



ALASKAN COURAGE

• BOOK FOUR •

# SILENCED

DANI PETTREY



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Dani Pettrey, *Silenced*  
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To Calvin Michael Miner  
Your Grammie loves you silly!





Kayden scaled the rock face, the addictive burn spreading through her arms, her body. Man, she loved this—hanging on the edge of a seven-hundred-fifty-foot sheer cliff face, knowing one wrong grab meant death.

“You’re not going to beat me this time,” her younger sister, Piper, hollered, her voice echoing across the twenty-foot-wide crevice separating them. She’d been trying to distract Kayden all morning, but Kayden knew how to ignore her sister. The person who wasn’t as easy to ignore was Jake. He was watching from the base nearly seven hundred feet below with her older brother Gage. The men had come along to “enjoy the show,” as they put it.

Unfortunately, putting Jake’s presence out of her mind was proving to be a lot harder than dismissing Piper’s taunts. Knowing his gaze was fastened to her was exhilarating.

Pushing off with her right foot, she lunged the eighteen inches to the next handhold, knowing the move had Jake holding his breath. She held hers until her fingers grasped the hold, heat searing through her.

Jake Westin—Check that . . . Jake Westin *Cavanagh* was so much more than she'd realized, and quite frankly, over the past month her deepening feelings for the man had frightened her a whole lot more than the vast leap ahead.

She reached the last overhang—a granite ledge butting out eight feet from the rock face. She'd have to boulder her way along the edge and then make the final leap of faith, praying she'd timed it right and used enough force to land on its leveled surface.

It was the deadliest point of the route—the one that separated the experts from the average.

Granite crunched beneath her nails as she clawed her way across the jagged rock.

The wind, growing in force, howled through the canyon below, echoing through the crevice in a high-pitched whir.

Kayden closed her eyes and stilled her mind. *I can do this.* She'd mastered it before. She could do it again. Her breath caught in her throat as she pushed off and lunged through the air, stretching her fingers until they burned—reaching, grasping for a safe hold. Her fingers made contact, and she wedged herself along the rock, her hands locked on the overhang's lip.

Her feet found a stable notch. Pushing up with her legs and arms at the same time, with sheer will and determination, she lifted herself up.

Relief swarmed inside as she crested the ledge, her arms shaking . . . and then horror struck.

A man, his skull bashed in, faced her—his visible eye open and staring directly at her.

She swallowed the vibration churning in her throat, the scream fighting to tear from her lips. Every fiber of her being

said *Let go, push back, get away*, but wrestling instinct, she maintained her hold as she balanced on the edge of the overhang.

Glancing over her shoulder, she assessed her options. Moving back down the way she'd come at this point in the strenuous climb was suicide. Her arms were burning limbs of Jell-O, and if she didn't make a decision within seconds, they'd give out. She needed to climb onto the ledge with the man, needed to make sure he didn't require help, verify that he was already . . .

She squeezed her eyes shut for the briefest of seconds, trying to drown out everything else and focus. Mustering what strength remained, she hefted herself fully onto the outcrop, her body brushing against the man's. Swallowing the bile creeping up her throat, she edged around him, scooted toward the rear of the ledge, and took a quick moment to catch her breath before shifting into search-and-rescue mode. She needed to check his vitals, make certain he was beyond help. She prayed she would detect a heartbeat, but her gut said the organ had stopped long ago.

"Woo-hoo!" Piper shouted from overhead. "Beat you."

Fighting the wave of nausea roiling through her, Kayden stretched out her index and middle finger, feeling for a pulse.

Just as she'd suspected. *Nothing*.

"Kayden?" Piper's voice grew closer, nearly directly overhead.

Kayden glanced up, shielding her eyes from the sun, as Piper leaned over the top of the face, more than fifty feet above. Her infectious smile faded as her big brown eyes fixed on the crumpled form beside Kayden.

Kayden cleared her throat. “We’ve got a downed climber on the ledge.”

“Downed or—”

She swallowed. “Dead.”

“I’ll tell the guys.” Piper pulled the radio from her harness.

Kayden nodded. “I’m coming up. Have Jake call it in.”



