

JEREMY RENNER

A MEMOIR

MY NEXT BREATH

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*I dedicate this book to my daughter, Ava, who is my life force ... my
everything, my only thing, my number one.*

A significant moment in my life that made me proud was when my dad was driving and picked me up from school.

I chose this because my dad got in a terrible accident where he got run over by a snowcat. I got to see him get better over time and it's made me so proud of how strong he is. When Friday came around each week, I would always be so excited to go to my dad's house and see my entire family. One Friday, my grandma, Meemaw, was picking me up from school, or that was what I thought. As I get called on the speaker, I walked over, super-excited to go home and see my dad. The last weekend I saw him, he was in his wheelchair. As I walked over to the car, I saw my dad was driving! I couldn't believe at first, but then also wasn't surprised. I knew always since I was a little kid, he was the strongest, most powerful guy on earth. Not only is he strong, he is the sweetest, most funny guy alive. In the car on the way back home I was thinking how incredibly lucky I am to have an amazing, strong dad.

—Ava Renner, essay for school entitled
“The Most Significant Event That Made You Proud”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I did not want to write this book.

I did not want to relive, moment by moment, word by word, the events of January 1, 2023. I did not want to recount the incident and its violence, nor the ramifications—on me and everyone around me—that followed: the life and death, the pain, the surgeries, the fear, the difficult recovery.

Also, I did not want to write this book because I couldn't imagine why people would care about what happened on that driveway that morning.

But in recent months I've come to understand the ripple effect this incident has had, and continues to have, even as time has passed. Because what happened did not just happen to me.

So even though I'm not a writer, and didn't want to write a book, here it is.

PROLOGUE

ONE SHOT

“Not today, motherfucker...”

That’s the last thing I remember shouting.

The snowcat was sliding across the ice toward Alex. Alex is my nephew; he’s twenty-seven, my sister Kym’s youngest. I’ve always had a kind of father-son relationship with him; he’s one of the first boys in the extended family; very sweet kid. The snowcat is a 14,000-pound industrial snow-clearing machine that I use on my property up in the mountains north of Lake Tahoe. That machine was heading toward him, and he had nowhere to escape to. His back was up against a huge Ford Raptor F-150 truck, which was itself jammed up against a snowbank.

It was January 1, 2023.

I believe that the most important thing in life is to take action. Feel everything, consider everything, read, think, ponder, cogitate—all that’s fine. But you have to *do* something; you have to commit to action whenever you can. Don’t only *think* about things, don’t just *feel* things—take the first step, and then the next, and then the next. Do it. Otherwise, nothing’s going to change, nothing’s going to get better for you or for the people around you. In the end, it doesn’t actually matter what you think or how you feel ... everyone is a mass of feelings and emotions—some good, some bad. But emotions never built a bridge or fed the hungry or saved a life. I mean, who cares how you feel? *Do* something.

An immense 14,000-pound machine was sliding toward my nephew; I had to *do* something; in those lightning-fast seconds, his life hung in the balance. If that machine was to hit him, it would have crushed him to death, no question. But this New Year was going to be the same as any previous year in one crucial way: To me, action was everything. It's at the core of who I am. I do stuff; I take action; I believe in the power of a deed done.

I am blessed by a large extended family whom I love more than anything; and I believe in action. These two immovable forces—love and action—were about to collide.

I had no choice. I had one shot.

One shot—a long shot, but a shot. Not for a second did I think about my other life, the one in which I do most of my own stunts, the Hawkeye I inhabit in movies. This man faced with one shot is not, at that moment, a Hollywood actor. He's just me, Jeremy Renner, uncle to Alex, father to Ava, son and brother and uncle—friend to many, pain in the ass to plenty—half a mile down his driveway from his home in Lake Tahoe, where right now, back up there at the house, folks are innocently getting ready for a ski trip after days being snowed in by a monster storm.

I live for that gang up at the house. They are my whole life, my heart. I love each one of them with such an intensity ... but here, now, I had one thing to do: I had to save Alex.

One shot, one action that would change everything and come to define the second half of my life: a three-foot leap up and a nearly three-foot leap across to the cabin of the snowcat, where I would grab the door handle, get inside that cab, hit the big red STOP button sitting up on the center of the console. The snowcat is charging toward Alex. He's got no escape route. The snowcat weighs over 14,000 pounds. He's standing by an F-150, which is itself against a snowbank. He's going to be crushed between the Ford and the thick steel blades of the snowcat; he's got nowhere to go ...

