



Vendetta in Valletta

Chapter One

If you fall you won't have Vertigo

As the Chief Executive Officer of Texan American Telecom (TAT) Chad Diggins and his wife Skyler, who was also the company's Chief Administrative Officer (CAO...pronounced COW by her adoring employees), were accustomed to living the high life. When at their primary home in Houston, TX they frequented the finest restaurants, accepted invitations to attend charity and political fundraisers, where they rubbed shoulders with other members of the city's *nouveau riche* elite, and indulged in conspicuous consumption whenever the fancy took them. But, in a marriage and courtship that had spanned over two decades neither had experienced anything quite as dizzyingly elevated as their current situation. They were suspended upside down by ropes dangling from separate cars of Gondola One ascending at a rate of 1,200 feet- per-minute toward Mid-Veil Ski Resort. They were near the location of their luxurious condo in Veil-of-Tears, CO and had ridden the gondola, albeit in more conventional circumstances, many times when skiing. The panoramic view was breath-taking but they would have preferred to enjoy it from the relative safety, comfort and warmth of the cabin ten, or so, metres above their feet. The cable car's current occupants, two burly, heavily-tattooed men with Italian accents and German handguns had other ideas about their viewpoint. Despite it being summer residual ice fields clung defiantly to the barren mountain side and a gusty wind caused their bodies to swing and rotate disarmingly.

Chad had pause to reflect that it was a blessing that Gondola One didn't span any vertiginous ravines or tentatively climb sheer rock faces with nothing but hundreds of metres of air beneath them. Instead the cable car's route reversed one of the mountain's many ski trails making a steady but unspectacular ascent. His mind flashed back to a family vacation in Northern Spain's Picos de Europa when they rode the Fuente De teleferico. It ascended 753 vertical metres in under four minutes traversing two immense spans. Had he been similarly exposed above that distant abyss of sheer rock his heart would have long-since capitulated. In contrast the vertical height of the Gondola One was rarely more than sixty feet above ground level and their greatest danger came from banging their bodies against the ground or treetops rather than heart-stopping exposure. As the gondolas

approached the Mid-Veil station the magnificent 14,000ft peaks of the Gore Range revealed their rugged presence. Unfortunately for Chad and Skyler so did the much closer ground of Veil Mountain as their bodies were dragged along beneath each car until they clattered to a painful halt below the whirring wheels, cogs and gears of the gondola's terminus.

Their captors untied the ropes securing the battered and bruised couple before using their bindings as leashes to tug them away from the station toward the Mountain Top Express Chairlift #4 where they were similarly upended and suspended. As the name implied the chairlift whisked them toward the ridgeline overlooking the celebrated Back Bowls at a breath-taking altitude of 11,250 feet. At the summit station their guards untethered them and mimed the action of walking. They were manoeuvred onto a minor, unmarked trail that descended sharply via a series of dog-leg turns. It occurred to Chad that they were descending one of the ridge's many black ski runs. Combined with the elevation the unaccustomed physical exercise was making Chad breathless. Skyler was also experiencing some difficulty and stopped to kick off her high-heeled Jimmy Choo's which didn't suit this terrain as well as the catwalk. Just as Chad felt the need for a rest, which he was sure the Italians would take a dim view of, they arrived at a tumbledown wooden shack. From a decrepit concrete stanchion two fraying wires extended apparently without end across the yawning abyss of a spectacular glacial U- shaped hanging valley toward the distant rock face of the Mountain of the Holy Cross, prompting vain hopes of divine intervention. Chad could only speculate that they were the remnants of a long-abandoned, and long-neglected aerial tramway that once had supplied a remote and otherwise inaccessible mineshaft.

"What are we doing here? Who are you people? Why have you abducted us from our home?" stammered Chad still gasping from the lack of oxygen. Perhaps he was suffering hallucinations caused by a cerebral oedema. Perhaps it was a nightmare from which he would soon awaken. Whether real or imagined his captors didn't respond to his desperate questions. Instead they gabbled at him in what he imagined must be Italian given the plethora of dramatic gestures and body language that accompanied the incomprehensible spoken words. Either these guys didn't speak English or they were making a damned good job of pretending not to.

