



ALASKAN COURAGE  
• BOOK ONE •

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# SUBMERGED

DANI PETTREY



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To Michael

For asking me to dance.  
It's turned out to be the dance of a lifetime.  
I love you.



To Mom

For always believing.  
I love you dearly.

## Prologue

*Never wager unless you control the stakes.*

And she'd thought she held such a strong hand.

Agnes Grey forced her head against the rattling seat back, clenched the armrests with such force her nails broke. Perspiration soaked her brow, seeping into her eyes, but she refused to cry. She was too old to cry.

The plane was going down into the water within sight of her home. Home—warm, safe, dry. She'd never see it again.

Her friend Henry Reid strained to look back, his white knuckles bulging on the wheel as he fought to regain control of the spiraling Cessna, but the fiery plane seemed bent on destruction. Panic flashed through his eyes. "Tighten your belts. Put your head between your knees."

His concern was sweet, but it wouldn't change the outcome. Their fate was set.

They were going down—hard and fast. The other passengers' terrified expressions said they knew it too. *Innocents, every one*, Agnes thought, fury on their behalf trumping her own fear. She was the only one on board who knew this catastrophe was no mechanical failure. It was *him*. She knew it as surely as she knew she'd seen her last sunset.

A bitter cry tore from her cracked lips. Any semblance of control on her part had been an illusion.

She'd played her hand, and he'd just called her on it.

If she hadn't been so stinking stubborn, if she'd kept her mouth shut and given him what he wanted . . . But Momma hadn't raised her like that. She'd done the right thing. She only wished she hadn't brought the others down with her.

Managing to crane her neck left, she took in the sight of the loving couple's hands clasped tight, crying as they whispered frantic words to each other.

Agnes's stomach lurched. She'd brought them on this journey, doomed them to a watery tomb.

At least now he'd be satisfied. She'd be gone. They'd be gone. No one was left to . . .

Acid burned up her throat.

*Bailey.*



## OFF THE COAST OF TARIUK ISLAND, ALASKA

Cole McKenna left the chaos at the water's surface for the chaos below. The black water quickly suffocated the floodlights directed down at him from the rescue boats above. Within seconds it was only him, the strobe attached at his waist, and the immense darkness of the sea.

His heart seemed to beat in time with the strobe's rhythmic flash.

*Thump. Thump.*

It was amazing the things one heard when surrounded by darkness.

*Thump. Thump.*

Cole checked his depth gauge with his left hand, keeping his right fixed on the lifeline. When diving in depths without any natural light and with no distinguishing landmarks, in an ever-changing current, a few seconds off the line was all it took to get disoriented, and those seconds could mean the difference between life and death.

Thirty feet.

Thirty-five.

"Diver two in the water," Gage instructed over the comm from topside.

He was glad he'd have Landon Grainger at his side tonight. He was going to need all the help he could get.

Sonar had indicated that what remained of Henry Reid's floatplane tottered on the edge of Outerman's Ridge, forty feet beneath the surface. He wished the flight manifest had arrived before deployment so they knew how many passengers had been on board. He hated going in blind.

Forty feet.

He slipped his external light from his utility belt and switched it on. The Cessna glimmered a murky white in its beam.

"I'm going off-line," he alerted topside.

"Be safe, Cole. Diver three is in the water."

Cole swallowed. "Roger that." He shouldn't worry any more about Kayden than Landon. As dive captain, he was responsible for every member on the rescue team. He couldn't allow the fact that Kayden was his sister to affect his decisions. It wouldn't be fair to the rest of the team or to the victims. But a brother's innate protective nature always lingered.

He inhaled, the pressure-demand regulator automatically releasing a puff of oxygenated air into his face mask. The device made him sound like Darth Vader, each breath deliberate and punctuated. His black neoprene dry suit, gloves, and hoses only added to the image.

The glow in the fuselage had disappeared, but the fact the fire had lasted as long as it had bolstered his hope that there was still air trapped in the craft. He prayed their search tonight would end in rescue and not just recovery.

