TOUGH WOMEN

ADVENTURE STORIES

Stories of grit, courage and determination

Featuring stories by

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EDITED BY **JENNY TOUGH**

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An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

Summersdale Publishers Ltd
Part of Octopus Publishing Group Limited
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
LONDON
EC4Y 0DZ
UK

www.summersdale.com

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

ISBN: 978-1-78783-300-5

You're tougher than you think

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FOREWORD

JENNY TOUGH

The length of time – milliseconds that go on for minutes – it takes until I hear the dead tree I've just pulled out of the mountainside splash into the river below is all I need to confirm the thought that was previously swirling, and now screaming, inside my head: one mistake, and I'm dead. The tree, now being carried through the impassible gorge by the raging white river, was meant to be my break on the climb. On an otherwise bare, precipitous, scree mountain flank, baking in the hot Kyrgyz summer sun, the small lone tree was the only feature I could rest on. And I really need a rest. Limbs shaking, sweat dripping, and the realization of my current consequences, I have no choice but to push onward and upward. No. Other. Choice.

It was my mistake. I know this. This isn't a mountain accident or an unfortunate turn of events. No, this was all me this time. I took a bad route. Chose a valley without thoroughly studying the contour lines. I followed a goat track – usually my only hope of decent footing – until I hit some landslides, which I delicately picked my way across. Up here in the Tien Shan, landslides are not out of place, and with the summer almost over, at least the avalanches have mostly settled. I'm not alarmed, and I continue on my course. But with an ominous rumble from above, the landslide I just picked my way over is awash with new boulders. I realize that I am not in a stable area. The boulders are not ankle-breakers; they're femur-breakers – not to mention the instant consequences should another landslide kick off while I'm in its path. There's no chance I'm going back that way, *no matter what happens*.

If I do break a femur, my hope of rescue out here, in the central Tien Shan, is quite limited. This country doesn't even have one single helicopter to send out. I know this, and I'm comfortable with the risk... Most of the time. But most

of the time I don't make navigational errors like this one. Speeding away from the scary landslides, I turn the corner of the valley, and my heart drops all the way down to my shoes. The valley turns suddenly into a gorge. The slope I'm currently following goes all the way to 90 degrees, the thin goat track literally ending at a cliff edge. There is no way forward, and no way back.

I consider my options. There are really only two: go down into the river on my right, and swim through the gorge, or go up and over the mountain on my left, where I know it's a little gentler on the other side. I tiptoe down to the water's edge: it's deep, but moving fast, and not so deep that I wouldn't crack my skull on a protruding rock if I tried to float down it. I look up at the mountain: it's steep. Super-steep. I spend no more than a few minutes making my decision: death is slightly less likely on the mountain than the white water. I pull my GPS safety device out and put it around my neck, prepared if I need to drop my backpack at any point. I take a deep breath, and place my hands on the rock in front of me. *Don't look down.*

I have no idea, to this day, how long that climb took. It felt like 2 hours at least, but it's likely that it was less. I don't know how long it took, how high it was, or if there had been another option. I refuse to look at my gpx track for the day. I don't want to know. What I do know, is what my mind went through. They say your life flashes before your eyes, but it was my future that I saw instead. I realized all the things I wanted to do, clear visions of goals I wanted to accomplish, places I wanted to see, and more memories to be made with people I love. I focused on the placement of each foot and hand to ensure I had a chance of still getting to do them. I promised

myself that if I survived this climb, I would call the expedition off. I would go home. They were right – I can't do this.

Three weeks earlier, I had landed in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, excited and ready to start my expedition: a solo and unsupported run across the central Tien Shan mountain range, which basically spanned the entire country. In all of my (considerable) research in preparing, I couldn't find any recording of anyone who had crossed this mountain range on foot, whether man or woman, walking or running. I had a chance at putting a world first to my name. It hadn't been the reason I decided to do it – it was already happening before I learned this – but my inner narcissist (who is usually fairly quiet) couldn't believe the luck.

The most intriguing bit of doing something that's never been done before is that there is no guidebook: you have to play Explorer and figure everything out yourself. You can't google anything. You have to find your way in the old-fashioned way, although I did rely heavily on satellite images of the mountains to design my route. I can't imagine how the explorers of old did without.

