



ALASKAN COURAGE,

• BOOK FIVE •

SABOTAGED

DANI PETTREY



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Dani Pettrey, *Sabotaged*
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To Jimmy
For being the best dad and Pop-Pop
a family could ask for.
We are so blessed by you.

Prologue

WILLOW, ALASKA

MARCH 8, 1:36 A.M.

Frank woke to a low rumble churning in Diesel's throat.

"Settle." The dogs hated waiting for the restart. He'd moved away from the other mushers up onto the hill, bedded the dogs down on their piles of hay, but the yearning to run was gnawing at them all.

Diesel sprang to his feet, lurching forward, and the rest of the sixteen-dog team followed suit—their hair bristling in spiky waves down the length of their lean backs.

Before Frank's vision could completely adjust to the full-moon-lit night, something sharp pressed against his side.

The dogs broke into a howling chorus, yanking at their line.

A bright light shone in his eyes. Frank pulled his gloved hand from his sleeping bag, the frigid Alaskan air seeping into his cocoon, and lifted it to shield the invasive glare. Was it another musher?

“You fully awake now?” A man knelt over him with a gun in hand. “Because your daughter’s life rests in the balance.”

“Meg?” Frank bolted to a sitting position, his nerve endings sparking, adrenaline burning through his limbs.

“Tell your mutts to settle, or I’ll shoot every last one of them.”

It took a harsh command, but they minded his order.

“What about my daughter?” Who were they and what did they want with Meg?

The man held up his phone, streaming video of Meg, bleary-eyed and weary.

A wave of nausea crashed through Frank’s gut as desperation clawed hold. “What have you done?”

“Nothing yet, but what happens now depends on you.”

“Where is she?” Frank reached for the phone. *Meg*. Anguish teetered on the brink of consuming him whole.

The man whacked his hand away. “She’s someplace secure.”

“I don’t understand.” Frank shook his head. “Why take Meg?” Were they holding her for ransom? If so, they’d picked the wrong guy. “I don’t have much money, but whatever I have is yours.”

“We don’t want your money.”

We? “Then what do you want?”

“You’re going to do a job for us.”



RAINY PASS, ALASKA
MARCH 10, 2:17 A.M.

Exhilaration pulsed through Reef. Not helpful at two-something in the morning, when he should be sleeping, but he never tired of Iditarod excitement. It was his first year back volunteering since he was a teen at his dad's side, and it'd been an adrenaline-packed thirty-six hours since the restart in Willow.

He rolled over, facing the cabin-turned-communications-bunkhouse front window. A dull sliver of moonlight crept around the curtain's edge—enough to make out a shape moving across the room toward the door.

Odd.

He propped his weight on his elbow, studying the form he'd been studying far too much lately. *Kirra*. What was she up to now?

He couldn't believe that, of all the search and rescue volunteers working the Iditarod, he and Kirra Jacobs had been paired as a team. He also couldn't help but wonder if one or

more of his siblings had influenced that decision. Not that he actually minded—and quite frankly, that’s what scared him.

They’d been assigned to sweeper duty. Keeping an eye out for any lagging mushers. The snowstorm whipping through Skwentna and on into Finger Lake was slowing the mushers’ time by hours—except for the leaders, who were already through and on to Rohn before the worst of the storm hit, creating an even greater than usual gap between first and last place. When he and Kirra had reached their shift to sleep, there’d still been a couple dozen mushers out.

Slipping to his feet, he crept across the cold wooden floor to intercept Kirra. His hand wrapped around the doorknob a fraction of a second before hers.

Her breath hitched.

He leaned against the door, the frigid outside temps seeping through the frame.

“Reef!” she hissed under her breath, glancing over her shoulder. “Get out of my way.” She shoved against him, but he easily held his ground. A good half a foot shorter and, he’d wager, seventy pounds lighter, did she seriously think she could just nudge him out of the way?

A smirk danced across his lips. He liked her style. “If you haven’t noticed, it’s close to ten below out there, not to mention the middle of the night. Where on earth are you headed in such a rush?