Panning his beam along the vessel, he began his inspection at the tail—torn and jagged—and moved along to the cockpit. His breath hitched at the compressed metal. He prayed Henry had been tossed free before the plane nosedived onto the ridge. At least then there was a chance Ginny would have a body to bury.

"Going off-line," Landon announced a moment before he was at Cole's side.

"Best access is going to be that door," Cole said.

"I agree." Landon pulled the crowbar from the gear bag.

Kayden joined them, her beam of light bouncing off Cole's mask before settling on the fuselage.

"Landon, you're with me," he instructed. "Kayden, watch the currents and how this wreckage is moving. Be ready to help lift to the surface."

"You got it, boss."

Cole wedged the crowbar inside the door's seam and, bracing against the sidewall, heaved back. Heat rippled through his fingers and up his arms with the exertion. Three minutes later, the door hung open on its hinges.

A tangle of wires littered the opening. Cole set to work clearing a pathway.

He checked his dive watch. Five minutes closer to the Golden Hour—the limit for cold-water drowning victims to be revived. Any longer and all hope was lost.

Not tonight. Not on his watch.

He gave Landon the go signal and entered the craft behind him, wedging his body through the opening and to the right.

Landon's auxiliary light reflected through the water ahead. "I've got two. Man and woman. Strapped into their seats, right side."

Cole didn't recognize the couple. In a town Yancey's size, everyone was a neighbor, so he knew most residents of his town by sight. Flying debris had left the woman with a gash on her face, and the man had taken a hard blow to the temple.

He turned the torch on his dive watch. Thirty-five minutes since the crash, another fifteen to get them to the surface, another ten to get them to the hospital . . .

"We take her out first." Cole unclipped the seat harness and cleared the woman from her seat. "Kayden, I need you at the door ready for a lift to the surface."

"Ready, boss."

Cole lifted the woman's legs as Landon lifted her shoulders. He carefully walked backward, measuring the distance to the opening by the steps he took.

“Hold here.” He lowered her legs and cautiously wedged himself out of the craft. He leaned back in. “Slowly now.” He eased the woman through the doorway. “She’s out.”

Cole held her upright as Kayden secured her for transport to the surface. Giving pressurized air to an unconscious drowning victim caused more harm than good. A fast lift to the surface and waiting emergency personnel was the best option.

He watched Kayden and the woman disappear into the darkness above, then headed back into the wreckage to rejoin Landon.

“He’s almost ready to go,” Landon said, kneeling beside the unconscious man. “You want me to lift with him?”

“Yes. As soon as Kayden is back down, you head up with him.”

Something bumped into Cole’s back, and he panned his torch around. A flash of movement caught his eye. He moved toward the rear of the fuselage and got kicked.

Someone was desperately trying to hug a pocket of air in the raised tail of the craft. “I’ve got another one—conscious,” he alerted Landon.

He stepped on a plane seat, getting as high as he could. A pocket of air, no more than five inches deep, hugged the angled roof of the cabin.

An icy hand hit his face. This time he grabbed and caught it. He lifted his torch and found a pair of terrified eyes staring back at him. “I’ve got Agnes Grey!” She was standing on the headrest of the last seat, hugging an air pocket barely a hand’s width deep. He yanked his pony bottle from his vest, pulled the release to let the air flow, and wrapped her cold hand around it, guiding it to her mouth. He shoved his mask back and tilted his head to move into the air pocket so she could hear him. “Breathe slowly, and stay as still as you can. I’m going to get you out of here.”

She nodded in rapid fire as she gulped a deep breath in. Water was lapping against her face, and he wasn’t sure how long she could stay upright in the cold water. Her lips were blue, her

skin pallid. She'd moved beyond the last of the seats trying to find the air. Getting her to willingly go underwater to get out of the wreckage was going to be a challenge.

"You, two other passengers, and Henry the pilot? That's who I'm looking for? Four people?"