I spent more hours than I ever have on any project designing my expedition. I studied what few maps I could find, scoured the internet and any books that had ever touched Kyrgyzstan (I can tell you a lot about breeding the Kyrgyz horse, to give you an indication of how well scraped that barrel is), combed through any knowledge I could glean from anyone. There wasn't much. I made lists and went on training weekends in the Highlands and then made new lists. I was the definition of

a good student. When I landed in Bishkek, I felt good. I knew I had done everything possible to make this work. Now all I had to do was buy some gas canisters for my stove (the only thing I didn't fly with), head to the eastern edge of the country, and run a thousand kilometres.

In the mountaineering office – which is really just a room with a few pieces of ancient Soviet alpinist equipment for rent – I found the gas canisters I needed. While fumbling for some *som* to pay with, the officer asked me what my "holiday plans" were in Kyrgyzstan.

"I'm going to run across Kyrgyzstan!" I told him with a confident grin. "I reckon it's about 1,000 kilometres, I've got a 12-kilogram pack with high-alpine camping equipment, and it should take me less than a month... err... Can't wait!"

He stared.

"... No," he slowly shook his head, "no. This can't be done. Kyrgyzstan is very big, and the mountains are very high. You'll see. This can't be done. No."

Unfortunately for him, my schedule for the day literally had nothing else but buying these canisters and spending some time adjusting to the altitude. I had time to wrangle. I took the bait.

"It can be done, I'll show you!" He followed my finger as I traced my route on the map, pointing out the valleys I would follow, the passes I would use, and the villages where I would resupply. Finally, a small nod of approval.

"OK, this is a good route actually... I think it can be done! But..." – and at this devastating moment, he paused to take a dramatic look up and down at me – "... not by you."

Ouch.

The following minutes of my life were at the height of mansplaining that I've had to endure as an outdoorswoman,

and I'll never forget the glowing ember of rage as he made it clear that his assessment of my abilities was entirely based on nothing outside of my gender. I didn't bother to tell him how much mountain experience I already had. I didn't bother to tell him how well trained my legs were. I didn't even think to tell him how tough I can be. I did what we so often do: smiled sweetly, said something like, "OK, great, thanks", and left as fast as I could.

There's another intriguing bit about doing something that's never been done before, and the part that I wasn't aware of until that day, is that people generally believe it *can't* be done. They've never seen it, and probably for good reason. Every single day on that expedition (out of the days that I saw other humans) I was told it couldn't be done – sometimes with so much conviction that I was pointed back toward the nearest village, and even had the path blocked on a couple of more heated occasions.

My hands are sweating and blistering, and grabbing reliable holds is getting more and more difficult. I get stuck at one point, unsure where I can make my next move. I still haven't looked down – always look up. Look where you're going. And that better not be down. The long wait for the tree to hit the river below flashes in my mind again. That's how many seconds I'll be falling for if I miss this next move. With a grunt more akin to a battle cry, I push myself up the next ledge. I can see the top. I'm so close. *Just get there, and this whole expedition is finally over. Going home!* I scramble to the top, and on a curiously even, completely safe ground that gives

way to a gentle, green, welcoming slope on the other side of the death-scree I've just climbed, I collapse into a heap. I cry harder than I can ever remember crying in my adult life. Adrenaline empties from my body in seconds and now I'm just a blubbering mess, letting the weight of everything that just went through my mind over the course of my climb really come out. I had to stay focused at the time, but the second it's over, out the emotions flood.

I didn't expect to cry like that, and while crying, I didn't expect the next thing I did either. After some time of full-on ugly-cry, I stopped, wiped my tears, fixed my ponytail, stood up, and continued as I had for the last twelve days. Just like that. I simply carried on running. I didn't fulfil my promise to quit, and it would be some time before I ever told anyone what had happened. I decided I should finish first.

After 23 days of navigating some of the most beautiful and formidable mountains in the world, I ran through the city gates of Osh in the south-west corner of the country. Even in the last 5 kilometres, as I finally let myself believe that I had been successful, cars were constantly pulling over to offer me a lift: insisting it was way too far to Osh, that I couldn't possibly run that far. My second and final big crying breakdown of the expedition occurred as I ran under those gates. I did it. Me. The unlikely candidate to become the first person to ever run all the way across Kyrgyzstan, all alone and unsupported. An impossible idea, and I proved it possible.