“Wait a minute . . .” His smirk turned into a grin. “You’re not headed out for a middle-of-the-night rendezvous, are you?” Not the perfect and prim Kirra Jacobs? A thrill shot through him. Was there more than expected beneath the straitlaced exterior of the lady who’d oddly enough been haunting his dreams?

She adjusted her gloves with oomph. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

He lifted his hands with a chuckle. “You’re right. What *was* I thinking?”

“I don’t have time for this.” She elbowed him in the ribs, hard, opened the door, and jetted past him. “My uncle’s missing.”

“What?” He yanked his jacket and gear from the peg and headed out after her.

The sub-zero temps stole his breath, searing his lungs with a cold burn. “Kirra, wait!”

She headed for the barn around back where the snowmobiles were stored.

“You’re seriously going to race out into the night after him?”

She yanked the snowmobile keys off the hook overhead. “I’ve waited long enough.” She shook her head. “I can’t believe I fell asleep before he checked in.”

“The mushers come at all hours, especially with this storm. You can’t stay awake 24-7.”

“I slept too long. I just called the checkpoint. Frank still hasn’t checked in. Something’s wrong.”

He rested his gloved hand over hers as she slid the key into the ignition. “Maybe he’s just running behind. This storm is causing havoc.”

“He’s been at the front since the race’s start. Even if he took a rest at Finger Lake, he’d have been here by now.”

Reef lifted his hands, letting large flakes cling to his flattened palms. He gazed up at the tendrils of white descending down on them. “Not if he’s waiting out the storm.”

“He’d never wait out the *entire* storm. No one but a rookie would. You’d fall so far behind, you’d never catch up.”

“Fine. Then we’ll wake the team and do this search right.”

“Ben will never order a night search. He’ll make us wait until morning and the storm lightens, and then they’ll have the Iditarod air force take a look first.”

“And what’s wrong with that? It makes good sense.”

“Really? *You’re* lecturing me on good sense?”

Touché. “I’m just saying it’s dangerous.”

She cocked her head to the side. “I thought you thrived on danger.”

Not anymore . . . He didn’t mind the occasional adrenaline rush that extreme sports provided, but this wasn’t that. Heading into the Alaska Range alone at night could get Kirra killed.

“You’re not talking me out of this.” She started the snowmobile. “Now, please get out of my way.”

He exhaled, his mind racing through the options. “Fine.” He climbed on the back.

She stiffened as he settled behind her. “*What* do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m your SAR partner. I’m going with you.”

“Look, that’s nice and all, but—”

“You know me well enough to know I’m not budging on this one.” He wrapped his arms around her waist.

“I really don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Sitting here arguing when we could be out looking for Frank? I agree.”

She wiggled, trying to break free of his snug hold. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Look, I’ve got all night, and I’m not going anywhere.” He relished the feel of her in front of him, and that gave him pause—as did the shock waves bolting through him.

“You’re being ridiculous!” She squirmed some more.

He grinned. “Actually, I’m rather enjoying this.”

“Ugh.” She released a highly offended exhale. “You really are ridiculous.”

His grin widened. He loved getting under her skin. In fact, he was thinking of all the ways . . . *Whoa!* This was Kirra Jacobs, and he was no longer that guy. “Look. You either come back in the shelter with me or I’m going with you. End of story.”

“Fine.” She ground out, then thumbed the throttle.



Kirra tried to ignore Reef’s arms wrapped around her, his body molded to hers on the snowmobile. She considered insisting on some distance, but she wasn’t foolish enough to refuse the only available source of warmth. Every inch of her body was covered except her eyes, and still the cold permeated her bones.

Loath as she was to admit it, Reef was right—this was crazy. But leaving her uncle and his dogs out to fend for themselves in this weather would be akin to murder. Frank always ran in the top ten. *Always*. Something was definitely wrong. They needed to reach him before he froze to death.

Thankfully she knew his favorite *parking spots*, as the mushers were prone to call the places they stopped to rest the dogs and themselves. She’d start with the spot closest to Rainy Pass, arriving from Finger Lake’s direction, and work her way out from there. Maybe one of Frank’s dogs had been hurt and he’d had to hunker down before reaching the checkpoint. If that were the worst of it, she’d be thankful, but she couldn’t shake the sense of dread lodged in the pit of her stomach, the quivering that wouldn’t ease.