She reluctantly released the air to reply. "Five. Another passenger went forward to try to help Henry." She swallowed hard. "I saw his body floating outside after we crashed."

"Stay right here. I'll be right back. I promise you."

He waited until she nodded, pushed his mask back over his face, and used the seat's headrest to propel himself back toward Landon. "Let's get him outside. Agnes is alert enough—I'm going to try to buddy breathe her out."

Landon nodded. They lifted the man clear of the seats and into the aisle. The plane shifted, toppling Cole forward and causing Landon to lose his balance. The pitch of the fuselage rolled another five degrees. "Move!"

Landon shimmied backward, guiding the man's legs, while Cole supported his shoulders. A torch lit outside of the plane, its beam sliding across the windows. "Kayden's back."

"How's it look?"

Landon disappeared through the door. "Tight, but it's enough." Cole eased the man down as Landon guided him out of the plane. "We're clear."

Cole didn't wait for word they had the man ready to lift; he turned and headed back into the plane for Agnes.

There was no way to safely put her in front, so he'd have to pull her through the wreckage. And he wouldn't be able to communicate with her once they moved out of the air pocket. He hoped she didn't so badly panic he had to knock her out just to get her to safety.

She was submerged now, fully underwater, her eyes closed, clutching the air canister to her chest.

He turned his torchlight on her face.

Her eyes opened, panicked.

He grasped her wrist and nodded as she in turn grasped his. He motioned they were heading down.

The plane shifted again.

He didn't give her time to react to the threat; he pushed them back through the water as quickly as he could, using the seats to judge the distance. She stayed with him, keeping a death grip on his wrist.

An ominous groan reverberated through the fuselage. Water vibrated around them. Cole's gauges swayed with the seat backs.

"Cole." Kayden didn't have to say any more. Her tone said it all.

The ridge wasn't going to hold the plane much longer.

Tugging Agnes, he bolted for the doorway.

Ten feet.

Nine.

Eight.

"Cole, get out of there!"

His heart squeezed at the terror in his sister's voice.

The tail section lurched forward, metal scraping coral with an eerie rasping as the water-filled fuselage teetered on the brink of darkness. This time it didn't stop.

Agnes let go of his wrist and yanked from his hold. Frantically she spun around, her eyes wild in his torchlight.

He reached for her, but she kicked off a seat, trying to propel herself to the opening. With no light and the plane shifting around them, she propelled straight into the AED storage cabinet.

Her body went limp, the air canister floating away.

Cole lunged for her, managing to seize her arm.

With a roar, the right side of the plane broke off, the outside current swirling in.

Struggling against the water's force, he wedged his leg between the seats and used the leverage to pull Agnes back to him.

"I'm coming in."

"Don't you dare, Kayden. Hold position. That's an order!"

He swam down toward the doorway, scraping his air canister on the frame. Keeping Agnes protected as best he could, he scrambled to grab a handhold on the frame.

Another hand met his. *Kayden*.

He wrapped Kayden's hand around Agnes's wrist. "She's unconscious."

"I've got her!"

Cole let his sister pull Agnes through the door, and then slid out of the fuselage behind her.

Kayden got Agnes secure for lift.

"Head up," he instructed.

"You're right behind us." It wasn't a question.

He gave the thumbs-up signal. The search for Henry and the missing passenger would have to wait until after the wreckage settled. He began his ascent, and as the plane faded from view, he saw it slide off the ridge into the darkness. A sick feeling rolled through his stomach. That had been too close for comfort.

Concentric circles spread out in ever-increasing rings above, pinpointing the helicopter's location. At least there was plenty of help above.

He breached the surface to the whirring of rotary blades.

Three paramedics crowded the rescue boat's platform, reaching to help lift Agnes carefully aboard. Cole waited until Agnes and Kayden were clear, then grabbed the ladder.

Ralph Barnes, Yancey's fire chief, leaned over to give him a hand with the heavy tanks.

"Thanks." Cole took a seat on the gunwale and started stripping off the weight of his gear as rain fell around him.

