

Chapter One

In the zone or cold blast?

Jamie shifted his weight on his snowboard at the top of the mountain and set his sights down the slope. If only winter break were longer. He'd be even more equipped for team competition this year—and the rest of his life. He sighed and then pushed off, ready to face the unforgiving beasts waiting for him on the run. The moguls sat up like whack-a-moles, to be conquered one by one as he carved his way down the mountain. The crisp scent of pine reminded him to keep alert as he hurtled between mighty trees on both sides.

As he faced the first bump, he inhaled the frosty air, trusted his Capital Outsider board, and let the exhilarating freedom carry him along. He'd started timing himself the first day they'd arrived at Killington. Today he was going for six minutes, a whole ten seconds faster than yesterday. His mind raced along with his body. Setting a goal made him even more primed to compete. His school team still had two competitions. If he trained while he was here, he'd win for the team. With a great record, he'd make the high school team next year. Then, who knows? Maybe states, then national.

The only thing that could boost the loads of fun he was having was if Lucas were snowboarding with him. Jamie laughed. Speedy Lucas would be at the bottom already. When Lucas got back home, they'd go boarding again. Soon, Jamie hoped, but his brother couldn't just up and leave the war in Afghanistan when he wanted to.

At the bottom of the hill, he lifted his goggles and slid to the side to make way for others swooshing in. He checked his time. Close. He couldn't wait to ride the lift to the top and speed down again. He'd make six minutes by the end of the day. After that, he'd work on other moves—maybe do a few corkscrews and alley-oops to test his balance and control. He had enough time for at least three more runs today and all day tomorrow to get his speed up.

He squinted in the bright sunlight. Was that his dad under the Welcome sign at the snack bar? As Jamie looked closer, his mood plummeted. His father stood with his arms folded across his chest, his mouth set in a hard line. Jamie unbuckled his bindings, picked up his board, and headed for the snack bar. His stomach knotted up. It usually did these days any time he had to deal with Dad. All they ever seemed to do was fight. Now here was trouble again. He braced for it and forced his legs ahead.

"Dad. Hi. Never saw you up here before. The view's great, right?" He forced a smile, hoping it might soften whatever was coming.

His father frowned. "Get your gear. We're leaving."

Jamie winced. So much for softening the situation. "No way. We still have two days—"

His father's jaw clenched harder. "We're going now." He turned and stalked off toward the parking lot.

Jamie's breath caught in his throat as he watched him go, then followed. "Dad, what happened? Did I do something wrong? Is Mom okay?"

Dad didn't answer. He reached their SUV and swiped the snowflakes off the windshield. Jamie fumbled his board onto the roof rack and locked up, then glanced back at the mountain and the lifts. A couple of kids he had snowboarded with the last few days were rocketing down the runs, laughing and probably planning where they'd get together later. He moved to grab his snowboard and run back. Let Dad go home if he wanted to. But Dad was double-checking the locks.

"They're secure," Jamie said, giving up hope of staying. "I'm not stupid."

Dad grabbed his arm and gave him a shove. "Just get in the car. We've got a long ride."

Jamie pulled away. "Okay, okay. Don't push me." His jaw tightened as he slid onto the back seat. It wasn't fair of his father to yank him off the slopes without telling him why. So much for his goal of speeding up by ten seconds and winning for his team. He forced a breath to carry his disappointment out the window and buckled his seat belt.

Dad got in the car but didn't start the engine. Instead, he announced, "I got a call from your science teacher."

Jamie swallowed hard. "What did he want?" But he knew. He hadn't even looked at his science notes before the test he'd taken last week.

"Why didn't you tell us you failed the exam?"

The word *failed* hit him like a snowplow. "I didn't know I failed. It was hard. But I got some of the answers." Jamie couldn't believe Mr. J had called Dad over winter break when they weren't even in school.

Dad started in on him again. Jamie tuned him out. He remembered hearing the word *remorse* on a TV series he liked. That's what was running through his head right now, regret and sorrow. Why hadn't he studied?

"Your teacher said you'll have to do a lot of extra work to pass the class. You have a greater chance of being left behind and repeating the year." His father shook his head. His disappointed expression said it all. Big surprise. Dad started the engine. "Buckle up. Mom's waiting at the condo."

Jamie did as he was told. Maybe the worst was over. But the silence that hung in the air between them as they drove to pick up Mom told him otherwise. How could he speed fearlessly down the steepest runs, flying over bumps and dodging other obstacles, and then be sitting with his dad, scared of his words?

Mom was waiting with their gear out front as they pulled up to the condo. Jamie hustled from the car to help load their bags. He yanked one up with both hands and flung it into the trunk.

Dad clapped a hand down hard on his shoulder. "Don't throw your anger around. You know why we're leaving early. You agreed to try harder in school, and you didn't follow through. You don't know how to focus."

Jamie fought down his anger. No use saying that his dad didn't understand anything about how all the pressure felt— pressure to be a good student, like his older brother, Lucas, hadn't been—as if he could make up for his brother's choices somehow. He couldn't have stopped Lucas from enlisting in the Marines and being sent to Afghanistan. Jamie's days got used up worrying about him. He missed his big brother so much. He also missed his dad, how he had been before all this. He used to make up games and play with them. Jamie remembered how he'd wait for Dad near the door to surprise him when he came home from work. Those days were gone. Now when Dad came home, he seemed worn out, his face always set in a frown. He was never in the mood to play.

