



THE WAY OF THE **BRAVE**

SUSAN MAY WARREN



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It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves.

Edmund Hillary, who together with Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, was first to climb to the summit of Mount Everest, the tallest mountain in the world

CHAPTER ONE

HE SHOULD HAVE never left Alaska.

Sure, in Alaska Orion woke to his breath in a hover of mist over his face, his fireplace having simmered to a low flame, the room lit in gray, the sun denting the eternal night. But he belonged in all that cold and darkness, under the shadow of unforgiving Denali, buried under a numbing layer of ice and snow.

There, his anger couldn't break through, couldn't ignite with the injustice of the daily news.

Couldn't consume him with helplessness.

It was better to be cold.

The vast aloneness of Alaska allowed him to breathe, despite the stinging cold in his lungs. Allowed him to scream without anyone knowing.

“I hate New York City,” Orion muttered now, just below his breath, but loud enough for Ham to hear as they boarded the 4 train.

“You just need coffee,” Ham said.

“Vats of it.” Orion tried to ignore the man who knocked into him, bumping him into the subway pole.

Orion wanted to blame his dark mood on the ache in his bum

knee, the fact that his body should still be sleeping, the static in his brain evidence of his jet lag. Maybe he should attribute his general sour attitude about humanity at large on the fact that his buddy Ham had insisted they route through Memorial Park to spend a few moments staring into the acre-wide footprint of the North Tower.

Orion had fisted his hands into his canvas jacket, the wind bullying him, the sun glaring off the glass of One World Trade Center, and watched as the waterfalls stirred up a mist into the brisk April air.

He couldn't escape the thud in his chest.

The start of the War on Terror, right here—a war that still hadn't been won, despite the casualties, the sacrifices, the personal losses.

All of it put Orion into a humdinger of a stormy mood.

Then he spotted the punk kid with the look of a thug slide through the closing doors of the subway car.

He didn't know why, but all the hackles rose on the back of his neck.

White, midtwenties, rail thin, the young man wore a grimy Knicks jersey, a pair of ripped jeans, and the fuzz of a few nights on his chin. He radiated an odor that suggested a night or two spent in the same clothing.

Maybe the guy was homeless—Orion shouldn't be so quick to judge. Clearly he'd watched one too many episodes of *Law & Order* during his months in rehab. Orion had probably looked the same way when he arrived at LaGuardia, freshly out of hibernation at his homestead under the loom of Denali.

Orion dismissed the kid and hung on to the bar overhead as the train pulled away from Fulton station. “We could have walked to Foley Square,” he muttered to Ham, who leaned his shoulder

against the pole, clearly used to the jerk and roll of the New York metro.

Ham's gaze was tracking Knicks as he moved halfway down the car.

So Orion wasn't the only one whose instincts fired.

"You're limping," Ham said, not looking at him. He sounded as grumpy as Orion. "And we're late. The rally has already started."

"I'm not an invalid. My knee just doesn't like eight hours on a plane." He watched as the guy nudged up behind what looked like a college student—brown hair, fuzz on his chin, clean-cut, a black backpack with a purple NYU logo on the flap hanging over his shoulder. "I hope White has answers."

"If anyone can track down Royal, it's Senator White. He's on the Armed Services Committee."

Orion glanced away, toward the other side of the car. A couple women sat with their bags clutched on their laps. Another woman stood, her bag over her shoulder, scrolling through her phone. A man in a suit coat holding a satchel was reading the paper folded in half in his grip.

Behind them a young man wearing a black hoodie, earbuds affixed, bobbed his head to music. He caught Orion's eye, then looked away.

"You should have told me that you went to rescue Royal and Thorne," Orion said, looking at Ham.

Ham met him with a frown. "It wasn't my information to give."

Orion's mouth tightened. "I wasn't thrilled when Logan Thorne landed on my doorstep last summer, very alive and packing a conspiracy theory."

Ham turned to face him, as if ready to share answers as to why a former Navy SEAL who'd been taken by the Taliban in Afghanistan some three years ago had appeared alive, although shot, and

in the backwoods of Alaska. Thorne surfaced with stories of an off-the-books rescue mission, a CIA cover-up, and the desperate fear that someone was still out to get him.

Thorne's story sat in Orion's gut and chewed at him until, some five months later, he finally contacted former SEAL Hamilton Jones.