Gage hollered over to him, "The support boat is headed back with the other victims. Landon too. You going to call this?"

Cole nodded. "Get us to shore."

Gage waved off the helicopter and headed to the pilothouse. They would reach shore in less time than it would take to transfer Agnes by air.

Cole watched as the rescue personnel started CPR on Agnes.

With all she'd been through, he wasn't surprised to find her heart had stopped.

"One one-thousand. Two one-thousand. Come on, Agnes."

Kayden sat down beside him. She watched the rescue personnel work. "She's icy cold. That's good. She's got more time," she murmured, more to herself than to him.

Cole squeezed her shoulder. Kayden didn't handle losing people very well—neither of them did. "I hope so." He couldn't do anything for Agnes but hope she could fight for her life one more time. Red lights swirled like beacons from the emergency vehicles on shore, growing closer as the boat neared landfall.

"You should have held position," Cole said quietly.

"And let you go down with the plane? I don't think so."

"Not your call."

"You would have done the same, and we both know it," Kayden replied.

"Probably, but I would rather not find out."

The boat pulled into the dock, and Landon was waiting for them, securing the boat lines as the engine was cut. Cole moved to help the EMTs lift their patient onto a transport board, and then onto land. Through the pouring rain, he watched as they shocked Agnes's heart in the ambulance and moments later started CPR again. They slammed the ambulance doors. The sirens wailed their departure.

Cole wiped at the water snaking in rivulets down his face. He was freezing.

Cole hauled gear over to the town's fire station, where the rescue crew had storage space.

The entire crew was family, with the exception of Landon Grainger—who was as close as family. Cole trusted them all, underwater and above it, to accomplish what rescues could be done, and to cope when there was nothing they could do.

They cleaned and readied the gear for the next call.

Kayden worked beside Cole in silence.

*Typical Kayden.*

When things hurt she closed ranks, shut everyone else out, but Cole would relentlessly fight his way back in.

Landon shouldered his duffel bag. “I’m heading over to the station to start the report. NTSB will be here in another couple hours.”

Cole nodded, not looking forward to the imminent salvage. They would refloat the plane if they could find it again, collect strewn parts, and photograph what they could. The work itself wasn’t the hard part—it was knowing lives had been lost that stung. The missing passenger was somewhere on that ridge, and the search for Henry Reid’s body would weigh on the entire team, but it had to be done. Ginny Reid deserved no less.

The last to leave, Cole exited the fire station and looked up at the sky. It’d gone from dark to pitch-black. At least the rain had simmered to a slow drizzle, though he doubted the reprieve would last long.

Wind whistled through the empty downtown streets in an eerie cadence. Hunching his shoulders against it, Cole hefted his duffel into his truck. He’d make a quick stop by the hospital to check on Agnes and the two still-unidentified passengers—then swing by the house to talk with Kayden.

Tariuk Island Regional Medical Center sat at the top of the hill overlooking Main Street. Cole left his truck parked in front of the fire station and walked the distance. He passed the sheriff’s station on the way and ducked his head in, catching Landon as he was finishing up his report.

Landon lifted his chin in greeting. “I just got off the phone with Ginny Reid.”

“How’s she doing?”

“Lousy. Sheriff’s with her now. I think I’ll ride over and see if there’s anything I can do.”

“Let me know how I can help.”

“Will do.”

“Any word on the passengers?”

“Ginny said when Henry left for Anchorage this afternoon he was planning to pick up a man named—” Landon lifted his notepad—“Mark Olsen, and Agnes Grey, of course. But when he called her before leaving Anchorage he said two others were added. She didn’t even know their names. Henry said they’d settled up when they got to Yancey.”

“I’m heading over to check on Agnes. I’ll see if there’s any word on them.”

The disinfectant smell rubbed Cole wrong, always had. The overhead glare of bad lighting and starchy white walls only compounded his discomfort. The hospital held bad memories, and it looked like that record would remain unbroken.

