



ALASKAN COURAGE
• BOOK THREE •

STRANDED

DANI PETTREY



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Dani Pettrey, *Stranded*

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To Ty:
My blond-haired, blue-eyed, full-of-life girl.
You are amazing, and I hope you never forget it!
I love you beyond measure.

Prologue

Abby's head swam, her vision narrowing as she stumbled into her cabin. What had they slipped her and when? Nausea rumbled in her stomach, magnified by the surging waves created by the brewing storm. How could she have been so foolish?

They must have figured out who she was and that she was close to exposing them. They were trying to silence her—though if it came down to it, she preferred death to the alternative.

She lifted the receiver and dialed Darcy's cabin.

Please be there. Darcy had said she'd wait in her room, but the phone kept ringing until it rolled over into voice mail. This wasn't a message for voice mail. Not if they knew who she was. Not if it could lead them to Darcy. She had to find a better way, a safer way to leave a message only Darcy would understand.

She scribbled a quick note. Now . . . where to put it? She grabbed the Gideon Bible from the nightstand, slipped the message inside, set the Bible on her bed, and headed for the door. Only Darcy would know Abby would have no reason to

have a Bible on her bed. Turning, she spotted her purse next to the nightstand, grabbed it, and placed it atop the Bible. Never hurt to have a little added protection. Darcy would still recognize the significance.

As she walked around her bed, the ship heaved and she stumbled. She needed help. Wobbling with each step, she managed to grasp the doorknob, the metal cool inside her clammy palm. Her breath quickened. Cracking the door, she peered into the corridor, thankful to find it empty. Stepping into the hall, she moved toward the elevator.

Shadows arched around the bend halfway down the hall, where another corridor intersected it. She halted. Her breath hitched.

A man spoke, his words angry and heated. A second man responded. Her heart seized in her chest. It was them. They were coming.

She turned heel, nearly losing her footing, and braced a supportive hand against the wall, hugging it as she moved as fast as she could in the opposite direction.

The deck door. She'd slip outside and track back toward the elevator, entering on the far end of the corridor. Perhaps the fresh air would help clear her muddled brain.

Sliding the exterior door open, she stepped out onto the deck. Brisk Alaskan air slapped her face but didn't bring the clarity she'd hoped for. Heat still surged along her skin. Seriously, what had they slipped her?

Fighting to remain erect, she gripped the railing as the tumultuous Alaskan waters crashed against the ship's hull. If she could just make it to the aft door, she'd come out right by the elevator. A few decks up and she'd be surrounded by people.

She took a tentative step, then another. Only sixty feet to the door she needed.

I can do this. For them, she'd fight.

"There." His voice sent ice water through her veins. They'd found her.

Sweat drenching her skin, she broke into a run, but her legs tangled beneath her. She flailed forward, her chin colliding with the rough deck surface. Pain and heat shot through her—her hands and face tingling with the loss of skin.

The footsteps grew heavier, nearer.

She peered through the haze swarming her brain, struggling to focus on the door a mere thirty feet ahead. Pushing up on her bloodied hands, she shot to her feet and stumbled forward. The deck bobbed with the waves, her vision swirling.

Please. Tears pooled in her eyes. She grasped the door handle as an unforgiving hand clamped down hard on her shoulder, pinching her in a viselike grip. Pain radiated down her right side.

"You really thought you could outsmart us, Abby?" He wrenched her back. Grabbing her hair in his fist, he hauled her across the narrow deck.

She scrambled to grasp onto something . . . anything. She kicked as best as her limp legs would allow, fighting whatever was poisoning her system. She mustered a scream, but the ocean's roar swallowed it.

He pressed her against the railing, her back arched over the thick metal beam, her feet dangling in the air. "What a waste."

"Please. No."

"It's too late for that." With a push, he forced her overboard.

Her feet flailed as the air rushed up to meet her. "Nooo!"



Darcy strode down the eerily silent corridor, heading for the elevator. Where was Abby? Perhaps, after returning from the day's excursion, she'd been called in to help with the evening's bash on Deck 9. Whatever the cause of Abby's delay, Darcy wasn't going to spend the rest of the night waiting. She had signed on with the *Bering* to aid Abby in an investigation—an investigation she still knew very little about.

