



THE PRICE OF VALOR

SUSAN MAY WARREN



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© 2020 by Susan May Warren

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CHAPTER ONE

AS LONG AS HAMILTON JONES had breath in his body, nothing, not even tooth decay, would hurt his little girl.

“Seriously, Ham? It’s cotton candy, not meth. Let the poor girl taste a cloud of pure sugar.” Jenny Calhoun looked at him with one eyebrow raised, amusement in her expression.

He couldn’t look at Aggie staring up at him with those pretty blue ten-year-old eyes. “Please, Daddy?”

Shoot. Agatha Jones had employed the lethal *Daddy* kryptonite, a name she’d been using with devastating regularity for the past month.

Ham dug into his pocket for a couple George Washingtons.

Aggie jumped up and down, clapping, her blonde braids whipping around her head. She’d lost a tooth just last week—one of her primary molars—and it had completely freaked him out.

He’d googled it, taken her to a dentist, and discovered that apparently kids lost teeth until they were twelve. So maybe getting a little sugar decay wasn’t the end of the world, but . . .

“Just this once,” he said as he slapped the dollars into her hand. She grinned, a gap in her gums, and took off for the cotton candy stand.

Next to him, Orion laughed. “Ham. You’ve said that five times today.”

He glanced at his teammate, and especially at the oversized stuffed moose Ry carried under his arm. Ham had won it for Aggie at a sharpshooting booth. Ham would be carrying it, but he already carried the dolphin he scored for her at the balloon-dart booth.

So he turned into a pansy when his amazing, beautiful little girl smiled. But sheesh, he’d only recently discovered that he was a father. He had ten years to make up for.

The night was cool, the crispness of early autumn spicing the air. Overhead, stars fell across the horizon, but the bright lights of the county fair and carnival blurred them out. Ham and Aggie had spent the day watching piglets, petting lambs, climbing on pretty green tractors, eating mini donuts—another of his fatherly fails—listening to country music, and figuring their way through a hay maze.

All that remained was the midway.

No. As in all caps. N.O.

The last thing he wanted was his daughter losing her gray matter on one of those spinny rides gone wild. He’d heard horror stories of seat belts failing and kids launching from the twirling cups of poorly maintained traveling carnival rides.

Besides, he’d made promises to . . .

Nope. Not thinking about *her*. Except, shoot. Signe was always with him, there, in the back of his head, haunting him. “*Don’t try to find me.*” Her last words to him, right after she’d left Aggie in his care.

Right. Ham had been struggling with his response for three months now. He didn’t do “sit around and wait” easily. Not when someone he loved needed him.

Except, maybe Signe didn’t need him. Had never, really, needed him.

Yeah, he'd been all kinds of foolish when he married a woman who so easily walked away from him.

"I want to go on the Ferris wheel," Jenny said as she looped her arm through Orion's. She wore her blonde hair pulled back into a long braid, a jean shirt, and a pair of leggings. Orion found her hand and braided his fingers through hers. He barely limped anymore from his recent knee surgery, and just last week, he'd started instructing a new ice-climbing class at Ham's GoSports Minnetonka location. He wore a T-shirt and a pair of cargo pants, his Alaskan blood always hot down here in the Lower 48.

Ham followed Orion's glance at the Ferris wheel. The ride had romance written all over it, lights glittering against the Minnesota night sky.

Ham knew that on this weekend's agenda, this little getaway to Jenny's former foster family's winery in midwestern Minnesota, was Orion's hope of proposing.

"Hand me the moose," Ham said, and Orion grinned at him.

Ham stood there, one animal under each arm as Orion and Jenny left to get on the ride. It looked safe enough—each seat formed to look like a balloon with a basket and an arched roof.

"You must be a sharpshooter to nab such big prizes." A man stood nearby, looking up at the Ferris wheel, then at Ham. Dark complexion, dark hair. He had a hint of an accent. His face was reddened with a fresh scar on one side, as if he'd been in a terrible accident.

"Naw. Lucky shots," Ham said.