Ham invited him to NYC to tell his story to Senator Isaac White, who served on the Senate Armed Services Committee and had ties to the CIA. If anyone could find Royal, it was the people who'd been behind his disappearance. Besides, they owed Orion answers about a number of things. So yes, he'd emerged from the woods for a face to face with White.

Ham had been bugging him anyway to join his private international SAR team, Jones, Inc.

Hello, *no*. The last thing Orion wanted was to dive back into the world of spec ops and medical tragedies. He'd barely survived the last go-round.

Had left behind buddies, pieces of himself, and a broken heart.

"Listen, that rescue mission blew up in everyone's faces and got a good man killed, so no, my first thought wasn't to call you," Ham said. "Besides, if I remember correctly, you were still in Germany—"

"Knock it off."

The sharp voice turned both Ham and Orion. Knicks had jostled NYU enough to get a rise out of the college kid. "Step back."

Knicks, however, came up on him, gave the student a push. "What? You got a problem with me?"

Ham stiffened.

NYU moved away, hands up. "I don't want any trouble."

What he said. Orion's jaw tightened. *Please don't let the kid be armed.*

The car swayed as it screamed through the tunnels. Orion glanced at the next stop on the map above the door—Brooklyn Bridge–City Hall station, still three minutes away.

A couple people pulled out their phones.

A ripple of fear silenced the subway as Knicks took another step toward NYU. Then he got in his face with a string of expletives that even Orion hadn't heard before. And he'd been to spec ops boot camp, a special kind of H-E-double-hockey-sticks.

Yikes.

Orion's code of honor made him glance, almost in apology, at the women standing in the back of the car and—wait, *what?*

Knicks and the man in the hoodie might be working in tandem because hoodie slipped past one of the women with what looked like her wallet disappearing into his front pocket.

Aw, shoot. The last thing Orion wanted was to get tangled up in other people's trouble.

On the other side of the car, the altercation erupted. Knicks cornered the pale, yet angry NYU student, who was trying to bump past him.

When Knicks shoved the kid against the door, Ham moved.

Orion should have expected it. Ham wasn't the sit-around type—even when they were serving at their base in Asadabad, Ham got to know the locals, as well as everyone on base. The man was the base party coordinator—he'd fashioned a basketball hoop and nailed it to a pole, even dragged in music.

He'd also started a prayer meeting, but that was Ham, the rescuer of lost souls.

Probably why the man wouldn't stop hounding Orion about leaving the woods and joining the living.

No, thank you. Mostly because Orion had nothing left to give, the rescuer inside him all tapped out.

Truth was, he just wanted to mind his own business.

Not with Ham around. The former SEAL took four steps and didn't break stride as he slammed into Knicks. At six foot three, Ham could be imposing when he wanted to, and part of the PR for his small empire of GoSports gyms meant a regular workout.

Knicks hadn't a prayer.

In a second, Ham had his arm around Knicks's neck, pressing into his carotid artery and jugular vein, cutting off the air.

G'night, pal.

Knicks clawed at Ham's arm, stumbled back, and Ham brought him down gently, letting him go when the man slumped into unconsciousness.

For a second, no one moved.

Then, clapping erupted through the car, even as Ham stood up and put a foot on the man's chest. "Stay down," he said, not raising his voice as the kid rose to consciousness.

The train started to slow.

Orion glanced at Hoodie. He'd moved toward the door, his head down. The only one, it seemed, not watching the debacle at the front of the train.

Aw, shoot.

Because Orion really didn't come here to make trouble, find trouble, or even insert himself into the middle of trouble.

And yet . . .

He couldn't live with himself. No way Hoodie was getting away.

Orion stepped up in front of him, blocking the door as the train pulled into the station.

Hoodie looked up. Dark eyes, a hint of dark whiskers, and his eyes narrowed.

"Give it up," Orion said and held out his hand.

Hoodie frowned.

“The wallet.” He didn’t take his eyes off the man. “You’re not getting off without returning it.”

“Get out of my way,” Hoodie said as the car rolled to a stop.

The doors opened.

Sure, Orion could have moved. Could have given in to the life mantra that he’d embraced with two hands, clutching it to his chest after the tragedy in Afghanistan—it wasn’t his problem.

But he was tired of evil winning, or at least winning the battle, and maybe God had put him right here to save one hardworking woman from having to spend the day fighting identity theft.

Not that he actually believed God intervened anymore, but apparently Ham still did, so—“I don’t think so, buddy.”