Jamie slipped from his father's grasp and turned to his mother. "Anything else inside, Mom?"

"We're all set," she said and slid onto the front seat. "Thanks, Jamie." As she turned to face him, her forehead wrinkled. "You could have tried a little harder. You know that Dad and I are always available to help you with schoolwork."

Jamie nodded. He wanted to say, "Sorry, Mom. Don't be upset. I'll try harder," but this wasn't the time. He imagined a cartoon bubble over her head, describing him: *Dork*. Or maybe *Loser*. No. That's how *he'd* describe himself. Mom wouldn't. He squinted and pictured what she might imagine—him struggling to hold off an avalanche of empty homework sheets about to cover him. That was more likely how she saw him. In his imagination, the avalanche wasn't soft and fluffy and fun to play in like snow. Instead, hard-edged sheets of paper cut into him.

As Dad put the car into drive, Jamie cracked open his window. He watched the Killington Ski Resort sign get smaller until it disappeared as they turned the corner.

Down. Up. Down. Up. Cold air blasted him from the window he opened and shut with the electronic button. Con- trolling other things in his life with a button would be great. Like school. And Dad. And all that pressure.

"You okay back there?" Mom called as they turned onto the highway.

Jamie, lost in his made-up game *Escape Out the Window*, nodded absentmindedly.

"Answer your mother!" His father's command jolted him back to attention. "And stop fiddling with the window."

Jamie banged his head on the back of the seat. "Yeah, I'm okay." Then he added, "Mom."

Jamie knew his dad only wanted to hear that he was okay doing what his dad had said: "Get your grades up," and "Apply yourself in school," whatever that meant. He might do what he had to in school if Dad would only stop bugging him. No matter how badly he wanted to, Jamie couldn't argue back or tell Dad that he could probably do the work but that Dad's hounding always stopped him. Nothing he did seemed to please his father, so why even try with grades? But if he said any of this, Dad wouldn't really listen. He'd just start lecturing him again about focusing, how Jamie had lost his way in school, and that everything he did now would impact his future. Forget about telling Dad that maybe college wasn't for him. His father would go ballistic, just like he had with Lucas whenever Lucas did something Dad didn't like.

Mom changed the subject, and Jamie hunched down in his seat. Maybe if Dad couldn't see him in the rearview mirror, he'd forget Jamie was back there for the next two hours as they drove home to Albany. He let out a sigh of disappointment as reality set in. The perfect temperature and powdery snow here almost guaranteed to advance his speed and moves on the slopes. No longer. Two whole days when he was supposed to be boarding, wasted because of a stupid science test. No one to blame but himself. Dad was right. He'd made an agreement with his parents that he'd work hard this semester. In exchange, they'd agreed to take him snowboarding for February mid-winter break. He should have studied for the test, but he'd been so keyed up about the trip that he couldn't concentrate on stupid science and memorizing chemical formulas. Who cared about chemicals? Now he'd have to bust his butt the rest of the year.

Another day on the slopes would have helped his racing time. But Jiminy Peak wasn't far from home. He could always take the bus there on Saturdays to get in some last-minute practice. Maybe he'd go tomorrow or Sunday, if he could talk Dad into letting him.

He reached over and pressed the window up-down button again. Air blasted in. His mom glanced back. Her eyebrows shot up.

"Sorry. Guess I was on automatic." Jamie shook his head at his lack of control. Maybe Dad was right. He had to pull it together.

He was 99 percent ready for the last two school snowboarding competitions. High school could be a new start. He had tried to be interested in school this year, but schoolwork bored him. Nothing he was expected to learn had anything to do with his life or his future. He didn't have a clue what he wanted to do, except for following the snow. That could take him out West someday, where he could get a job at a ski resort and be out on the mountain as much as he wanted.

"You know, Jamie," his father called out, interrupting his daydream, "if your brother had applied himself, college could have—"

Jamie bolted up in his seat. "Geez, Dad! Leave Lucas out of this. It has nothing to do with him. He didn't want to go to college. And don't worry about me graduating. It's only eighth grade, and I still have four months till the end of the year."

"Jim, please. Let him relax a bit." His mother intervened at the right time, but his dad went on.

"No, Grace. He has to hear this." His father adjusted the rearview mirror locking onto Jamie's eyes. "You can't expect to get on in life by waiting till the last minute to get down to business," his father scolded. "The world doesn't reward procrastinators. You have to focus."

Mom reached over and patted Dad's arm. "Jim, that's enough for now."

Jamie balled his fists, irritated that he had upset Mom, who usually took his side when Dad was being unreasonable. "I don't expect the world to reward me, Dad." If he had to say what hurt him most about his dad's opinions and predictions it would be the way he said them, like a drill sergeant to a dumb soldier. If he had a dollar for every time his dad told him to focus, he'd be snowboarding on a three-thousand-dollar Channel Sports CC.

“Well, you’ll have more time for schoolwork now that snow-boarding competition’s over,” his father shot back. “That’s a start.”

Jamie did a double take. “It’s not over. I still have—”

Dad took his eyes off the road and met Jamie’s gaze in the rearview mirror. “For you, young man, the season is over.”

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