

GRAYDON DEE HUBBARD



AT THE ALTARS OF
MONEY

— A NOVEL —

Titles and author pseudonyms of
other books by Graydon Dee Hubbard

*Slim to None: A Journey through the
Wasteland of Anorexia Treatment*
by Gordon Hendricks

Charlie's Pride: A Novel
by Dee Hubbard

At the Altars of Money

a novel



Graydon Dee Hubbard

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“Money has many altars, and those who worship there are often willing, sometimes eager, to sacrifice their integrity or their reason—or both.”

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Part I

A Chance Encounter

June 21, 2001

A NATURAL BEACON, it guided pioneer families to a new life in the mountain west, beyond the monotony of America's great plains. Now, Longs Peak attracts seekers of a different kind. Like worshippers trekking to a hallowed place they come.

HIS headlamp illuminates signatures in the trailhead register, and he scans the new page for June 21, 2001. Seven climbers have an earlier start. But the math doesn't work. He looks back to the parking lot and recounts cars in the moonlight. Yes, there are eleven. Then he realizes *Of course, campers have come up the day before. Damn this obsession with numbers. Does it never cease?*

With a bold flourish, he signs his name, "Hamish Mackenzie." There, he's joined the ranks of others drawn to this historic mountain seeking... what? Solace? Redemption? A vision of perfection in an imperfect world? Maybe adventure, challenge, and a tiny speck of fame. Perhaps even death. *Was a new destiny for each revealed?* Then he laughs and shakes his head. *You're too solemn this morning,* he chuckles at himself. *Lighten up. Most just came to climb the mountain and enjoy its views.*

He's planned a Thursday climb to avoid crowded weekend conditions on Colorado's most popular Fourteener trail system. More climbers are ahead of him than he expected, but he knows campers will head for the 14,255 ft. summit at dawn, hours before he reaches their campsites. He curses himself again. Why should he care how many climbers precede him? He's timed his start, not to be first on the summit but to savor sunrise on the mountain's East Face, a renowned "big wall" for elite technical climbers only. He won't even see the peak until he breaches timberline and approaches Chasm Lake trail junction, over two hours into his climb.

He looks closer at the register. Scrawled above his signature is a familiar name...Kelly Reid. Yes, he remembers her, an SEC attorney he talked to several years ago...about the Bonaventure Fund, Denver's first Ponzi scheme and its boldest white-collar crime ever. She's only five minutes ahead of him.

He feels good...no, better than that, he feels terrific. An adrenalin surge elevates his spirits, heightens his senses. His hands tremble with excitement, for him a rare emotional indulgence, and he's supercharged with energy fueled by positive expectations. No anticipatory anxiety this day. No tormenting identity conflicts. Today is his thirty-fifth birthday, and he's ready, really ready, to interrupt his pursuit of money and pursue a more zestful, more adventuresome life. *About damn time.*

He's going to climb his first Fourteener, a bloody tough one. Fifty-five climbers have died here.

Facing him is a long and difficult but non-technical climb into thin air, most of it above timberline. A vertical mile of elevation gain. Fifteen miles round trip. Maybe twelve hours on the mountain. Harder coming down than going up. But he's fearless in his resolve. No fear of losing his way. No crowds to fear. Raising a mittened hand, he forms a fist of triumph and pumps it at a moonlit sky. Celebrating victory over himself, he rejoices in his brief liberation from the world of money management, that frenzied, soulless world where dollars race from pocket to pocket rather than into productive enterprise. Such an artificial world. One in which he functions to perfection, but also in sensory deprivation and without delight.

Now the natural world beckons. *Bravo.*

His headlamp casts an inquiring shaft of light at the forest before him, finds and focuses on a wide path that burrows ahead like a tunnel, and invites him to enter the lower mountain's protective cover. He breathes in deeply, exhales mini-clouds of condensation into frigid mountain air and strides forward with confident, methodical steps. As the forest closes about him, he shivers. At what? Not at the cold. Something's missing. There are no external sounds. He hears only his breathing. *How rare is that?*

Impatience soon nags him, but he's mindful not to burn too much energy too soon. A slow but steady pace is best. Conserve strength, but squander exuberance. Both are possible. Find his natural climbing rhythms and maintain them for as long as he can. Maps and guidebook information are stored in memory. He's memorized names and locations of places along the way, even programmed in rest stops, with time and elevation goals for

each route segment. *But*, he reminds himself, *plans and goals aren't sacred. Don't deny impulse. Experiencing adventure may require changing plans and deferring goals. Inflexibility equals opportunity lost. Gotta be more opportunistic. Certainly in my personal life...yeah, right, my nonexistent personal life. Maybe in my professional life too.*

AS he approaches timberline, he slows, eases his breathing and glances at his new watch. Its modern technology also displays his geographic location, serves as a compass, and calculates his elevation and distance traveled. Almost time for a break. Less than two hours on the trail, but he's covered almost three miles and gained over 1,600 feet of elevation. A reasonable pace, but he might not summit until later than guidebooks suggest. They urge climbers to descend by early afternoon, before storms envelop the mountain and lightning bolts use human forms for target practice.

Aerial photo images he's studied crowd into his mind. A mountain range bisects Rocky Mountain National Park, extending west from the Continental Divide. Unusual for Colorado, where most ranges run north to south. Rising above a crowd of surrounding peaks, a broad truncated summit thrusts upward. Shaped like a giant closed fist, Longs Peak challenges the sky.

Confrontation has consequences.

He knows the sky generally responds in anger, with shrieking winds, torrential rain, freezing sleet, stinging hail, and yes, blinding snow, even in summer. He accepts the weather risk. Ignoring risk is foolhardy. Prudence demands an understanding of risk and planning for it. A summit attempt on the calendar's longest day just might get him the best results he could expect: a unique scene at sunrise, a difficult summit attained, and a worry-free descent. Will his thirty-fifth... No. He shakes his head and corrects himself, again self-scolding for his obsessive precision with numbers. *Can't leave out my first day on the planet. So...will my thirty-sixth first day of summer mark the first day of a fresh beginning for me?*

Most of the mountain's physical challenge still lies ahead of him, and he has prepared for it by alternating a jogging program with aerobic weight-circuit routines at a neighborhood fitness center. Cross-training, the exercise gurus call it.

For clothing, he's selected Capilene inner and mid-layer garments, then rain-proof Gore-Tex pants and jacket, all ultra-lightweight, all designed and crafted for climber comfort and efficiency. Covering his