Hoodie tried to move around him, but Orion grabbed his shirt and slammed him back against the pole. Glanced at the woman from whom Hoodie had lifted the wallet. “Check your bag, ma’am.”

She stared at Orion in horror, then searched her bag.

Hoodie grabbed his wrist, but Orion jerked his hand, turning it, and in a second, he had the thief turned around in a submission hold.

“It’s gone.”

Yep. He knew it. “Give it up and I’ll let you go,” Orion said to Hoodie.

“Ry, what’s happening?” Ham came over, dragging Knicks by the shirt.

“Meet the dynamic duo,” Orion said. “The old sleight-of-hand trick.”

Hoodie was struggling, swearing, kicking out at Orion.

Sheesh, he didn’t have time for this. With everything inside him, he just wanted to put the guy on the floor, put his knee in his back.

Okay, and maybe school the jerk about old-fashioned right and wrong.

But he was trying not to be that guy, despite the stir of anger in his chest, so Orion reached around him and grabbed the wallet from the pouch in his sweatshirt.

He released his hold just enough for Hoodie to turn.

The kid slammed his foot into Orion's knee.

Pain spiked up his leg as his leg buckled.

Just like that, Orion landed on the deck, his hand gripping the wallet. Hoodie took off running.

Orion bit back a word.

Knicks shouted, and Ham must have let him go because he nearly stepped on Orion in his scramble away from the car.

"Are you okay?" The woman knelt next to him. He felt like a fool, trying to gulp back a whimper.

But, holy cannoli, he wanted to let out a scream. "Yeah," he said, his voice strangled. He handed her the wallet.

"You're a hero," she said. "Thank you."

He wanted to respond, to shrug her words away, but it was all he could do to catch his breath.

Ham was helping him up, and heaven help him, Orion let him do it, trying desperately to fix a smile on his face.

"No problem," he finally managed. His voice sounded like a fist had closed around his lungs, and it felt like it, too, as he limped out, the doors closing behind him.

He leaned against the wall.

Ham stood behind him. "Well, that was fun."

"I need that coffee," Orion said. He ground his teeth, pushing up, finding his balance.

Ham hesitated. "Or, maybe you need one more second?"

Orion sucked in a breath. "I thought you said we were late." He limped out, trying not to wince and failing.

They took the escalator up to freedom—not a hint of Knicks

and Hoodie. He did see their victim, NYU, however. The kid's pack hung over his shoulder, his head down as he all but fled the station.

Poor kid. It never felt good to have to be rescued. Humiliating, really.

Orion worked out the pain in his knee as he climbed the stairs to Centre Street into the heart of New York's court district. Protesters stood on the steps of the New York State Supreme Court building. The scent of hot dogs and gyros seasoned the air, and his gut growled. "I'm stopping in the Starbucks," he said to Ham. "I'll meet you at the rally."

Orion glanced over to the plaza crammed with spectators. From a distance he could see White standing on a platform, half hidden by campaign signs. Orion knew the man by reputation only—apparently, Ham had served with him during his early days as a SEAL. Conservative, not easily ruffled, the man was rising quickly out of the stew of political contenders.

He didn't care what stump speech Senator White delivered—if he got on to the presidential ballot, Orion would vote for him.

"Text me. I'll find you," Ham said and headed toward the crowd.

Orion crossed the street and entered the Starbucks, painfully aware that his knee burned deep with every step. As he stood in line, he eased the weight off it. It had started to swell.

Next time he had the bright idea to get on a plane, he needed a good bang over the head. A reminder of the fact that his family had set down roots and stayed in Alaska for a reason. He didn't know why the need to find Royal ground a hole through him, but he couldn't pry it out of his mind. Answers—that's all he needed, maybe. Answers to the question of how he and his other Pararescue Jumpers—PJs—had been ambushed on that mountain, in the back hills of Afghanistan. And not just the cosmic, survivor's-guilt kind of questions, but the specific one—namely who in the CIA

had pulled the trigger, armed with lousy intel that had sent two SEALS and two PJs to their graves.

Left two to be captured and tortured by the Taliban.

That question burned him awake in the long nights of the Alaskan winter, fueled an anger that he couldn't seem to douse.

Maybe if he could find Royal, bring him home . . .