I never thought I was destined to be the sort of person who did those sorts of things. Neither did anyone else.

When I was a little girl, the kids at school used to laugh at me that my name was Tough. How ridiculous that a girl could be called Tough! I was embarrassed by it and wished that my family had been the Smiths or the Joneses or something. Little girls aren't Tough. Little girls are pretty and nice. That's what I learned at school. It was not right that I was called Tough. Point and laugh.

All grown up now, I wear my name with pride. What extreme good fortune that I should get to be called Tough! Every time my passport gets checked and the officer grins and asks, teasing, "So, are you really Tough?" I wink back. Hell yes I am. It's a great name. I love being Tough.

It isn't about being pretty and nice or not. That isn't part of the trait, and it isn't something binary where being tough diminishes any femininity. Tough means a lot of different things. It's not how many pull-ups you can do or who can win in a fight or how many chillis you can eat without crying. Your toughness is within. And your toughness is unique. It manifests itself in different ways. And it sure as anything does not identify with either gender more than the other.

I found my toughness for the first time in the mountains. Pursuing challenges that excited me but also scared me, and somehow getting through them, I showed myself that I actually deserved my name, that I was Tough. I still look at a looming mountain pass and shiver with a fear that I can't get up there. I've taken a few wrong turns over the years, like that valley in Kyrgyzstan, or looking up from my bivvy sac to see ten armed men in Morocco, or literally sprinting through illegal mines and coca fields in Bolivia, or limping on an infected wound in

the desert... The list, unfortunately, really goes on. And I will continue to add to it – that's part of the path of life I've chosen, in truly challenging myself and the limits of my comfort zone. Any of those scenarios sound scary to me even now, but when the time came, I always rose to it, and later reflected that I had been so much tougher than I ever thought I was capable of. It grows my confidence and encourages me to keep expanding the limits of what I think I'm capable of, in all areas of my life – and I want that for everybody, especially women and girls.

Why Tough Women Adventure Stories?

For most of my life, I carried this fantasy that once I proved myself, no one would doubt me again. But, objectively speaking, I have proven myself by now. At the time of writing, I've completed four world-first solo expeditions like that one across Kyrgyzstan, won adventure races, been to six continents solo, and made a full-time career in the outdoors. If I could meet with my fifteen-year-old self, she would be delighted, and she would assume that no one doubts me any more. But they do – if they only have my appearance to judge me on, that is.

Perhaps that is one thing that I love so dearly about spending time in the wilderness – it's the greatest equalizer. The mountains don't care what gender you identify with, how old you are, who you love, how you speak. They don't give a toss. You are free out there. But on so many occasions in my life, I've been warned against going to this sanctuary – because I'm a woman. It never used to bother me, to be honest. I always believed in my own abilities and knew the strength of my years of experience, so I just ignored the comments and carried on anyway. But, what about the women and girls who don't have that? What about someone new to the outdoor world? Are we

really sending a message that this is not an arena for women to venture into?

The following pages are stories from some of the most badass outdoorswomen out there. They are stories of grit, love, determination, passion and trailblazing. All of these authors have discovered their unique inner toughness and used it to follow a path in life of their own choosing. My hope with this book is that it will show the many faces of toughness, and encourage everyone – men and women, boys and girls – to reassess our culture's perceptions about who does or doesn't belong in the outdoors (hint: everyone; no one). I also wanted to give a voice to some incredible role models who have great stories to tell. The truth is, the outdoor industry is actually full of women, but when it comes to the highest level of media, such as what we see on television, the demographic dwindles to one, and so the wider community believes that tough outdoorspeople fit one single mould.

But change is happening, and by giving a platform to the voices who are igniting that change – a platform like a book, for example – we continue to grow. I've always believed in the power of storytelling – stories that leave an impact, stories that people will remember. The following pages are filled with storytellers I admire. The authors in this book will take you around the world, with challenges ranging from races and world records, to battles with their own bodies and minds, to independent pursuits and personal growth. The stories in this book, and the women who wrote them, all embody what it means to be tough.