One shot.

“Not today, motherfucker...”

This all happened in milliseconds. In the time it takes to type “one shot,” I had to make that leap. I didn't have time to compute distances, to prepare my bones, no time to loosen my muscles—my only hope in saving

Alex is to jump three feet across, nearly three feet up, grab the door, hit the button. My eyes dart, my blood tenses, something in my stomach shifts to the very bottom, a mixture of dread and opportunity jangles my senses and makes me less human, more animal.

Animal takes over: Alex is my blood, and like a wild beast I have to get between him and death. This is no longer conscious thought. This is pure action, motivated by love.

I didn't have time to consider my options, if indeed there were any. I had one shot at that leap ...

... and I missed.

And then everything changed forever.

PART ONE

INCIDENT

SNOWMAGEDON

We really shouldn't have been in Lake Tahoe in the first place.

Every year, I bring my entire extended family up to my house a few miles northeast of the lake, where I host a big event to celebrate the New Year. Christmases in the Renner family tend to be spent apart—most of my siblings have their own kids, so they hunker down at home to celebrate—but New Year's is different. That's when as many of my family as possible come to Camp Renner, which is what I call my house in Tahoe, so we can have a week of skiing and snowboarding and food and celebration of the fluke of the calendar that means everyone gets a new start. Usually there are twenty-five to thirty of us, and this year, as with every year, I had been looking forward to getting together with everyone for months. In a busy life, filled with work and travel and thousands of distractions—the mundane business of being alive—this annual get-together served to remind me why I work so hard in the first place: I get to take a breath, on the top of a mountain, away from the pressures of success. I am blessed to have a home big enough to host as many people as can come.

But by the end of 2022 it seemed like everything was against it.

For a start, I managed to miss my flight ... by just a few seconds. The morning of December 28 my daughter Ava and my nephew Alex were to travel with me from Burbank Airport in Los Angeles up to Reno. I'm usually pretty good at making flights, but that day we had a ton of luggage,

and our two dogs, and there were always some last-minute things we needed that we'd have to check we packed, and anyway, even though we bucked it the thirty minutes from the Hollywood Hills, where I have a house, to the airport for our flight, we somehow managed to cut it too close. We were at the gate a full fifteen minutes before the flight was due to take off, and it's a small airport and a small airplane ... It wasn't like we were taking an Airbus 380 to Singapore. We were all checked in, too—but as we arrived at the gate, the crew had just that second closed the cabin doors.

“Dude,” I pleaded to the nearest attendant who had literally just finished calling our names into the loudspeaker, “let me squeeze on, please. We're here, you checked us in and everything.”

“Sorry, sir,” he said, “we can't open the door once it's closed. FAA regulations...”

No amount of pleading worked, and it wasn't as if we could wait for the next flight. Every other flight was fully booked, and there was a major storm heading to Tahoe; we were screwed. I was distraught—people had already started their own journeys from all points north, south, east, and west to head to Camp Renner, and I had ruined the holiday. There was nothing we could do now but take a car back to my house in Hollywood, get all the luggage and the dogs back into the house, and then decide what to do. Everything had been prepared to host twenty, twenty-five people, but now the host can't make it?

Back at the house, I just couldn't face giving up. It's time to do something; it's time to take action.

“Screw it. Alex,” I said, “let's just drive up there. What is it, eight hours? The car's all-wheel if the weather gets really shitty. Let's do it.”

We were up against time, the fading light—I really didn't want to drive in the dark—and the weather. But sometimes you just have to commit to an action and do it, so that's what we did. We packed up the car once again—Ava, Alex, dogs, luggage—and headed out. It had been a crazy day already, but I was feeling good about the decision; I recorded a video message to the rest of the family telling them our plan.

One last thing to do before we headed north: I pulled over into a gas station on Franklin and Highland in the heart of Hollywood, about three

miles down the hill, and filled up.

Nothing could stop us now.

Wrong.

With the car full of gas, I hopped back into the driver's seat and hit the START button on the car.

Nothing.

I press it again.

Nothing.

I look at Alex, who looks at me. Is it the battery? Did I not put the gas cap back on properly?

And then it hits me.

"Alex," I said, very slowly as the information settled in my brain stem, "I put the key fob on the top of the car as we were leaving the house, and now I can't find it..."

Oh shit.

That fob could now be anywhere between my house and this gas station—three miles of busy LA roads. I have a car full of stuff, my daughter, Alex, two dogs, and a houseful of people waiting for me eight hours north of this crappy little gas station in Hollywood.