Peggy Wilson leaned against the counter, her brow furrowed as she talked on the phone. “I understand that. The insurance card says he needs preauthorization, but how on earth are you supposed to get preauthorization for an emergency?” She sighed, her face reddening.

She looked up, caught sight of Cole, and covered the receiver with her hand. “I’m sorry. These insurance companies like to drive me insane. What can I do for you?”

“I came to check on Agnes Grey. She was brought in here—”

“An hour ago.” Peggy’s face fell. “I’m sorry. She didn’t make it.”

Cole balled his hands at his side. If he’d been faster . . . stronger . . .

“They tried resuscitating her, but it was no use. Her heart just wouldn’t beat.”

Cole swallowed. “Any word on the couple brought in?”

Peggy bit her bottom lip. “I’m afraid they didn’t make it either. They were pronounced DOA.”

He closed his eyes as regret bit deep. “I really thought they had a chance.” Maybe if he’d taken them out in a different order . . .

Her thick hand clamped on his. “I’m sorry, sugar.”

“So am I.”

He exited through the automatic doors into the crisp, black night, his heart heavy.

*Agnes Grey, gone.*

He headed down the quiet street, past darkened shop windows, past the Russian-American Trading Post, where Agnes lived and worked.

Yancey wouldn't be the same without the venerable Lady Grey.

And Bailey? His step faltered as her beautiful face flashed before him. How would she take the news of her beloved aunt's passing?



## 2

The news sent Bailey Craig back in time. She'd heard what Gus said, heard Agnes was dead, but rather than memories of her beloved aunt, it was memories of why she'd left Yancey that flooded her mind. Twelve years elapsed in an instant, and suddenly she was sixteen again. . . .

The pounding—like little men sledgehammering her skull from the inside out—woke her. *So thirsty.*

She opened her mouth to the horrible feel of cotton suffocating her. She didn't want to open her eyes—didn't want to see, let alone face, the wreckage of what she'd done again.

*Not again.*

She didn't have to look over to know he was gone. Though she lay on the floor, at least this time she had a pillow beneath her head and something was draped over her—a blanket, her coat? She couldn't be sure.

The place was still. No one else was up yet, or they'd all left the night before.

Where was she? *A party.* But the details were sketchy, as always. She'd come with Kelly and Beth. Had they left her? Disgusted with her drunken antics again?

She rose gingerly on her elbows and opened her eyes, her head swimming with the motion, nausea rolling through her stomach like a thirty-foot wave.

Everything was hazy, dim. She blinked, trying to moisten the contacts dried to her corneas.

Krista's dad's place. That's where she was. He was away for the weekend.

The room was dark, except for the glaring sun forcing its way through a slit in the curtains. The bedroom door was shut. She smiled. Perhaps someone else had done something stupid and she wouldn't be the only one disgraced.

She flipped the bathroom switch, the fluorescent light crackling as it came to life. She recoiled at the image in the mirror. How far she'd fallen. Mascara smudged beneath her bloodshot eyes. The faint impression of the carpet pattern etched in her skin on the right side of her cheek, her hair misshapen and frozen from the overabundance of hairspray.

She'd taken such care to look good, to be appealing and seductive, and now she just looked sick. She splashed cold water on her face, over and over, scrubbing hard, as if it could wash any of the filth away.

Hot tears mixed with the frigid water, and she slumped to the ground, too sick to stand, her heart breaking—shocked there was anything left to break. The cold floor felt good against her hot skin. She curled up in the fetal position. *Not again.*

*How did I get here?*

She couldn't blame anyone else; she'd brought it on herself. If she could just go back, take that first time back. Not have another drink. Insist they go for food before she got too woozy, insist he take her home. But in her drunken stupor she'd ended up with *the* guy she'd thought she'd wanted, at least for the moment. He was older, more popular—surely it would make her more popular too.

Of course it hadn't lasted past morning, and her course had been set.

There had been so many times she could have turned it around, salvaged her reputation, or at least not made it a thousand times worse, but she always took that next drink, the

one to make her feel better, and ended up in the same state so many mornings.