Orion ordered a venti Americano and by the time he stepped back out into the brisk air, he felt almost human, the caffeine sloughing off the adrenaline, along with the dark edge of frustration. Across the street at the rally, a band played—a country music group that roused something home-grown and patriotic inside him. And from deep in the well of his memory stirred a voice, soft, light. *"How do I live without you? I want to know . . ."*

A simple song sung by the girl he couldn't forget on a base deep in the Kunar province. For a dangerous second, he let the memory light the darkness inside and stepped out onto the street.

Honking jerked him back. A taxi nearly sideswiped him.

Yeah, he hated the city.

The taxi driver flipped him off.

And people, really.

Orion waited until the light changed, then crossed over into the concrete park, searching for Ham. The crowd was still packed, the supporters not quite ready to give up the day, and Orion stood at the edge, scanning the crowd. His gaze landed on a familiar backpack—NYU. The college student he'd seen on the subway stood next to an abstract black granite sculpture. As Orion watched, NYU took off his pack and sat on the edge of the circular fountain, wearing a stripped, pale expression, a line of sweat streaking down his cheek.

The kid might be going into shock. The former trauma medic in Orion gave him a nudge.

Fine. He took a sip of his coffee and ambled over to the kid. NYU abruptly got up, drew in a breath, and walked away.

Clearly, the kid was rattled because he'd left his backpack behind. Orion limped up to it and lifted it. "Hey, kid! NYU! You forgot your backpack."

The student turned, glanced back, eyes wide. Stopped.

Orion tossed it toward him.

NYU's mouth opened, and he grabbed the pack, clutching it to himself. If possible, his face had gone even paler. "Thanks," he shouted.

Orion had the strangest urge to follow him, put his hand on his shoulder, make him sit down, breathe.

He knew what it felt like to barely escape with your life, and sure, the kid hadn't exactly been in mortal danger on the subway, but maybe his heartbeat hadn't figured that out yet.

Poor kid should take the day off. Go back to his dorm.

Hide in Alaska . . .

As if reading his mind, NYU turned, walking away fast.

Orion let him go.

Turned back to the crowd.

His phone vibrated in his pocket and he pulled it out. Ham.

Meet me behind the stage, at the tour bus.

Orion texted back and moved around the crowd, working his way toward the large bus with Isaac White's handsome mug plastered along the side.

Ham stood, hot cocoa in hand, talking with a couple security guys in suits who guarded a roped-off area. Wind raked his dark blond hair, lifted the collar of his leather jacket. He blew on his cocoa and nodded toward Orion when he spotted him.

One of the security guys walked over and let him in. Shook his hand. “Ham says you had a little scuffle on the subway.”

Orion shrugged. “No big deal. A couple thugs. We didn’t save the world or anything.”

The man laughed and Orion smiled as he walked over to Ham. Okay, it felt good to pull out the old warrior, dust him off. “*You’re a hero.*”

Not really. Not anymore.

The tour bus door opened, and a man walked down the stairs.

Orion had watched a few news clips of Isaac White but hadn’t expected the immediate charisma that radiated off the former SEAL. Graying hair, blue eyes, he took Orion’s outstretched hand with a two-handed grip. The man possessed the kind of smile that made Orion feel like he was in the presence of a movie star.

George Clooney, maybe.

“Senator,” Orion said, wishing he’d cleaned up a little better than his canvas jacket and a pair of jeans.

“Ham said you needed my assistance.” White angled Orion over to where Ham stood.

Orion’s mouth went weirdly dry. His anger had suddenly abandoned him in the face of White’s seeming willingness to help.

Ham must have seen his stripped expression. “We’re looking for a teammate who went missing in the debacle in Afghanistan,” he said. “Operator Royal Benjamin. He was one of the two SEALS captured in the attack. And one of the two—”

“Who were rescued in your rogue op.” White looked at Ham. “I know.”

“Then you know that something isn’t right,” Orion said, finally finding his voice, a little more oomph in it than he probably needed. But the anger was returning. “The other SEAL, Logan Thorne, showed up on my doorstep last summer. He told me a story about

the CIA trying to cover up what happened in Afghanistan—and, trying to kill him.”

White held up his hand, lowered his voice. “Not here, not now—”

Orion’s mouth closed, and the heat stirred in his chest. He should have known—

“Mistakes were made, for sure,” White said. “And the CIA knows it. But before you start throwing accusations around, let me do some digging.”

“C’mon, Senator—”

Ham shot Orion a shut-up look, but White talked over him.

