

DANGER NEVER SLEEPS ②

ACCEPTABLE RISK

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CHAPTER
ONE

AUGUST
GREENVILLE, SC

The pain compelled her—

No . . . *propelled* her.

It had to end.

Living this way wasn't living. She would be doing everyone a favor if she just ended it. She couldn't believe the burden she'd become to the people she loved most.

Dr. Helen Craft approached the window, tears tracking down her cheeks to drip off her chin. She touched them in wonder. When was the last time she'd cried? The day her father died? No, it was the day the Taliban had driven the van loaded with explosives into the playground at the orphanage.

She was working in the small medical clinic across the street and felt the blast like she was standing beside it. Only she hadn't suffered a scratch. Not like the children.

"The children," she whispered. Forty-five killed instantly. Thirty-three injured.

A sob escaped her and she unlocked the window.

The images clicked on an endless loop with no stop button. She couldn't even pause it without alcohol or some drug.

Operating on a child who'd lost a leg.

Digging through the rubble to find more children with more injuries than she could help at once.

A missing hand.

A missing face . . .

One operation after another.

One child dying, then the next and the next, until she'd lost count. Later, she'd learned sixteen of the thirty-three surviving had succumbed to their injuries.

"I couldn't save them," she whispered. "Why couldn't I save them?" What good was she when they all died in spite of her best efforts?

And the workers. Her friends—

She grabbed her head, the screams continuing to echo. "Stop, please stop. I just want it to stop."

She threw open the window and looked down. Down represented peace. If she went back, the torture would continue.

"Helen! What are you doing?"

She didn't turn, didn't acknowledge her sister's terrified cry, just stepped out onto the ledge . . .

"Helen, no!"

. . . and launched herself into the air.

Free-falling.

Until the pain was finally gone.