Cole had no idea how bad she felt. How she wanted to run to him, crying, begging his forgiveness . . .

But she knew he wouldn't accept her apology, not after what she'd done. And she couldn't lose face—that would be worse than anything, right?

She was so pathetic.

“Bailey, are you there?” Gus's voice pulled her back to the present.

She blinked hard, wishing away the memories of her youth and the nightmares that accompanied them. “Yeah.” She cleared her throat. “Sorry.”

“Did you hear what I said?”

*Agnes. Dead.*

“Yeah.” She sank on the edge of the couch, nearly slipping to the floor in the process.

“She left the Trading Post to you. In fact, she left it all to you. We can go over the details when you get to Yancey.”

Her throat constricted. “Yancey?”

“Yes. When you arrive home for the funeral.”

*Home.* She'd have to go back. Images of her in high school, curled on that bathroom floor, pounded through her mind.

“How soon can you leave?” he asked.

*I can't leave Oregon. Can't go to Alaska.* Fear seized her.

“Bailey?”

“Yeah, Gus, I'm here.” She swallowed the bile burning up her throat. “I'll make arrangements.”

“Agnes took care of the details on this end, didn't want to be a burden to anyone, least of all you. You just have to get here.”

“All right.”

“It'll be good to see you again.”

She nodded, bereft of words, and slipped the phone back in the cradle.

*Yancey, Alaska.* She'd planned on never setting foot there again. Now she had no choice. Agnes deserved for her to be there. Agnes deserved so much more. She'd let her aunt down as much as she had herself.



Cole pulled in his driveway and glanced over at his sisters' place. Several lights still shone. Climbing from his truck, he footed it across the open acres of land that separated his cabin from his childhood home, dodging mud puddles and rain. The scent of damp moss hovered like a fog in the cool, dank air.

Aurora greeted him at the kitchen door.

He slipped his boots off and knelt to pet the whimpering husky. "How ya doing, girl?"

The wonderful aroma of chili powder and cumin swirled in the air, and his mouth watered.

"I saved you some," Piper called from the dining room.

He moved through the doorway to greet her. "Thanks." The search-and-rescue call had come two minutes into their weekly family dinner.

Piper swiveled from the computer screen, her back to the desk edging the stairs. "I'm guessing it didn't go well."

Cole leaned against the doorframe. "She didn't talk about it?" He already knew the answer. Kayden kept everything close to the hip.

Piper shook her head. "Nope. Just headed for the shower."

"You know Kayden. . . . When something hurts, she needs her space. Give her a day and she'll be back to her annoying self." He forced a chuckle, but he wasn't fooling either of them. It was hard making more recoveries than rescues, nine times more to be precise. Being on search-and-rescue detail wasn't easy, but it was the job they all felt called to do.

"Do I want to know?" Piper's eyes held the innocence he loved so much about her.

"No, but you're going to hear anyway." It was inevitable in a

town Yancey's size—six hundred and three at last count. “Do you want it to come from me?”

Piper nodded her affirmation, but her eyes pleaded otherwise.

He exhaled. “It was Henry Reid's plane. Agnes Grey was on board.”

“And?” She nibbled her bottom lip.

“I'm sorry, kid. We didn't find Henry. Agnes died at the hospital.”

Her head bent, and Cole moved to stroke her shoulder.

“Poor Miss Agnes.”

“I know.” Saying it'd been a rough night didn't come close.

Piper wiped her eyes and looked up. “You must be starving. Let me fix you a bowl.”

He squeezed her shoulder. Always so concerned about others. “I got it.”

“You sure?”

“Positive. You finish what you were doing.” He indicated the computer screen. “What are you looking for this time?”

“A book.”

“Another mystery?” She'd read thousands.

“Princess Maksutov's diary.”

Cole lifted the lid off the Crockpot and pulled a bowl from the cupboard. “That's a different title. Who's that by?” He filled a hefty bowl with chili, topping it off with diced onions and shredded cheddar, then grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

“Princess Sofia Ioannovna Maksutov.”