The man looked back at the Ferris wheel and waved. A number of children in the array of baskets waved back, so he couldn't be sure which kids were his, but the man turned to him. "We'll do anything for our kids, won't we?" Then he walked away. Yes, actually, he would.

"Daddy, do you want some?"

He looked down and found Aggie looking up at him, grinning, holding out a fluffy piece of blue cotton candy.

For a second, he was back in time, Signe grinning at him as they sat on a picnic table near the blue waters of the community pool, her blonde hair a mess, her face grimy as she held out a melting ice-cream cone. *“Want some?”*

He drew in a breath.

Aggie’s eyes widened. *“Daddy?”*

He wasn’t sure if he saw fear or just confusion in her pretty blue eyes, but whatever it was, it snapped him back to now, and he crouched before her. *“Yeah, I’d love some, honey.”* He opened his mouth.

She smiled and fed him the cottony sugar.

Oh my. He hadn’t had cotton candy since . . . well, maybe that was another memory he should tuck away. It seemed that every good childhood memory contained a shadow of Signe.

He really didn’t know how he’d survive knowing she was out there . . .

“Don’t try to find me.”

Right.

“Ooh, look. Orion and Jenny are on the big Ferris wheel!” Aggie’s gaze had turned past him. He noticed that she wore ketchup from today’s hot dog on her teal Frozen-themed sweatshirt. And a hint of chocolate ice cream on her sleeve.

Apparently Orion was right, he had problems saying no. But how was he supposed to deny anything to this pint-size version of the woman he’d never stopped loving?

“I wanna ride!” Aggie grabbed his hand and pulled him with her. Ham nearly fell, still crouched, but managed to scramble up and pull her back.

“No, Aggie. We’re not riding—”

“Please?”

From high above, Jenny was calling to them, waving. Aggie waved back wildly. “Please, Daddy? I’ve never been on one.”

Really? He knew so little about her past ten years. Aggie had shown up three months ago on a seashore in southern Sicily after the yacht she’d been a passenger on, with her mother, had exploded in the Mediterranean. The US Air Force base took her in after she identified herself as an American . . . and former SEAL Hamilton Jones as her father.

He’d gotten on a plane, not sure what to believe. After all, he’d watched Signe die ten plus years ago in Chechnya, during an op-gone-wrong.

“I don’t think so, pumpkin.”

“Please?” Her cheeks were stained blue. He pulled out a napkin from his pocket and tried to wipe her face. She jerked away.

Yes, sometimes he’d really like to know what happened to his child over the past ten years to put that hue of fear into her eyes.

Except, just thinking about it gnawed a hole through him. Maybe he didn’t want to know the details.

He handed her the napkin and she wiped her face.

Around them, the midway was a cacophony of screams and laughter, music and the smells of fried cheese curds and hot dogs. People milled everywhere, crowds ever moving through the narrow thoroughfares. The perfect place for someone to sneak out and grab her when he wasn’t looking. Only a couple months ago, that very thing had happened at the Mall of America. Someone from Signe’s past.

A Russian.

Probably in league with the man who had held her hostage for ten years—Chechen warlord Pavel Tsarnaev. That much Ham had gotten out of Aggie.

Yes, better that he didn’t know the details of Aggie’s past, or he might never sleep again.

Might, in fact, completely ignore Signe's request and find her anyway.

Because deep in his gut, he knew she was in trouble.
Needed him.

The Ferris wheel was slowing to let people out, and Aggie ran over to Jenny as she got off.

Ham followed. Raised an eyebrow to Orion.

Orion shook his head.

Yes, well, pulling your heart from your chest and offering it to a woman with a proposal just might be the most terrifying act a man did. He well remembered when he proposed to Signe.

He'd meant forever.

Apparently, she thought their marriage should just last the weekend.

No, that wasn't fair. He shook the thought away as Aggie ran back to him. "Jenny said it was amazing. You can see for miles."

Ham gave Jenny a look. She shrugged. "It is. You can."

"Please, *please*? I won't ask for another thing tonight, I promise."

Oh kiddo. "Honey, it's not . . ."