“I’m not sure where your friend is, or if he’s even alive, but if you want me to find out, I’ll need some time.” He clamped a hand on Orion’s shoulder. “And patience.”

Orion wanted to believe him and his smile, but—

“Sir, we need you to come with us right now.” One of the security agents stepped into the conversation. “There’s been a bomb found in the square.” He pushed White away from them, toward a waiting SUV. Ham jogged after him, Orion limping quickly behind them.

He caught up to the second agent. “What kind of bomb?”

The agent looked at him. “I don’t know. We found a backpack near the fountain. The bomb squad is on their way, and the police are evacuating the square. It could be the same kind of bomb that took out the San Antonio rodeo arena a couple weeks ago.”

San Antonio arena? Orion hadn’t a clue what he might be referring to.

That’s what he got for living off the grid.

Still, a fist had grabbed his gut, squeezed. “What kind of backpack?”

The man flashed his cell phone toward him.

Black, with a purple NYU stitched on the back pocket.

Orion slowed, stopped, watching as the agent climbed into the front seat.

Ham hung back and joined Orion.

“What?”

“That kid with the backpack.”

“Seriously?”

Orion finished his coffee and tossed the cup into a nearby trash can. “I’m going back to Alaska where I can stay out of trouble.”



The secret to not dying was simple.

Don’t look down.

Shouts from sixty feet below bounced against the domed ceiling of the GoSports indoor ice climbing complex. Jenny Calhoun blocked them out and released a long, slow breath.

Relax. Assess.

Tensing up on a climb only led to mistakes. Which led to crashes.

On a mountain, that could mean landing in a crevasse or at the base of an icefall—or worse, buried under an avalanche of snow.

She hung ten feet from the top, with two more quick clips ahead of her, but the hardest move still loomed above her—the overhang.

This didn’t have to be hard. She could almost hear North, her instructor, in her head as she tightened her grip on her ice axes. *“It’s called a figure four. Swing your right leg over your right arm. Use that to leverage yourself up and land a new left-hand hold.”*

She ticked off the move in her head, seeing her next move, the one that would position her under the overhang. *“Wind your right leg over your left arm. Release your right hand. Now you can move your axe under the overhang, wedging it against the face of the wall.”*

She could then use the handle of the axe like a lever to help her push herself over the hanging ledge.

Sweat dripped down her back despite the twenty-eight-degree air. The climbing wall was essentially a vertical skating rink with multiple grades and a plywood-grafted overhang, along with a few man-made holds.

The route setter had created a grade-six climb for tonight's amateur competition.

She released her left hand and shook out the lactic acid pooling in her forearm. Her entire body shook, and her grip had nearly slipped on the last set, despite the golf gloves she wore. But Aria and Sasha stood below, next to her belayer, and she'd let her mouth make promises she prayed her body could keep.

If she expected them to trust her to lead them up Denali in a little over two months, then she needed to nail tonight's ice-climbing event.

She gripped the handle, took a breath, and leveraged herself up, slamming her axe in hard to the blue ice. Then, she unwound herself from her right-hand hold in one swift ballet move, wrapping her right leg over her left arm, just like she'd practiced.

Leaning back, she drove her left crampon into the icy wall and kept her heel down as she set her undercling.

“Nice move, Jen!”

She didn't know who'd shouted from the crowd below—maybe North, watching her apply his lessons. She liked the former SEAL, one of the many former military guys who helped run GoSports.

She eyed the next hold, a man-made jug four feet from her position.

To her right.

Which meant she had to bring her left axe next to her right.

“C'mon, Jen! Make it happen!”

Aria, her best friend and roomie.

Boston played on the speakers—“More Than a Feeling”—but she tuned it out, unwound herself, set her right foot, and unhinged her left-hand grip. She set the left in an undercling beside the right.

It freed her right hand as her feet scrambled to a better hold.

She took a breath and pushed hard, scrambling up the underside of the overhang and lunging for the jug with her right axe.

The axe embedded in the dry hold and she hung one-handed, swinging in the air, the left having unlatched with the move.

Don’t stop moving. Because slowing down meant the burn could catch up.

And the goal was always to keep ahead of the pain.

She swung her left hand over the plywood overhang and stuck the axe into another man-made jug. Swinging free, and with sheer arm strength, she lunged for purchase up the face of the sheer wall crusting the upper layer of the platform.

The crowd screamed, sixty feet below.

Hanging from one arm, she tucked her left axe over her shoulder, pitched a foot into the overhang, and reached for her rope to quick-clip it into the belay biner.