Balancing the bowl in one hand and the basket of corn bread in the other, a bottle of water tucked under one arm and a bottle of honey under the other, he made his way back into the dining room, Aurora fast on his heels. “Why would you want some chick's diary?”

“It was stolen from the historical society's display at the library. Poor Mrs. Anderson's all in a dither.”

“You don't say?”

“She has good cause this time. Someone reached in the display case and stole it.”

“Stole what?” Gage asked, entering from the kitchen. After returning from guiding a three-day white-water-rafting excursion only to be called in to assist with the night’s rescue, Gage still hadn’t managed to shave, let alone eat.

Aurora sprung up and bounded toward him, licking his scruffy face as he bent to pet her.

“I was just telling Cole how someone stole Princess Maksutov’s diary.”

Gage rumpled his brow. “Who?”

Cole shrugged.

“She was the wife of the last Russian governor of Alaska,” Piper explained. “She’s buried in the old Russian cemetery.”

Gage snagged a piece of corn bread from the basket. “Why would anyone steal Princess Macksue’s diary?”

“Princess Mak-su-tov.” Piper enunciated each syllable. “And I have a theory.”

“Shocking.” Gage feigned surprise as he sank down into the chair opposite Cole.

“What’s shocking?” Kayden asked, padding downstairs in her sweats, her damp hair leaving drip marks on her T-shirt.

“Piper’s got a theory.” Cole pulled a chair out for his sister.

Kayden bypassed the chair and leaned against the sideboard instead. “Let’s have it, Nancy Drew.”

“Very funny.” Piper swiveled back to face the monitor. “I think someone stole it to turn around and sell it.”

“Would it be worth anything?” Gage asked, slathering his corn bread with honey but somehow managing to get more of it on himself than the bread.

“Sure. It’s close to a hundred and fifty years old. It had gold filigree on the cover and edging the pages. To certain collectors it might be worth a small fortune. I bet someone stole it and is planning to sell it on eBay.”

“That wouldn’t exactly be bright.” Cole shook his head

as Gage attempted to wipe the honey from his hands with a paper napkin.

“Please.” Piper rolled her eyes. “We’re talking about someone in Yancey. Not exactly mastermind criminal stock.”

“True.” Theft in Yancey wasn’t the norm—a few drifters, the occasional misdirected teen. Cole’s heart sank. *Not Jesse*. Not this time. He’d been working with Jesse Ryan in youth group for months. He thought the kid had finally turned a significant corner in his life. “Any leads on who might have stolen it?”

“Sheriff Slidell doesn’t seem very concerned. He had Landon file a report, but I doubt he’ll do much else, which is why I’m scanning eBay and the like. If it comes up for sale, Slidell can track down the seller and we can get it back where it belongs.”

“I’m sure Slidell will appreciate your efforts,” Gage said, struggling to pull off the tiny bits of napkin stuck to his hands.

Piper huffed. “He can appreciate all he wants.”

Cole swallowed a chuckle along with another bite of chili. Piper was adorable when she set her stubborn mind to something—and the pursuit of justice ranked high on her list.

He took a swig of water, praying Jesse wasn’t involved. His gang had been responsible for several thefts and much of the vandalism in Yancey in the past year, but Jesse had been straight the past two months. He’d given Cole his word.



The man bent at the water’s edge, ignoring the biting rain. They were all gone now—helicopters, emergency personnel, passengers.

Tossing a rock in the ocean, he watched it skip erratically atop the choppy waves before sinking into the black depths, just as the plane had.

One single act had ensured his future.

His heart had nearly stopped when they’d pulled her from the wreckage, but she’d died in the end.

He smiled with satisfaction. His problems were over. A few more days and he'd finally get what he deserved.

Standing, he watched the storm whip across the sea, pounding frothy waves against Tariuk Island's rock-strewn shore.

If anyone else got in his way, he'd deal with them as he had the old lady.

It was his time now.