"Go with her, Ham. I'll hold the zoo." Orion stepped up to him and reached out for the stuffed prizes.

"Yay!" Aggie said and shot up the ramp.

"What—wait!" He dumped the animals in Orion's arms, about to follow, when his phone buzzed in his back pocket.

He pulled it out.

Seriously?

"Aggie! Wait for me—hello?" Maybe he shouldn't be quite so abrupt when he answered the call of a US senator and presidential candidate.

"Are you okay, Ham?" Former SEAL Isaac White's low, calm voice came through the line.

“Yes, sir,” Ham said, frowning at his daughter as she gestured to him to join her. He shook his head. Mouthed a very clear *Wait for me*.

Then he turned away to keep her from distracting him and put his other hand to his ear. “Just at a fair with my daughter.”

“I hope this isn’t a bad time, but I need to talk to you.”

“Absolutely. What can I do for you?” White had ferried his team back from Alaska after a near-bombing three months ago, and besides that, he and Ham went way back to when they served together on Team Three.

“Can you come to DC? I need a favor, but . . . well, I need to talk to you face-to-face.”

“This about our mutual friend the Prince? And the rumors that the CIA NOC list is—”

“There’s a fundraising event Tuesday night for the Red Cross. Maybe you and your team would like to join us?”

Ham could hear the unspoken plan—White was suggesting a cover story for Ham’s trip.

Which meant their meeting was something he didn’t want the media, or maybe even Ham’s people, knowing about.

“I can make that happen,” he said, watching a mom and dad pick up their young son and swing him between them. The kid laughed, kicking his legs.

“So, I’ll put you down for how many tickets? Eight?”

“Seven.” Orion, Jenny, Jake, Aria, North, and he’d ask Scarlett, his newest addition, to join them.

“Perfect. Thanks, Ham. Text me when you get in.”

“Aggie!” Jenny’s shout behind him made him turn.

Everything inside him went cold. She’d gotten on the ride without him.

But that wasn’t the worst.

His brave, headstrong, curious daughter—and she got those

genes directly from her mother—had boarded one of the rusty, ancient balloon chairs and risen to the apex of the Ferris wheel. But, as the ride came down the back side, the basket had swung and somehow latched on to the basket next to hers.

As the ride moved toward the far side, her basket had begun to tip.

If it kept going, it would invert, dumping her right out.

“Stop the ride!” He took off up the ramp toward the operator who was frantically trying to slow it down without jerking it to a violent stop. Ham pushed him away and slammed his thumb into the emergency stop.

The entire ride shuddered, screeching and groaning as it halted.

Screaming. Not just the spectators, but Aggie, high above, maybe fifty feet, clinging to the basket.

It had inverted to nearly a forty-five-degree angle, and she clung to the bars, her legs dangling over the edge.

Ham’s heart stopped, a rock right in the middle of his chest.

“Help! Help me, Daddy!”

She might not have said it, but Ham heard it, deep in his bones.

“Hold on, Aggie!”

While every shred of common sense told him to wait for the emergency help, the father inside him wasn’t listening.

It wasn’t a difficult climb. Up the center spokes to where they connected at the center, maybe six feet apart. Then a climb up each one until he came to Aggie’s.

“Hang on!”

Except she was kicking, screaming, and using up all her energy.

“Calm down! I’m on my way!”

“I’m falling!”

“No you’re not! You’re going to hold on until I get there. Hold on!”

He hit his hands and knees, scrambling along the edge to her

balloon. But the way the carriage had stuck, the back of the basket blocked his entrance.

"I'm almost there, honey." He swung down, dangling as he started to work his way the last few feet.

The Ferris wheel began to move.

"Stop the ride!" Maybe the emergency stop had malfunctioned on this decrepit ride.

"Hold on, Aggie!" The basket inverted and now Aggie, too, dangled from just her grip on the pole.

"I can't!"

He reached for her, missed. Her fingers began to loosen.

Nope. Not on his watch. He'd made promises to Signe. To himself.

To God, long ago, when he said, "I do."