## 2

Kayden had found a dead climber on the ledge. Piper’s shaky voice echoed through Jake’s ears as he pulled his satellite phone from his pocket. His fingers wrapped around the metal casing, and the phone vibrated in his palm, ringing out at the same time.

“Westin . . .” He blinked. “Cavanagh.” How long would it take him to go back to his full name? He’d been Jake Westin for so long, switching back to Jake Westin *Cavanagh* was proving a lot harder than he’d expected.

“It’s Landon.”

“Perfect timing, Sheriff.”

“Huh?”

With Sheriff Bill Slidell’s sudden departure from law enforcement and Yancey, the town council had voted then-deputy Sheriff Landon Grainger into the leadership role until the fall elections would no doubt make it his permanent position.

“Kayden found a dead climber up on the last ledge of Stoneface’s route.”

“Dead?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“His climbing buddy just called from Ranger Station Four.”  
The closest to them.

“Did he say what happened?”

“The guy missed a handhold and slipped.”

That’s all it took, one missed handhold. No wonder his heart lodged in his throat every time Kayden climbed. He’d even taken to climbing with her, feeling he’d at least be in a better position to help if something went awry. But he was kidding himself. She was so far above his level of experience, all his being present would accomplish was to give him a front-row view of her fall.

He blocked off the horrific thought. “You heading out here?”

“Yeah, already called Cole and Booth. We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

“We’re going to need to bring retrieval gear up the back side.” The vehicles would only be able to make it so far, and then the rest of the rescue team would have to hike in and, when they were finished retrieving, hike the body back out.

“How are the girls?” Landon asked.

“We’re headed up to them now.”

“Let Piper know I’m on my way,” he said, clearly worried about his fiancée.

“Will do.” Jake shut the phone and relayed the conversation to Gage as they worked their way around the back face of the mountain. The path—what there was of one—was narrow and winding, overgrown with tree roots and moss still damp from last night’s rain.

Maybe that was why the man had slipped. Maybe he’d

started climbing too early, before the sun had a chance to completely dry the rock face.

Sweat beaded on Jake's skin as he mounted the last rise, having gone up seven hundred feet in elevation. The air was thinner, but fresh and brisk in his lungs. Piper caught sight of them first, her eyes filled with tears. Kayden stood with her back to them, and he moved for her, yearning to comfort her but knowing she'd never let him.

"Jake," Piper greeted him.

Kayden turned. Just as he suspected, her eyes were dry, but her face was tinged red—she was upset. How could she not be?

"Gage." Piper ran into her brother's arms.

He patted her back. "How ya holding up, kid?"

"I'm okay, but Kayden's—"

"Fine." Her gaze met Jake's, answering his unvoiced question. "I'm fine."

He nodded, knowing it was a lie.

"Landon's on his way," Gage said, and Piper's tension visibly eased.

"Booth coming with him?"

Why was Kayden asking about the ME? "Yeah."

"Good." She rubbed her arms. "Because something doesn't feel right."

Jake sidled up beside her, and she tried to ignore how good his presence felt. How she longed to run into his arms as Piper had into Gage's.

"You said something doesn't feel right?" Concern marred his handsome brow.

"I just have this feeling. Great . . ." She shook her head

on a laugh. “Now I sound like Piper.” Her sister had great instincts. *Kayden’s . . . ?*

He nudged her arm with his, and peace lingered the moment his skin touched hers. “Don’t discount instinct. It can be a great help.”

She shrugged. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but something was nagging at her.

“They’re here,” Piper said, jumping up and running for her fiancé’s arms. Booth appeared, with Cole close behind.

“Booth.” Kayden lifted her chin to greet Yancey’s medical examiner.

Cole stepped around Booth, moving straight for her. If she’d let anyone comfort her, it would be her big brother, the oldest McKenna sibling and head of the clan since their parents’ passing.

“How you holding up?” he asked, clamping a reassuring hand on her shoulder, gently forcing her to look him in the eye.

She glanced across at her sister, still a bit green in the gills. “Better than Piper.”

A hint of a resigned smile tugged at the corner of Cole’s lips. “It’s not a competition, Kayden.”

She stiffened her shoulders and forced a slight smile in return. “Everything’s a competition.”