One pitch left.

She glanced at the clock. Forty-five seconds.

But this was it—the final hold always eluded her. Just out of her arm-stretch to the right, the hold was artificial, a thick dry tool hold she could never quite set.

And it was a one-shot deal, because the minute she swung, the leverage on her left axe would twist, unlatch.

Every. Single. Time.

She dreamed about this move, sweating into her sheets in her tiny one-bedroom apartment in Minneapolis. Analyzed it over

lunch breaks and sessions in her office at Ascend Therapy and Wellness.

Watched Skeet McKenna and North—both lead climbers at GoSports—land the move over and over.

And she'd come up with a plan. The trifecta of climbing: Leverage. Technique. Guts.

Now, she added the left axe to her hold, twisted her hand into a backhand position, her fist upside down. Then she wrapped her left leg around the hold.

This went wrong, and she just might rip her arm from its socket. Or, she'd land it.

Relax.

Please.

She released her right axe. Took a breath.

She pushed with her legs, arm and core, practically flying through the air toward the hold.

She landed her axe hard into the resin of the dry hold.

She cut her feet loose from the ice and hung free, swinging for a second before she slammed them back into the ice. Sticking her left axe in her mouth, she gripped the other with both hands.

Her body simmered, the adrenaline shunting the trembling in her core. But she spidered up the wall, grabbed her rope, and quick-clipped it into the final biner, three feet higher.

Her feet were already slipping.

But it didn't matter. She grabbed her axe from her mouth and swung it hard over the top of the overhang. Ice shards chipped and fell into her face, bouncing off her helmet as she dangled from the final hold.

She freed her right axe, joined it with the other, then scrambled to the top.

The buzzer sounded and finally, finally, she looked down.

Seventy feet to the crowd at the bottom—Aria, Sasha, Skeet, and North, not to mention twenty or so other competitors and fellow ice climbers.

Inside, she was fist-pumping. She wasn't going to fall. Wasn't going to crash hard and find herself in rubble at the bottom of some icy wall.

Wasn't going to let the mountain win.

Aria was losing it, her dark hair streaming out of her climbing helmet as she waved. Next to her, Sasha was shaking her head, wearing a grin, the sleek entrepreneur redhead probably evaluating her own climbing techniques.

Don't worry, Sash. I won't let you die.

Frankly, this moment was for all three of them. Because if Jenny hoped to summit Denali and get them back down, they needed to trust her.

And she needed to trust herself.

She glanced at Skeet, holding her on belay, and he gave her a nod, so she hooked her axes over her shoulder and sprung out from the wall.

For a second, she flew, no wings needed. Just her and her future. Just freedom.

Then the belay caught and Skeet lowered her down.

She hit the padding, her legs shaking, and braced herself against the wall.

Aria ran up and flung her arms around her neck. "You beat North's best time."

She glanced at the man, who was tall, rangy, and dark. He'd served in special forces with the owner of GoSports, Hamilton Jones—something she tried hard to forget. She didn't know what drew her, out of all the climbing shops in Minneapolis, to Jones's outfit. Self-punishment, maybe. But neither North nor Ham had

recognized her—and why should they? She'd changed her entire life since those days in Afghanistan. Kept moving forward.

North high-fived her before helping unlatch her rope system.

She unhooked her toe clamps, grabbed them up, and fielded the fist bumps as she headed toward the locker rooms.

Outside the cold room, the regular climbing walls were quiet tonight, but in the weight room next door, a number of athletes worked off their daily stress.

Sasha caught up to her. "Lucas texted and he wants to meet us for late-night appies at Sammy's in St. Paul. You in?"

Sasha's husband was still trying to make peace with his wife's climbing hobby. Probably wanted to grill Jenny again on the specifics and precautions for their upcoming trip. "Sammy's? The hockey place?" Jenny asked.

"Apparently, they have amazing wings," Sasha said.

She headed into the locker room, Sasha and then Aria on her tail. The steam hit her cold bones with a sharp bite.

"Not everyone can sleep until ten, Sash," she said, peeling off her gloves.

Sasha unhooked her helmet. "I am up before six and you know it. Just because I run my own business doesn't mean I get to set my own schedule."

"Yeah, and she can't write off her gym membership as work-related," Aria said, opening her locker.