Abby's calls from various Alaskan ports over the past few weeks had been brief—telling Darcy about an adventure journalist opportunity aboard Destiny Cruise Line's *Bering* and encouraging her to apply. The last call—the day before Darcy was scheduled to leave California to join the cruise—had been different. It had lasted less than a minute, and there was a heightened urgency to Abby's tone, true fear—unlike anything she'd heard in her former undercover investigation partner before. She wouldn't give any details, only frantically confirmed that Darcy was indeed arriving. Whatever Abby was on to, it was big.

For the first time in three years, the hunger of the hunt was back for her. And the beauty of it was that her adventure journalist “cover” was real.

Her adventure credentials and her ability to be on board the ship within forty-eight hours had impressed Destiny Cruise Line and snagged her the spot. She'd been on board little over twelve hours, and already she was anxious to plunge into whatever Abby needed her help with.

She pressed the Up button, tapping her foot until the elevator doors slid open. She stepped inside, hit the button for level 9, and leaned against the rail. Who would have thought she'd ever be back on a case? When she left undercover investigative reporting three years ago, she'd vowed never to return. But this was different. Abby needed her help, she wasn't totally undercover, and most importantly she wasn't working for Kevin—that fact alone made all the difference. Or, at least, she tried to convince herself it did.

The elevator moved slowly, or perhaps the anxiety was getting to her. She'd been so restless since she'd left Alaska last December . . . left the McKenna family . . . *left Gage*. She'd expected to stay in contact, but nothing had come—five months with no phone calls, no e-mails . . . nothing.

She jiggled her leg as the numbers overhead lit with each deck passed—5. 6. 7.

The elevator jerked to a sudden halt at 8, jarring her hard against the back rail. An alarm whirred and the lights dimmed.

You've got to be kidding.

She pressed the 9 button. Nothing.

“Oh, come on.”

Depressing the emergency call button, she held it in, trying to ward off the encroaching panic.

She was trapped.



He answered his cell on the third ring, irritated at the intrusion. “This better be important.”

“We’ve got a situation,” Jeremy said.

He stood and stalked away from the bed. “I thought you were handling the situation.” Isn’t that what Jeremy had promised—to take care of *his* mistake?

“I was,” Jeremy mumbled. “I am, but . . .”

“But?”

“We’ve hit a complication.”

There’s a shock. It was always something with Jeremy. Why he’d trusted him to run things this long . . . That was *his* mistake. “What kind of complication?” He retrieved his whiskey glass from the wet bar.

“Someone sounded the man-overboard alarm.”

“Where are you?”

“There’s no need for you to come. Just tell me what to do.”

“Obviously following orders isn’t your strong suit.” He finished his drink in a single draught, the golden liquid burning its way down his throat and spreading across his chest.

“But, boss . . .”

“Give me your coordinates. Now.” He kept his voice even, tight. No sense losing his temper until the matter at hand was resolved.

Jeremy gave up the coordinates.

“I’ll see you soon.” He cut off the call.



2

Abby came to, nausea rolling in her belly. The ground purred beneath her. Muffled voices spoke from somewhere nearby. She lifted her head off the cold, damp surface as darkness swirled around her.

Her sopping clothes clung to her shivering body. *Where am I?* Peeling the matted strands of wet hair from her face, her view cleared, and reality struck like a death knell. She wasn't dead. This was much, much worse.

"I'm sorry, boss. Someone sounded the alarm," Jeremy's voice quivered.

The man whose voice set terror aflame in her blood was afraid? Who was this other man?

"That's all I've been hearing from you lately. '*I'm sorry.*' Do you have any idea the strings I had to pull to cover up this mistake of yours? I might as well be conducting a bloody orchestra." The man speaking stalked into view a mere twenty feet in front of her, but the night masked his features in shadows.

She looked up, and rain splattered her face. She was still outside. But the purring? *A boat.* Maybe a rescue boat. No, this certainly wasn't a rescue.

"You." His voice was deep, cut hard with the edge of anger.

She stiffened, fearful he was addressing her, but he stalked the opposite way, toward someone beyond her line of sight. “Get going. You’ve just been promoted.”