Cole shook his head. “You’re impossible.” He bent, looking her in the eye. “You know, there’s nothing wrong with admitting something is upsetting.”

“Not everyone has to tear up to move past something.”

“I know.” His green eyes softened. “But I also know when you’re shaken.”

She exhaled at the deep sincerity reflecting in her brother’s

eyes. He was just trying to be helpful. “I know, and I appreciate it.”

Now she needed to prepare for what lay ahead. Finding the victim had been bad enough, but the grislier task of the day approached—retrieving the body.

It had been hard to tell with the extent of his injuries—and she hadn’t been able to get herself to look too closely at his face—but if the man was local, or even regional, chances were she knew him, at least by name. The climbing community along the Alaskan Peninsula was tight. The Alaskan climbing community *period* was tight.

“Our victim’s name is Conrad Humphries,” Landon said as Kayden’s brothers readied the retrieval gear.

“Conrad?” Piper swallowed.

“You knew him?”

“We both did,” Kayden said. “Not well, but he visited Yancey’s climbing gym a couple times last winter. I think he lives over on Imnek. How’d you know his name?”

“His climbing buddy provided it.”

“He was climbing with someone?” she asked, surprised his buddy had left him.

Landon nodded.

She stepped closer. “What did the buddy report?”

“He said everything was going smoothly. Conrad made it past the overhang and the buddy lost visual. Not long after, he heard Conrad holler and then . . .”

“Then?” she pressed.

Landon grimaced. “A thud.”

She tried not to wince. She’d seen the result of that thud up close and personal. Her stomach twinged. “Where’d the buddy call from?”

“Ranger Station Four. Apparently he had no cell reception and knew Conrad needed help, so he climbed down and hiked back out to his rental car. Drove to the ranger station that he and Conrad had passed on the way in. Said it was the quickest way he knew to get help.”

“Did he check to see if Conrad was conscious before he left?”

“I don’t know, but he seemed to be under the impression this was a rescue mission, not a retrieval.”

“So he thinks Conrad is still alive?” Jake asked.

Landon nodded. “That’s the impression I got.”

“Even with the sound of the impact?”

“Our minds go where we want them to in times of tragedy.”

“Where’s the buddy now?” she asked.

“Still at the ranger station. I asked him to stay put. I didn’t want him coming back out here while we’re trying to work. I told Ranger Aikens I’d be by to talk with him when we’re finished here.”

“What’s his name?”

Landon checked his notebook. “Stuart Anderson.”

*Stuart Anderson?* The name wasn’t familiar. Where had he come from?

“Okay,” she said, her mind racing. “I definitely think you’re going to want to question him.”

Landon cocked his head. “I was already planning on it. It’s standard procedure in any climbing accident. Do you have a specific concern?”

She shrugged her hands into her fleece pockets. “I don’t think this is your standard accident.”

Landon’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“Something feels off, but I can’t piece it together until I get a better look.”

“Okay. Everyone, round up.” Landon grouped everyone together at the edge of the overlook. “According to protocol, this is a crime scene until determined otherwise. I’ll perform the analysis with Booth, and we’ll need two with us on the ledge.”

“I’ll go,” Kayden and Jake volunteered in near unison.

Jake glanced over at her, but she kept her gaze fixed on Landon. She was going.

“I found him. I want to bring him home.”

Landon nodded.

Cole scooped up the top rope. “Gage and I will run the line. Do the heavy hoisting.”

“All right.” Landon lifted his chin in Kayden and Jake’s direction. “Let’s go.”

The quickest, safest, and easiest route to the outcrop from their vantage point was to rappel down. Jake strapped in beside Booth, Landon, and Kayden, and then they took turns double-checking each other’s equipment.

Once all four were confirmed secure, Landon lowered first, followed by Booth, and then Kayden. Jake loved the skill and dexterity with which she moved, or rather glided. Her sculpted arms, though still extremely feminine, were evidence of the strength she possessed—a strength that ran much deeper than mere athleticism. He admired her physical strength, but it was the rare glimpses of her heart that had him enthralled.