Their acquaintanceship, such as it was, had begun approximately an hour earlier when the doorbell at the Diggins' Condo in Veil-of-Tears' exclusive Bachelor's Gulch neighbourhood had rung unexpectedly. To his knowledge nobody had ordered pizza, the kids were out with their pals and had their own keys and visitors weren't expected. Who could it be? Chad's curiosity had been answered as soon as he opened the front door to discover a behemoth of

a man dressed like an extra from 'The Godfather' standing on the welcome mat, then the cosh descended on Chad's head and his curiosity vanished immediately along with his consciousness.

His wits returned grudgingly. At first the enveloping darkness convinced him that he remained unconscious but was experiencing a dream. Then he perceived that his mouth was gagged and limbs trussed. Finally, the sounds of groaning and whimpering emanating from the gloom nearby convinced him that he had company. It could only be Skylar. They had been abducted, but why?

The answer that he sought in vain lay a mere two hours earlier in time but almost ten thousand kilometres to the East in Catania, Sicily. The Diggins' had no material involvement in the creation of their current predicament. Their undoing was the responsibility of their colleague and co-founder of TAT, Silas Marshall. As Silas scurried up the steps of one of the company's private jets desperate to depart both Sicily and the enforced 'hospitality' of their Cosa Nostra host Ricardo D'Agostino, the Mobster had demanded the names of two victims in what he regarded as just recompense for the death of two Mafia henchmen during TAT's assault on the labyrinth of caves beneath Sperlinga Castle six months earlier. The subterranean warren housed La Cosa Nostra torture chambers where two TAT employees had been incarcerated and persecuted. Inexplicably Silas had named Chad and Skylar Diggins as his nominations for the gruesome *quid pro quo*. He still could not rationalise his decision but figured that 'what's done is done and naively hoped that nothing would come of it.

Less than sixty seconds after pilot Davey 'Yee Haw' Crockett lifted the Gulfstream off the Catania runway Ricardo received a call from an underling in Malta. To his consternation he learned of the savage deaths of four more *Cugine* at the hands of TAT. More specifically at the behest of the mysterious and currently deranged Mister Smith in retaliation for his elongation on The Rack during his three-day confinement in Sperlinga. The culprit and his compatriots had eluded Ricardo's grasp by a mere minute. To salve his anger Ricardo immediately called his Mafia partners in Houston, TX and ordered the hit on the Diggins...and that was merely the beginning of his intentions.

The Houston affiliate wasted little time in ascertaining that their targets were not at their primary Texan home. Ricardo had previously done his homework on TAT's Executives and his dossier on the Diggins revealed their ownership of other properties on 'The Aching Butt

Ranch' in Euphonium, TX; Condos on the Florida Gulf Coast, Costa del Ponce in Mexico, Laguna Beach, CA and.....Veil-of-Tears, CO. Ricardo used his network to detect the Diggins whereabouts. The Denver affiliate delegated their Veil-of- Tears family to check the Colorado address. They hit paydirt thereby earning a lucrative contract and the rare opportunity for a little job-related fun.