Whoever he was addressing didn’t argue. Didn’t say a word. A moment later, a small motor sounded and quickly disappeared into the distance.

She inched toward the ship’s side. If she could reach the water, perhaps she stood a chance.

“If I don’t go back . . .” Jeremy spluttered.

A shot pierced the night.

Fear ricocheted through Abby’s dull limbs, and adrenaline propelled her forward, the rough deck tearing at her already-battered knees.

“And where do you think you’re going?” A gun cocked beside her ear as the man knelt over her.



Moisture slithered down Darcy’s back as she sat, sweating, in a stuck elevator. She’d pressed every button on the control panel. She couldn’t reach the elevator ceiling to see if there was a way to climb out. The rising heat . . .

What if there was a fire on board and she was trapped inside this metal box? *Don’t go there, Darcy.*

She was stuck until someone complained the elevator wasn’t working, and the ship’s crew fixed the problem. *Malfunction.* Maybe if she repeated it enough, it would drown out the panic hissing in her ear. The air was growing stale—suffocating. She hated enclosed spaces. Hated being surrounded by darkness. The dim emergency lighting certainly didn’t count as light—she could barely see her hands balled at her sides.

Uncurling her fingers, she lifted her arm and depressed the small light button on her watch, illuminating the iridescent

face. *One hour, eight minutes and counting.* She'd loathed every second of it.

Finally, with a jerk, the elevator resumed rising and the regular lighting kicked back in. She surged to her feet and smoothed out her blouse. She was sweating, flushed, and going to look it when the elevator doors opened.

The doors slid open, and she was met by a worried crew member—a man, close to her age. He was tall and slender, with wavy chestnut hair and matching brown eyes. “Are you okay, miss?”

“I’m fine.” She practically bolted from the elevator, gulping in deep breaths of fresher air. “What happened?”

“The man-overboard alarm was triggered, and I’m afraid when that kicks in, it’s just like the fire alarm has been set off. We have one central alarm system on board, and it automatically shuts the elevators down.”

“Man overboard?”

“Yes, miss.”

People began to get on the elevator she’d just escaped from. Were they *crazy*? She scanned the crowd, the worried faces, and realized the problem. They were clamoring for the elevators because they wanted to check on their loved ones—make certain it wasn’t them that had gone overboard. Nearly all were elderly. No doubt the younger ones had already taken to the stairs. They moved past her until the elevator was stuffed to capacity and the doors slid shut.

“Do you know who went overboard?” she asked.

The man shrugged. “No clue.” He signaled another group onto the next available elevator. “I’ve been busy seeing to the ship’s safety, and then resetting the alarm once the person was secure.”

“Person . . . secure?”

“The rescue crew successfully retrieved the person who went overboard.” He looked back at the diminishing crowd, relief finally settling on his brow.

“That’s great.”

Refusing to get back on the elevator, she headed straight for the medical clinic. If she wasn’t going to catch up with Abby tonight, the least she could do was investigate the overboard incident.

Exiting on Deck 7, she headed straight for the medical clinic. Whoever had gone overboard would be brought there immediately to be checked over by a doctor.

She rounded the hall and to her surprise found the clinic dark.

Curious . . .

She tried the knob. Locked.

Surely the rescue crew would have the rescued passenger back on board by now.

She waited, pacing the corridor for several minutes, but no one appeared.

She scurried back to the ninth level, hoping the man who rescued her might have some answers by now, but he was gone. Nearly everyone was—no doubt having returned to their cabins after the frightening episode.

Moving out onto the exterior deck, Darcy peered over the side. Rain pelted her face, cooling her skin. The spring storm that had been threatening all day had finally hit.

She scanned the choppy water, looking for any sign of the rescue crew but finding only blackness. She walked the circumference of the ship, searching all four points—port, starboard, bow, and stern—and saw nothing but the tumultuous sea. Where had the rescue crew taken the victim if not to the clinic?

She peered across the waves from the aft of the ship, at the lights fading in the distance. They'd been near land. *Perhaps . . .*

“This is your captain speaking,” a baritone voice piped over the intercom. “I want to thank you all for complying so willingly with our emergency protocol. I am pleased to announce that the young lady who fell overboard has been successfully retrieved and taken to a nearby hospital. Please rest assured we are back on course and will dock in Yancey shortly before dawn. Now get some rest. It looks to be a beautiful day in Yancey tomorrow.”