As hard as he’d tried fighting his feelings, he’d fallen madly in love with Kayden long ago, and he feared the love was

rooted in his heart for good. Question was—now that the truth of his past was out in the open, now that she was no longer skeptical about his character—could she move beyond all that and ever love him for the man he was?

“Jake?” Landon called from below.

“On my way.” Jake planted the soles of his boots against the gray granite, lowering his body until he was sitting into it and nearly horizontal with the overhang below.

Feeding the rope through his belay device, he slowly walked himself down as the top rope overhead kept him secure.

Reaching the overhang with both feet planted securely on the solid surface, he unclipped and turned to—

His gut clenched at the sight of the battered victim, and his gaze shifted to Kayden. No wonder she’d been shaken.

Landon retrieved his camera from his pack. “I need to take photos before we move anything.”

Booth squatted on his haunches beside the body, beginning his cursory examination.

Jake leaned against the rock face beside Kayden, both trying to stay out of Landon and Booth’s way until either required their assistance. She kept her gaze fixed on the darkening horizon. Rain was on the way. The wind tossed her hair about her face. The summer sun had lightened her typically dark-brown hair with natural sandy highlights. Man, he could watch her for hours.

Not wanting her to catch him staring yet again, he took a deep breath and shifted his attention to the victim.

The man lay facedown. Only a small portion of the right side of his face was visible, his right eye open and protruding from the impact.

“That’s what it was. See the chalk.” Kayden pointed as

Landon's lens fastened on the white chalk streaks tracking down the victim's arms. "Chalk should never run like that."

"Maybe he was out here too early and the rocks were still wet. Maybe he grasped a handhold with standing water," Jake said, playing devil's advocate.

She shook her head. "No. Water would wash the chalk away, not track it down his arms."

"So, what are you thinking?" Landon asked.

She strode forward, kneeling beside the body. "I'd say he was sweating profusely, except sweat doesn't normally streak chalk."

"Sweating profusely? You think he had a heart attack or something like that?"

"No, if he was sweating, the chalk would absorb any liquid on his hands—cake to them, not run down his arms."

"So you're saying . . . ?"

"Maybe something was off with his chalk. That's a huge factor when we're looking at a climbing fall."

"Maybe he used cheap chalk," Jake said as Landon's camera flashed over the streaks.

"It's possible." Kayden stood. "Booth will determine that at the lab. . . ."

"But?" he pressed.

She sighed. "I don't know . . ."

Jake could tell she was hesitant about pressing her observation, but she was the most skilled climber in the area. "Trust your instinct, Kayden. It's often what cracks a case wide open."

"All right," Landon said, standing. "Huddle up."

"What do you think?" Jake asked him.

Landon pulled his baseball cap from his back pocket and

slipped it on as the first drops of rain fell. “I think we need to move fast.”

The storm was rolling in. What was now a soft drizzle would soon be a torrential downpour if the dark clouds were any indication.

On Landon’s signal, Cole and Gage lowered the gurney down. Landon and Jake grabbed hold, resting it parallel to the victim’s body, while Booth observed the scene.

Kayden moved to assist.

Landon shook his head. “Let me and Jake lift.”

She blew a wisp of hair from her eye. “I’m fine. Let me help.”

Landon sighed as he knelt beside the man. “It could get a whole lot uglier when we roll him over. Besides, I need you to put on a pair of gloves and seal up his chalk bag in this.” He tossed her an evidence bag from his kit. “As soon as we can reach his chalk bag, I’ll slide it off his belt and hand it to you. We need to keep it dry.”

She nodded, standing a few feet behind Landon, her latex gloves now in place.

Landon crouched, looking across the victim’s body at Jake. “You ready?”

Jake took a deep breath, holding it, and nodded.

“On three,” Landon said. “One, two, three.”

They lifted and rolled the man faceup onto the gurney.

Kayden stifled her intake of breath, but Jake heard it all the same.

Landon removed the chalk bag from the man’s belt and handed it off to her.

“We’ve still got some chalk to work with,” she said.

Landon took another quick round of photographs while

Booth assessed the victim from the new vantage point, and then they covered the man's body and harnessed him in. Cole and Gage hoisted him up, careful to keep a safe distance between the gurney and the jagged rocks, not wanting to batter the victim's body any more than it already had been.