"Exercise is part of a healthy heart and mind," Jenny said, stripping off her workout shirt, soggy with sweat. "And I need to at least test my theories before recommending them to clients."

"And dragging your friends out for life-threatening adventures," Sasha said, grabbing a towel. "Lucas still hasn't signed off on our girls' weekend."

"It's more like a girls' *month*," Aria said. "I'm not sure I can

leave my practice that long. What if I get an emergency call? It's not like I can call in a chopper and get a ride off the Wickersham Wall."

Jenny also grabbed her towel, slammed her locker. "I see you've been reading your homework."

"You might consider assigning a novel where everyone *lives* at the end if you hope to recruit people on your epic, life-changing adventures," Sasha said as she followed them into the private shower area. "I'm just glad we're not climbing Everest."

"Everyone is going to live," Jenny said. "I'm going to take you to the top of the world. And, I plan to be up and back down in under three weeks, so you can tell Lucas—and your nursing staff, Aria—to take a breath. It'll be life-changing, I promise."

She showered, then thirty minutes later, her blonde hair tied back into a braid and still drying, she followed Aria and Sasha into the brisk April Minnesota air. Overhead, the stars were sprinkled against a dark velvet sky.

It didn't have a prayer of competing with the skyscape when you stood on top of the world. Where everywhere you looked, jagged, snow-capped mountains fell under your feet, where the heavens felt so close you could reach out to touch them.

Gannett Peak, Mount Hood, the fourteeners in Colorado—she was slowly chipping away at her peak-bagging list. But Denali had been calling her name since . . .

She drew in a breath. This wasn't about Orion Starr.

Wasn't about the terrible mistakes she'd made.

Wasn't about the man she nearly killed.

At least not entirely.

"Meet you there!" she shouted to Sasha as the woman climbed into her BMW X2. She and Aria slid into her Renegade.

"Lucas is worried," Aria said, dragging up her phone. "I saw

him at the hospital, and he wanted to know who our guide is going to be.”

“Besides me?” Jenny said, pulling out of the lot. The GoSports complex was lit up like a beacon. Open 24-7 year-round, the franchise had exploded, with GoSports centers around the nation. She’d even seen a Super Bowl ad a couple months ago.

Hamilton Jones, SEAL to the core, landing on his feet.

Some of them hadn’t gotten up quite so fast.

Some were still trying to find their feet.

No, no, she refused to let Orion haunt her.

Especially since she seriously doubted that he gave one remnant thought to her.

Street lights splashed pools of brilliance on the dark pavement as she merged onto the highway.

“No, really, Jenny. You’re good, but Denali?”

Jenny looked over at her. “Fear not. I found a professional Denali guide.”

Aria raised an eyebrow. “Wait—you didn’t hire that Starr guy, did you? That PJ you had the wicked crush on in Afghanistan? Still have a crush on? Because it’s about time—”

“No.” And she tried not to bite her words off, but hello, Aria should know better.

And it wasn’t just a crush. At least, for her.

Stop.

“The last person I’d hire to guide us up the mountain is Orion Starr. First—I’m not even sure . . . well, he nearly had his leg blown off, so my guess is he isn’t climbing. But even more, the last person he’d want to see is me.”

Aria frowned.

Jenny glanced at her, cocked an eyebrow.

“But it wasn’t your fault—”

Jenny cut her off again, this time with a tight shake of her head.

“Fine,” Aria said. “But for the record, I’m not the only one who needs counseling. What is that adage—physician, heal thyself?”

“I don’t need healing. I wasn’t hurt.” Wasn’t killed. Didn’t have her life destroyed because of a bad decision.

No, those were men like Orion, and Ham. And four SEALS and two PJs, especially Royal Benjamin and Logan Thorne, the two men left behind.

Tortured.

“No. That’s right. Don’t look back. Or down. Just keep moving forward.” Aria drew in a breath. “That isn’t going to work forever, sis.”

They weren’t exactly biological sisters, but what they had felt like it, so Jenny let her words pass without comment.

Because her method worked, thank you. Keep moving. Stay ahead of the thundering roar of guilt.

She didn’t have to let the past find her, pull her down. Make her crash and burn.

And this year, when the anniversary of the worst mistake of her life rolled around, she planned to be 20,310 feet above the earth.