Darcy swallowed. *Young lady?*

She stared back at the lights nearly swallowed by the darkness. Could it have been Abby?



The call had come in at a quarter to one. A group of teens camping in Tariuk Island's rugged mountains had thought a late-night rafting race on Class IV rapids was a good idea.

Gage stood at the edge of the foaming waters, the sound of a young female's sobbing not far away.

"The raft is overturned and pinned against the rocks. Two of the young men went out to help and were swept away in the current. One showed up about a half a mile downstream, battered on the shore. The other hasn't been seen since," Gage's older brother, Cole, said.

Cole was head of Yancey's volunteer search and rescue crew, which consisted of all Gage's siblings; Deputy Sheriff Landon Grainger, his youngest sister's fiancé; and Last Frontier Adventures' employee and good family friend, Jake Westin. In addition, a number of auxiliary volunteers were combing the shores, but the technical rescues were up to the trained core circled around Cole at the moment. Floodlights shone down on them and fanned out across the raging water.

Sheriff Bill Slidell and the rest of his deputies had the teens corralled. No sense letting any of them near the water again.

The last thing they needed was more casualties. The spring wind howling through the valley lashed against Gage's cheeks along with the dashing rain. The mid-May water temperatures were likely over freezing with all the melting snow working its way down the mountain face.

"According to the group, there were three teens and a kid in the raft."

"A kid?" Piper's eyes widened.

"Barry Moore thought he was being kind bringing his kid brother Tommy along for the weekend."

Gage watched the emotion swell in his sister's eyes.

"Two of the four made it back to shore. We're looking for Barry, his brother Tommy, and the second rescuer. Water is too shallow for divers, so this will be a swift-water rescue with no eyes on the victims, which makes you point, Gage."

He nodded. "We need to set up secure lines running from the site of the incident to a half mile downstream. We search in teams of two, always anchored in." He looked at his sister Kayden. "How long?"

She looked at her watch. "Call came in twenty minutes ago. Accident occurred at least ten before that."

Which meant the odds were high they were looking at retrieval, not rescue. Factoring in the strength of the rapids, the temps of the water, and the lack of daylight, chances were slim they'd be able to do any good. But they'd give it their best. Gage lifted his whistle. "Signal if you see anything, and we'll move to you. No one goes under without the full team in line-up position. Understood?"

Everyone nodded their consent and set to work.

The rapids' pull was strong, buckling Gage's knees as he waded in full dry suit out toward the wreckage. Piper was on lights and communication. The closer they came to what

remained of the tattered raft, the more incensed Gage became. “What were they thinking?”

“They weren’t,” Kayden said beside him. “It’s clear from the empty beer cans, they’ve all been drinking.”

“Barry had no right endangering his little brother like that.” Gage’s gloved fingers snagged hold of the outer edge of the raft. Working with his sister, they peeled the battered and frayed raft from the boulder it’d been plastered to, hoping they’d find Barry or Tommy clinging to the rock beneath it—but no luck.

“Angle the light down,” he hollered over the rapids, directing Piper with the wave of his arm. The beam slid down the rock’s surface. “On the swell beneath,” he directed, his headlamp too dim to penetrate more than a few inches below the tumultuous surface. “Pan to the right.”

The shaft of light moved, and Gage’s breath caught—the pale face of a little boy. Gage blew three long whistles and repeated. His team shifted to assist.

Once everything was secured and everyone was in position, Gage dove beneath the surface. Tommy’s hair floated above his head, swaying with the river’s pull, and his little arms swayed out at his sides.

Gage dove deeper, his headlamp illuminating only inches in front of him. He followed Tommy’s small body down. His right leg was free but was being battered against the rock with each new crushing rapid swirling in. His left leg was pinned between the large boulder and a smaller one nestled beside it.

Gage surfaced, gulping in air. “He’s pinned. We’re going to need tools.”

Cole, being the expert diver—even if they were only dealing with a depth of four feet—swapped places with Kayden and

accompanied Gage back under the water to free Tommy's leg from the boulder's crushing hold.