He swung and wrapped his legs around her body. "Grab onto my waist!"

She looked at him, wild-eyed, then lunged for him.

"Lock your arms around me," he said. Sweat slicked his hands. He just had to work them back to the jutting arm—

The ride stopped, a violent jerk that nearly dislodged Ham's grip.

Aggie slid down to his hips, then his thighs. He clamped them tight. "Aggie, hold on to me!"

She looked up at him, tears staining her face. "I can't!"

"You can and you will," he said, finding a voice that he'd used for years commanding his SEAL teams. "You are my daughter, and I know you can do this."

She swallowed, nodded.

He worked them over to the arm, his body trembling. Now to get her up—

A hand snaked down over his shoulder. "Reach up and grab my hand, Aggie."

Orion. Ham looked up and his buddy was leaning down over him, his legs hooked into the girder.

"I . . ." Aggie met Ham's eyes, hers pleading.

"I got ya," Ham said and pulled his legs up.

Orion grabbed her wrist, then the other. Suddenly she was swinging free, being hauled up by Orion to the metal arm of the wheel.

Ham hooked his leg on the edge and pulled himself over onto his stomach. His breaths gusted out, hard. He found her ankle and wrapped his hand around it, holding on.

"You're okay, kiddo," Orion said. She was crying, Orion's arms wrapped around her as he held her on his lap.

Ham pushed himself up, not wanting to look down, then trying not to lose it at the distance to the ground. A fist in his chest cut off his breathing.

In the night, sirens blared.

"Here," said Orion, untangling Aggie from his waist. He turned her toward Ham. "I'm going to check on the kids in the car above, see if they're okay. Their car didn't tip as much, but—"

"Go." Ham pulled Aggie to him.

She hung on, still weeping.

He wanted to cry too. "I got you, honey. Don't worry. Daddy's not going to let anything happen to you. You're safe."

He closed his eyes and heard the rest of the last conversation he had with Signe.

"She's safe. I got her."

"Thank God. Please keep her that way, Hamburglar."

Yes. No matter what it cost him, he'd keep his daughter safe.

Below, a fire truck had set up, was disengaging the ladder.

"You did good hanging on."

Aggie sucked in a breath, leaned back, and looked up at him, those big eyes in his, holding him captive. "I was trying to be

brave, like Mama always told me to be. She'll be really proud of me, won't she?"

And shoot, he couldn't help but nod.

He wiped her cheek with his thumb and looked out to the lights of the homes that glowed against the darkness. To the horizon and the milky white moon.

To where, somewhere, he just knew Signe was in trouble.



Signe didn't want to get dramatic, but the fate of the free world was at stake.

But first, she had to finish her cup of coffee.

Quietly. Deliberately. *Nothing to see here.*

Just a woman sitting in a cafe off the center square of Bad Rappenau, a tiny town southeast of Heidelberg, watching the sun gild the cobblestones and the massive Lutheran church that overlooked the cafe. A nondescript woman in a pair of leggings, boots, a rain jacket, and a hat, her blonde hair tucked up in back. She was wearing sunglasses, but she didn't look any more like a spy than the man sitting across from her, with short dark hair and a blue jacket, black dress pants. He read a German paper.

Or the man who'd parked his bicycle, wearing skinny jeans and a sweater, a scarf knotted around his neck.

Or even the girl at the counter—short black hair, wearing a dress, leggings, and boots.

See, no spy here.

No dangerous information tucked away in her inside pocket, like a grenade should it make it out into the open.

No deep undercover CIA agent holding the world's secrets in her jacket. The NOC list. The list of nonofficial covers of operatives around the world.

She glanced toward the center fountain, the four arched cherubs

that shot water out of their mouths. The spray caught the sun, arched it into a rainbow.

The old story about Noah hung in her mind, just for a second. Forgiveness. Fresh starts.

Nursery rhymes and stories that had nothing to do with reality.

The bells on the church rang, scattering a grouping of pigeons, and the scent of fresh apple kuchen from the nearby bakery could make her weep if she hadn't just breakfasted with her old Doctors Without Borders friend, pediatrician Zara Mueller, and her husband, Felix.