The Diminuendo family had controlled the Veil-of-Tears Mafia franchise for decades and the upmarket, well-heeled resort town provided a spectacular income- stream but the family business was also as dull as dishwater. The *pizzo* rolled in as regular as clockwork as did the revenue from their narcotics and prostitution businesses. Don Diminuendo often wondered how a town of just over five thousand residents could consume so many tons of cocaine and recently legalized weed and remain vaguely functional. Similarly, the family's top-end Ukrainian and Russian call girls were as busy as the proverbial beaver. But this revenue was simply automatic, the Don's four strapping young sons Dimm, Dom, Dumm and Dork were supposed to supply the beef to enforce the family's revenue streams but they remained otiose to requirements. Everyone paid willingly and enforcement remained unnecessary. Consequently, the boys whiled away their days and nights sampling the family merchandise, both pharmaceutical and human, gambling, drinking and sleeping. The young studs hankered for an opportunity in an active market like Vegas or Jersey but no demand for their services materialised. Suddenly their world had changed. A real Mafiosi from the Sicilian homeland had called and requested their assistance and they had delivered. Not only had they located the quarry, they had also successfully abducted them and they were on the verge of terminating both the contract and their targets. Surely, opportunity finally beckoned. To ensure their future successful career progression the brothers realised that the more dramatic, venal and unconventional their chosen mode of execution the rosier their future would be. So, it came to pass that they elected not to simply shoot their victims in their own home in the time-honoured Mafiosi tradition but to find a suitably dramatic location and mode of death to bolster their credentials and thereby embellish their resumes and attractiveness to the criminal job market.

Hence the Diggins current unexpected position on the edge of a Rocky Mountain High with John Denver nowhere to be seen and mercifully not within earshot.

"One on each wire" commanded one of the Italians unexpectedly demonstrating a command of English as he motioned toward the decrepit lines of the aerial tramway.

“Why in tarnation would we do that?” enquired Chad. “There ain’t no way that we can make it across that distance. Its gotta be more than five miles across that chasm. Hell, I can’t even see where these wires end.”

The English speaker made no attempt to provide an immediate answer to Chad’s question. Instead he fished a mobile phone out of an inner pocket and, reverting to his foreign language, issued what sounded like a brisk command.

About ten minutes passed before a third man appeared on the steep trail ushering the Diggins’ offspring Chad Junior and Gold ahead of him. Chad and Skylar stood aghast at the development.

“Because, if you don’t do it they will and you can watch” answered the man with an unmistakable look of menace in his eyes.

With grim resignation Chad moved toward the furthest wire projecting from the weathered stanchion reluctantly followed by Skylar who appeared to have lapsed into a trance. “See you on the other side Honey” Chad uttered with unintended ambiguity. They both turned and blew kisses toward their children before simultaneously and tearfully declaring “love you both” and then attempted to mount their respective wires.

Chad dimly recalled Silvester Stallone facing a similar challenge in ‘Cliffhanger’ and attempted to replicate his technique by straddling the wire from above with his frame elongated lengthwise. Barely had he inched his way a measly ten feet before every muscle in his body began to cramp and ache. Worse still his bulk appeared to act as a magnet to the wind causing the already unstable wire to sway. It began gently at first but then seemed gather a self-perpetuating momentum. The more he extended his arms and dragged the bulk of his body toward his distant objective the more intense the unnerving motion became. It all seemed so much easier in the movie when Sly was doing it. He risked a glance back and across to the other wire to see how Skylar was faring. He immediately regretted his decision. She had apparently attempted to mimic his method but had already lost balance, turned turtle and was now suspended beneath the wire. So far he had maintained his resolve not to look down but now that determination wavered. What he saw literally took his breath away. Despite only progressing a few yards along the wire the rock face had

dropped away vertiginously. Terra firma was already a long, long way below and from this altitude it looked very firm indeed. What he knew to be tall coniferous trees appeared no larger than toothpicks. Unfortunately, Skylar followed his gaze and immediately began to wail in alarm. She was the first to lose her grip on reality but Chad did not outlive her by more than a minute. Once the adults had plummeted to earth the Italian men repeated the exercise with the Diggins' trembling and distraught children. The kid's performance didn't greatly delay their departure to inform Don Diminuendo of their accomplishments.

TAT's Gulfstream had already dropped off the three European members of the party that had attended the 'Summit' meeting called by La Cosa Nostra. Bill Cash, Coco Tittisee and Memphis 'Telephone' Bell had disembarked at East Midlands airport and the plane was airborne again bound for Houston. Silas remained ignorant of events that would await their arrival. He did not yet know that he was the sole surviving founder of the company and its most senior Executive. His former partners, the Diggins, having mysteriously vanished into thin air.

To read more visit the [Book Store](#)