There's only one thing for it.

"Alex, we're going to have to wait here, and you're going to have to get an Uber back to the house," I said. "I bet the key fell off right as we left. There's no way it stayed on much farther than next to the property, right?"

Alex's face betrayed enough doubt that I don't think I fully believed he'd find the key fob, but I also felt like we'd had enough bad luck that day.

Ava and I waited as Alex headed back to the house. The dogs looked at me, confused, but then they're always confused, especially as one of them survived a coyote attack and subsequently and understandably identifies as a cat.

After about half an hour, an Uber pulled up into the gas station, and Alex jumped out, holding the fob triumphantly. Sure enough, it had fallen off pretty much as we left the property.

It was a Christmas miracle. Laughing, we set out, Ava hunkered down in the back, Alex my copilot.

The dogs set to snoring, though I swear one of them also meows. We head north up out of the city, and then we thrum to the familiar rhythm of towns along the Antelope Valley and the Sierra Nevadas: Palmdale, Lancaster, Mojave, Indian Wells, Lone Pine—where Mount Whitney, sharp and serene, jags up into the clear blue—then Big Pine, Bishop, Mammoth, South Lake Tahoe. The weather deteriorates, the night descends, but nothing was going to stop us.

We arrive as the last light leaves. When we'd left LA, it had been sixty-one degrees; now, up on Mount Rose where my house sits, it's twenty-nine. In a matter of hours, the storm will begin; it will be an epochal weather event.

There will be so much snow to clear.

★ ★ ★

Camp Renner sits 7,300 feet above sea level at the end of a long, winding driveway that climbs to an expansive parking area in front of the main house, and then another, smaller guesthouse farther up the hill. When you live that high in the Sierra Nevadas, you get used to snow, but that year we faced something extra. We'd already had a good dump of snow, but what was coming was going to be a generational storm on top of it—the forecasters were predicting record-breaking weather. The *Tahoe Daily Tribune* summed up the magnitude of the situation on December 30, 2022:

The National Weather Service in Reno on Thursday upgraded to a winter storm warning that lasts through 4 a.m. Sunday, Jan. 1, for up to 5 feet of snow above 8,000 feet, 1 to 3 feet above 7,000 feet ...

An avalanche warning is in effect through 7 a.m. Sunday for the storm packing gale force winds and rain on snow followed by high intensity snowfall could result in large, widespread, destructive slides.

Strong winds will gust up to 50 mph with 100 mph or more possible for Sierra ridges.

Travel over mountain passes likely won't be impacted with snow until midday Saturday.

Five feet of snow—we get a lot up at Mount Rose, but even to us that sounded like a huge amount. No doubt we would lose power at some point, and in all likelihood, we'd be snowed in, too, but what we didn't want was to get snowed out before we even got there.

Alex and Ava and I had arrived ahead of the storm—just—and the rest of the family managed to make it, too (though not my mom—she was in our hometown of Modesto with my brother Kyle and Katie, his wife, who had just had their first child). Some friends were joining, too, and soon the house was bustling with people, sitting around in the kitchen catching up, playing pool by the big front window, the kids thick as thieves, hunkering down in the TV room.

Once the storm started it just never stopped. It was gorgeous to watch from the safety of the house. Slanting shards of snow rattled the great window, covering the cars and the snowmobiles, dulling all sounds until all we could hear was the soft buzzy call of the mountain chickadees and the urgent whistling of the western tanagers. After a few hours great globs of heavy wetness hung from the ponderosas and the sugar pines, looking for all the world like the fake stuff you spray on Christmas trees. By the time the New Year approached, the whole of western Nevada was buried under those epochal five feet, and one day stuck turned into two turned into three.

This is the best—and worst—thing about where I live. Each year we seem to get a stretch where the winds whip to one hundred miles per hour, huge snow amounts fall, and we're on avalanche—and lightning and tornado—watch. Power fails; roads close; ski-resort funiculars hang useless in the ice-bound air. The National Weather Service sends out warnings with homey phrases like, "Best to hunker down where you are," but when all the roads are closed and the power goes out, there's really no choice: it can be treacherous to be a human in the face of all this nature. And yet the extraordinary beauty and opportunities for adventure that the snow affords make living in the mountains a true privilege.

By the last day of 2022 we had no cell service and no internet, meaning no phones, no tablets, no TVs. The kids had long given up the TV room to come and hang out with the adults. We were just one big extended happy