Probably she shouldn't have landed on their front step two weeks ago, but she'd run out of options.

Run out of safe houses.

Run out of hope, really.

Because, according to the latest news on CNN, she was also running out of time.

The man with the paper folded it and picked up his coffee. Looked at her and smiled.

She gave him a quick smile back, then focused again on her phone, not looking at anything but her peripheral surroundings. She sat with her back to the wall, in an outside chair, one ear on the conversation inside the cafe, one eye on the fountain.

Roy was late.

No tall, former SEAL who now worked as . . . well, she didn't know his job description, really. Just that he was the one guy she could trust to bring an end to this mess.

Probably there was one other former SEAL she could trust too, but she couldn't involve him.

Roy was supposed to be sitting on the edge of the fountain by the time the last bell tolled, feeding the pigeons. Then, he'd roll up his sleeves so she could identify him by a tattoo of a bonefrog, one of the universal Navy SEAL tats.

She finished her coffee. Glanced at the clock.

Five minutes late.

Yeah, this didn't feel right. She got up and tucked her jacket around her, not sure what to do. But if Roy was late then—

“It's a beautiful day.”

The voice, in English, turned her. The dark-haired man who'd sat across from her had also risen.

She stilled, not sure she wanted to speak in English.

He stepped out beside her, close enough to touch her. She closed her hand around a tiny 9mm Luger she'd borrowed from Felix.

Because Felix was on the list. And he had just as much at stake in this meet as she did.

She hoped he was still watching as she ignored the man and stepped into the square, intending to take a walk around the block and maybe through the gardens of the nearby castle as she figured out her next move.

Felix and Zara were probably growing tired of her bunking in their spare room.

“Why didn't you just destroy the list?” Zara's question lingered in Signe's mind as Zara made spätzle and sausage last night, her hair tied back in a handkerchief, so much like the days when they served in the refugee camp together.

Well, actually, Signe was there for other reasons, using the organization to position herself to be in the right place, right time.

Zara was supposed to be her in-country contact, a plan that Signe had talked the pediatrician into.

Signe never planned on staying ten years.

But then again, back then she didn't look too far ahead. Because she'd learned that you simply couldn't trust plans.

The only one you could really count on was yourself.

Well, and maybe Hamilton Jones, but . . . yeah, she'd burned that bridge one too many times.

Love versus her country. Oh, her misplaced ideals had cost her—and Ham—so much. And for what? So she could spend ten years waiting for a warlord to hatch a terrorist attack she hadn't been able to stop anyway.

She should have escaped years ago, but, well, Aggie.

Pavel never let Aggie too far out of his eyesight.

She'd simply gotten lucky, and maybe brave, that night three months ago on his yacht in the Ionian Sea.

"I can't destroy it," she'd said to Zara last night, running her thumb over the edge of her teacup. Felix was out, securing her a fresh German passport. She had her American version, and a Russian Federation version, but it would be easier to travel in the EU with something from the European states. "The NOC list isn't just a Word doc that anyone can open. It comes with layers of encryption, and each copy comes with a master key that is unique to the user authorized to open it. Which means the file contains metadata that can tell us who sold the list out of US hands." And prove her theories about a traitor at the helm of the US government.

"How did you get it away from Tsarnaev?"

Oh, that was a story she didn't want to detail. The short of it, however, was, "I blew up his yacht. Stole a dinghy, dropped my daughter on shore, and ran."

It was just as terrible as it sounded and she looked away, outside, across the red-clay roofed buildings.

Zara had paused then, turning to look at her. "Hamilton's child."

She'd only been barely pregnant when they'd been attacked, but even before that, Zara had been there when Ham reappeared in her life and nearly wrecked Signe's big plans.

Nearly made her abandon her vision, her ideals, and run into his arms.

She'd been strong for her country.

No, she'd been a fool. And clearly was still a fool. Because what if she'd stayed with Aggie and returned home, with Ham?

