a bit at first, a few butterflies, but as the river drew closer his thoughts turned grim. They

focused not on what he'd done well in the past, the successful trips, but what he hadn't: Gallows.

It was a scourge of a rapid. His nemesis. He'd never guided it successfully—had, in fact, been pummeled each time through—and he dreaded a high water bid. The place was shrouded in creepy mystique. No matter how much he mastered the river, Gallows owned him.

Zack surged with anxiety, dropped his pack and slumped on a boulder. Sunlight filtered through the sequoia canopy. He studied the massive trees, rooted well above the river, and envied their upland habitat, their inability to speculate.

The mind was a curse.

He wanted to run to higher ground: Mongolia, Mars, anyplace away from here. Running was easy, what he did best. It had brought him to this very place.

But he couldn't run from here. Three river guides and eleven clients depended on him. Dependence triggered his flight instinct, but there was only one way out: down the river and through Gallows.

Gabe Arenal, the trip leader, approached. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Just taking a break."

"Got the fear?"

Zack couldn't reveal the depths of it, his own little prison. He shrugged. "You?"

Gabe grinned, a blend of stress and lunacy. "Always. But fear's the engine that drives the fun, right?"

Zack found the grin unnerving.

The sunlight seemed too bright all of a sudden. It reflected off the granite and warmed the mountains and forced a dry breeze up the canyon and cumulus over Sierra Nevada peaks. The breeze smelled of pine sap. Dust.

He suppressed his anxiety. He could do this. Had to.

"Right," Zack muttered. "Fun."

He stood, hoisted his pack, and headed down the trail.

Eager to see the water level, Zack hiked quickly and reached the Sequoia River ahead of everyone else. A string of warm days had melted the winter snow pack and sent it through this lovely but godforsaken granite cleft in the Sierra Nevada. Their usual campsite on the gravel bar was flooded, willow islands in the current. White fir and sugar pine clung to a terrace above the channel. Just enough dry ground to set up camp for the night.

He dumped his pack and approached the river. The flow was massive, bigger than expected. It churned and roiled through the channel. He could feel the tremendous energy of

matter and gravity, seemed to push against his chest. A gorgeous bit of fear.

He knelt and splashed water across his face, cold and clear. It washed away the sweat and trail dirt and sent his heart racing. The conflict of the river: the water you needed to live, to drink and wash and play, was also the water that could hold you under and pin you down and fuck you up for good. Pick the right line and you were set. Stray a few feet and you were finished.

Clients, guides, and the pack train drifted down the trail and onto the terrace. Gabe and the other river guides, Mitch "Messy" Messing and Carey Graves, started unloading gear: rafts, oars, paddles, coolers, cooking gear, dry bags. Enough supplies for fifteen people and three nights in a mountain wilderness.

As Zack turned back to the river, conflicting emotions rushed through him. Countering his endemic fear was the reckless need for excitement. Both made him Zack Pruitt. When they checked each other, good things happened, made him a respected class-five guide and kept him alive to spin the yarn. But when they broke apart, disaster followed.

Because fear was the engine that drove the fun.