They drove in silence until they pulled into the parking lot next to Sammy’s. She liked the place. Located on University in St. Paul, just a few blocks from the Xcel Center, the pub and grill had once been a shipping warehouse, now turned vintage sports bar with wooden floors and brick walls. It hosted the largest collection of Minnesota Blue Ox memorabilia in Minneapolis—courtesy of the two owners, a former defenseman named Sammy, and his recent partner, former enforcer and assistant coach Jace J-Hammer Jackobsen.

Signed pictures, goalie equipment, and framed team jerseys decorated the walls amidst flat screens tucked over the bar and into every cranny of the joint.

The place smelled of the tangy, legendary BBQ sauce, peanut-oil French fries, and craft beer. She noticed one flat screen played the news, the others reran games on mute.

And, to her dismay, at a mic at the front a woman was singing—really? Karaoke?

Jenny shot a look at Aria, who grinned and grabbed her arm, dragging her behind Sasha.

Sasha's physician husband slid out of a booth and met his wife. The man looked more like a mercenary than a trauma doc, but he'd been a Navy surgeon, so maybe that's where he got his demeanor. He had brown hair with threads of gold and a thin beard, and he wore a black pullover, pushed up to reveal strong forearms as he pulled his wife into his arms.

For a second the Navy bio flickered and took hold of Jenny. He knew about her past, of course, but did Lucas know about her connection to Hamilton?

No. How could he? She was simply one of the best PTSD psychologists in the state. He wouldn't link her CIA past to Ham's former SEAL team.

No need to panic.

"My wife said you set some sort of ice-climbing record tonight," Lucas said as he slipped into the booth beside Sasha.

"No. Just . . . well—"

"She's being modest," Aria said. "She killed it. Faster time than North."

"North Gunderson?" Lucas said, taking a sip of his water. "I served with him—well, sorta—I was stationed at a flight hospital in Italy for a while, and he came through once with his team after a mission in Eastern Europe. I didn't realize he was back in Minneapolis."

"He's an instructor at GoSports," Sasha said. She settled into the story of Jenny's climb while Jenny and Aria perused the menus.

At the front of the room, the song ended and a man got up from a table of rowdies. Of course, Bon Jovi piped into the speakers. She winced at his awful rendition of “Livin’ on a Prayer.”

The words—and the rowdy table singing along—stirred up a memory. A too-handsome-for-his-own-good, brown-haired PJ and his buddies singing at the top of their lungs.

No. She breathed the ghost away and turned her attention to the television screen. They were running more footage from the San Antonio, Texas, arena where a bomber had set off an explosion after a bull-riding event a couple weeks ago. Apparently, they’d caught the man, but it didn’t stop the pundits from speculating on his reasons—something about being out of a job, angry . . .

Yeah, well, anger made people do stupid things. Costly things. That’s why you couldn’t dwell on the past.

The waitress came up just as the song changed and another woman got up, spinning a LeAnn Rimes favorite.

Fate was merciless tonight.

“You want anything?”

She drew in a breath. And then, suddenly, the crisp wind filtered in off the thick cedar forest of the Hindu Kush mountains and caught up the scent of shishkebabs grilling on an open fire. Male laughter lifted from behind her as a group of men fought for a basketball, dribbling it against a dirt court, bouncing it off a pallet-made backboard, a naked hoop. Someone’s iPod plugged into a speaker, blasted country music.

“*How do I live without you . . .*”

Her chest tightened, her throat thickening.

“Ma’am?”

Jenny stared at the waitress, her mind blank.

“*I want to know . . .*”

“I . . .” She closed her mouth, shook her head. Pushed out of the booth. “I’m sorry. I’m not feeling well.”

Lucas frowned.

“Jenny?” Aria said.

“Sorry, Aria. I need to go home. Can you . . . are you—”

Aria’s eyes widened, then, “Let’s go.” She looked at Lucas and Sasha. “Next time.”

Jenny headed for the door. Tried not to turn into a fish as she hit the cool air, but—

“You’re having a panic attack.”

“I’m fine.”

“Give me the keys before I need to resuscitate you,” Aria said, coming up beside her to circle her arm around her waist.

Jenny looked at her and Aria gave her a small smile. “I guess some mountains you just can’t quite climb high enough to conquer.”

She slid into the passenger seat. Leaned her head back. Closed her eyes.

Aria’s hand found hers. “Someday we’ll both climb our mountains and come down healed.”

“Yeah,” she said.

But as Aria drove her home, back to their shared apartment complex, Jenny fell hard into the dark, brutal truth.

There was no mountain high enough to overcome her mistakes.