Well, really, maybe they'd all be dead.

"Did he know about her?" Zara asked.

"Not a clue."

Zara raised an eyebrow.

"I couldn't jeopardize my cover with Tsarnaev. So . . ."

"So you raised your daughter in a terrorist camp."

Signe's mouth tightened, and she looked away. "It wasn't like that." But yes, it felt like it. "When I realized I was pregnant, it was too late." She looked back at Zara. "At least she's safe now."

"With that SEAL."

"He's not a SEAL anymore, but yes. Hamilton has her. Nothing is going to happen to her on his watch, I guarantee it. He's like a Doberman about the people he loves."

About her, really.

Oh, he hadn't deserved the way she treated him.

"Which is a good thing because I've got a target on my head. If I step foot in the US, they'll either label me a terrorist, because of my years with Tsarnaev, or the company will grab me and . . . well, you've heard the rumors, right?"

Zara had gone back to stirring. "About a rogue faction in the CIA who have aligned with Russia and are trying to derail the election?"

Uh, *yeah*?

Zara glanced over her shoulder. "I also heard some rumors that there might be a contract out on you."

Signe stilled. But she should have expected that.

Zara had lost weight after her escape from Chechnya, but then again, being nearly kidnapped by a warlord probably sent her into some kind of PTSD. The fact that she met and married Felix made Signe wonder what kind of counseling Zara had received. Felix

had been in the KSK, German special forces, but now sold books at a local used bookstore.

Right.

Now, with the meet a bust, the last thing they needed was trouble invading their lives. She'd have to figure out somewhere else to lie low—

“Signe.”

Her name on the man's lips stilled her, and she cringed, painfully aware of her stupidity. She kept walking.

“Roy sent me.”

No, no—she didn't stop. Because he'd have to say—

“The sparrows don't fall without someone watching.”

She stopped, glanced over her shoulder. The man was a few steps behind, his hands out where she could see them. Okay, so maybe . . .

He gestured into a walkway between the buildings that led out through a park.

Stores had begun to open, a bus stopped nearby and let out passengers. A few wandered through the square.

And from the churchyard, Felix was watching. *Please, follow me . . .*

Except, maybe not. Because people who followed her usually ended up getting hurt. The last thing she wanted was to see one of her oldest friends get burned, or worse.

But maybe, if this wasn't a setup, and she played the game right, they'd all be safe.

She could stop running.

And maybe, someday, go home.

“*Don't try to find me.*”

Her words to Ham still burned her throat.

So she slowed and let the man catch up.

“Where's Roy?”

“Something came up. He sent me.”

“Who are you?”

“The name’s Martin. Do you have it?”

It was the way he said it. Not the words as much as the tone. Reminded her way too much of Pavel, of the way he’d get when he was annoyed.

And then people got hurt.

She had learned how to handle him. “No. But it’s close.”

“Didn’t trust Roy, huh?” He ended with a chuckle, as if the lives of two hundred people working as nonofficial CIA operatives undercover around the globe was something to be dismissed.

Yeah, it irked her.

“There’s a lot at stake,” she said calmly, as they came out to the street. Across the street, a cafe hosted breakfasters under red umbrellas. Cars slowed as they drove by on the cobblestone. “The security of our government.”

“Which is why we need to get it into safe hands.”

Right.

“I’ll get it, and meet you back here in an hour.”

He grabbed her wrist. “Or, you could take me with you.” His fingers bore into her bones. She wanted to twist out of his hold, but here they were, in the middle of the street.

And that’s exactly what Pavel would do. Get her in public where she couldn’t run and start the threats. Threats that became reality in private.

“Let go of me,” she said softly.

“Give me the list,” he said, closing the gap between them.

She pressed the nose of the Luger into his gut. “Step back.”

He raised an eyebrow, and for the first time, she got a good look at him. A scar across his right eyebrow shadowed dark brown eyes, and pockmarks on his face betrayed an acned youth. Maybe six foot, he bore the brawn of a thug in his shoulders and eyes.

He smiled. "I walk away, and your friend dies."