Working together, they managed to free Tommy and bring him to the surface.

Gage handed Tommy's limp body to Cole, who passed the boy down the line toward shore.

"Noooo," a woman wailed as Tommy's battered body reached land.

Sheriff Slidell quickly intercepted Tommy's mom, Gail, who'd arrived on the scene along with her husband, Tom. Slidell tugged her away from her son so the paramedics could work.

Gage's heart wrenched at the mother's anguished wails. He knew firsthand the torment of watching your child die.

Two hours later, Gage and the crew returned to Yancey's fire station, where the team stored the majority of their gear.

Cole's hand clamped on his shoulder. "We brought both boys home."

It was true, they'd pulled the brothers from the water, but it brought Gage little consolation. Both boys were dead. A group of teenagers' idea of fun had destroyed a family.

"They had no business being out there. They didn't have the skills."

"I agree." Cole sat on the bench beside him. "They were drinking. It impaired their logic, and what they expected would be a fun ride ended up killing Barry and Tommy, and we still have one teen missing."

"Maybe I shouldn't go tomorrow. I should stay and help find the missing boy."

"No. We made a commitment to the *Bering*. You go. There are plenty of us to comb the water and the shores.

Besides, we both know that there's little chance we'll ever find him."

It was a sad statistic, but unfortunately his brother was right. The rapids led out to the Gulf of Alaska and on to the Pacific Ocean. Unless the teen's body was pinned somewhere beneath the surface that they'd overlooked, chances he'd still be found were slim.

"You think they learned anything?" Water safety was nothing to be trifled with. Treating it lightly endangered not only your own life but the lives of others—the teen rescuer still missing had reportedly tried to warn the others of the potential dangers, and when they didn't listen, he'd been the first in the water to try and help. He'd paid with his life for their foolishness.

Cole leaned forward, resting his hands on his thighs. "I imagine none of their lives will be the same. At least I pray that's the case."



Gage pulled to a stop before his rental cabin and glanced up at the darkness overhead. It befuddled him how his intelligent siblings could worship a God that let children die so senselessly. He had to admit that last winter—being around Darcy, witnessing the passion and depth of her faith—he'd actually begun to waver in his steadfast refusal to believe, but tonight brought all his hurt and anger roiling right back to the surface.

Stalking across the muddy drive, he climbed the wooden porch steps to his cabin. Flipping on the light, he kicked the door shut behind him and dropped his gear bag on the ground, wishing he could shuck the crushing weight constricting his chest.

He'd thought he'd finally reached a point of functioning, of existing, and then Darcy St. James had strolled into his life—barreled into it was more like it. She'd stayed barely a month, but it'd been more than enough time for her to anchor herself into what remained of his heart.

When she'd returned to California, he'd assured himself everything would go back to normal—well, at least to routine—but five months and counting and he still couldn't shake her from his mind.

He glanced at the clock. Nearly five a.m. He was scheduled to report to the *Bering* at eight. Should he even bother trying to sleep?

With a sigh, he tossed his clothes on the floor and plopped on the bed, figuring a couple hours were better than nothing. Rain slashed against his windows, dripping off the gutters. Tommy's pale face would haunt his dreams.

He rolled over, incensed anger biting at him. But the *Bering* job was just what he needed. The first day of a new journey—a ten-day voyage across the Bering Sea, leading adventure activities and kayak excursions for the passengers. He hoped new places and new faces would prove enough distraction for him to finally erase Darcy St. James from his mind.

Well, maybe not erase entirely—she was awfully pretty to think on. The problem was the *amount* of time he thought about her—how her eyes lit when she was on to something, the cute dimple that formed in her right cheek when she smiled, and the way his heart beat a little harder when she laughed.

He needed a diversion, and Kayden's on-site excursion proposal finally being picked up by Destiny Cruise Line provided the perfect one.

Kayden didn't even bat an eye when he'd so readily offered to take point on the trial run, but she wasn't the sister who

would notice. Piper was the sister who saw things a little too clearly, and she'd definitely questioned his eager acceptance of the lead role. She knew he was running, but what choice did he have?

Nothing could happen with Darcy. Even if he was ready for another stab at love, it could never be with her.