She drew in a breath.

He pulled his phone from his pocket. Showed her a snapshot.

Felix, blindfolded, wearing the clothes he'd had on when she'd left his flat. Clearly, he'd been taken from the churchyard, and now a gun was held to his head. It looked like . . . yes, he was in his flat, in his kitchen, which meant—

"Don't make us kill him with the wife watching."

Oh—see, this was why she couldn't go home. Because no matter where she went, trouble followed.

People died.

She swallowed hard. "You work for her, don't you?"

Martin cocked his head. "We both work for her."

She shook her head as he put the phone away. "I never wanted this. This was not the plan—"

"I'll count, if that makes it easier. One—"

"This is treason, you know. People who gave their entire lives for their country—"

"Two." His hand went around her gun and drew it out of her grip. Smiled.

A car drove by. Pigeons scattered.

"Three—"

A shot cracked the air and Martin jerked back, away from her.

Signe spun, not looking to see if he was wounded, and took off. Back through the alleyway, into the square, up the hill toward the church, past it, along a footpath to a restaurant. Up the back stairs, three flights.

The apartment door hung open. A whistle shrilled the air.

"Zara!"

Her friend's body lay in the foyer, the blood sticky, drying from the wound across her neck, her eyes glassy.

No—*no*— "Felix!"

She edged past Zara toward the tiny kitchen.

The teakettle sounded from the stove, the steam sweating the cupboards.

The kitchen had been destroyed, the table overturned, chairs broken.

Felix lay on the floor, bruises covering his face, his hands over his gut where blood streamed out between his fingers. The blindfold had been ripped off.

She grabbed a rag and shoved it against the wound. Deep, his intestines spilling out—he'd been gutted. "Felix—I'm here—"

He opened his eyes, seeing her, gasping, and let out a moan. "Go—"

"No, I'm staying—"

"*Run!*" His voice died, breaths coming fast. "Can't . . . they can't . . . find—"

Footsteps up the stairwell made him grab her shirt with his bloody hand. "Out the window—"

She was on her feet, pushing open the tiny window that led out to the clay-tiled roof. The red tiles broke off as she scampered across them.

She ran to the edge. The house dropped away into a thin alleyway, three stories down.

The next roof was six feet away.

She backed up, glanced behind her.

A man was coming out Felix's window.

She turned around and sprinted off the roof. Bit back a scream as her arms windmilled, her legs running—

She landed hard, kicking off tiles, scrambling for purchase.

Found her feet.

The man had cleared the window, was running across the roof.

She jackrabbited across the top, the tiles sliding out beneath

her feet. She fell and slid down the slanted roof, tiles flying off the top like dominos.

She stopped just as she careened over the side, her fingers digging into the sharp lip at the edge of the roof.

Kicking, she tried to hook her ankle on the edge of the roof. It slipped and she fell, one grip dislodging.

She pawed at the top, her left hand straining to hold her.

Footsteps ran across the roof, the man having also jumped the gap.

She looked down, her hold disintegrating.

A balcony jutted from below her, maybe ten feet down.

And if she missed it . . . the ground, another forty feet.

Jump, just be brave—

“Gotcha!”

A hand closed around her left wrist.

She looked up at her captor. She’d seen him at the cafe, the bicyclist in the skinny jeans.

Zara’s words from last night stabbed at her—*“I also heard some rumors that there might be a contract out on you.”*

This was not over.

Because the fate of the free world was at stake.

She lifted her leg and drew out her Ka-Bar from her boot, ran her blade across his knuckles.

He shouted, let her go.

She pushed off the edge.

Fell.

Dropped hard onto the balcony. Pain streaked up her ankle and maybe she’d twisted it.

She had lived through worse—much worse—pain than a little sprained ankle.

Gritting her teeth, she found her feet.

Yanked open the door to the apartment.

Footsteps thundered above as she banged through the flat.
Empty except for a cat, which spooked and hissed at her.

She flung herself into the hallway, fled down the stairs.

Then she was out into the street, the pain a dull hum as she
ran for her life.