Leave it to Reef to play the chivalrous knight. *Seriously? Reef?* Just her luck she'd gotten paired up with him again.

She exhaled, trying to release the pent-up tension from her body, the warmth of her breath quickly swallowed by the cold. The more time she spent with Reef, the more he surprised her. And she *hated* surprises, especially when it came to men.

Accelerating, she pushed the engine to its max, as snowflakes the size of half dollars pelted her face. She blinked, the simple motion made difficult by the ice crusting her eyelashes. Was she putting herself and Reef in danger being out in such harsh elements—yes—but she didn't have a choice. This was Uncle Frank.

She took the last upswing to her uncle's favorite resting spot at full speed, the front of the machine lifting over the rise. Reef's laughter echoed over the roar of the wind and the purr of the engine. She slid to a stop and left the engine idling.

Reef hopped off beside her. "I'm impressed. Didn't know you had that kind of speed in you." His face was covered from the nose down, but she could see his smile in the crinkle of his eyes.

She adjusted her headlamp and pulled the flashlight from her jacket, pressing it on. She fanned the light out across the thick cascading snow, so thick it was difficult to make out where the ridge began and where it dropped off.

"Thank God." Her uncle's voice echoed along the fifteen-foot crevice that bordered the ridge. "I hoped you'd think to come looking for me here."

"Frank." Relief swarmed inside as she moved toward his voice.

Reef's strong arm grabbed around her waist, yanking her back. "Whoa!"

Her feet dangled in the air over the dark emptiness below, her flashlight dropping into nothingness.

Was Frank on the other side of the crevice?

Reef swung her back and set her down, his hold remaining firm.

She pushed at his forearm.

“I’m not letting go unless you promise to be more careful.”

She nodded, her heartbeat whooshing in her ears.

He let go, and she instantly missed the warmth of his embrace.

“Kirra,” Frank yelled.

“Yeah.” She moved with great care toward the edge, Reef keeping in close stride with her. Thick trees on that side prevented the moonlight’s penetration—she couldn’t see anything.

“I need you to listen. We don’t have much time.”

“Are you hurt? Are the dogs?” Why was he on the opposite side of the crevice from the race trail?

“We’re fine, but your cousin’s not.”

“Meg?” What did she have to do with any of this?

“Some men have taken her.”

“What?” A nervous laugh escaped her lips. He couldn’t be serious. “What are you talking about?”

She yanked the secondary flashlight from her pants pocket and shone it across the space. She could barely make out Frank’s form silhouetted by the snow. His dogs stood in a line in front of his sled, harnessed and ready to go.

“Listen carefully.” The edge in his voice deepened. “Some men kidnapped her. They’re holding her hostage until I do something for them.”

She sensed Reef shift, as if he intended to say something,

but she was thankful when he said nothing, allowing her to take the lead. “What do they want you to do?” What could they possibly want from her uncle?

“I can’t tell you. I have to do what they say or they’ll kill her. But you might be able to help.”

“Anything. How?”

“Find Meg before I reach the finish line in Nome. If you find her, I won’t have to finish the job.”

“Job? What job?”

“Stop asking questions and listen. You find Meg and then find me. If I know she’s safe, I won’t finish the job. Otherwise, I fear a lot of others may be hurt too.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t have to. Just do what I say and find your cousin before I reach Nome.”

“I’ll call the cops as soon as we get back to Rainy Pass.”

“No! No cops. They said if they saw a cop anywhere around, they’d kill her. Promise me, Kirra. No cops. I can’t lose Meg.”

“Okay. No cops.”

Diesel growled and Frank’s eyes widened. Kirra looked over her shoulder and saw a light approaching through the gloom. The rumble of a snowmobile drew near.

“I took too long. They’re here.”

“Who’s here?” She looked again to the light and then back at Frank, but he was gone.

“Frank! Frank!” She fanned her light along the opposite ridge, finding nothing but snow.

The snowmobile stopped but remained idling as a man stepped from it.

She lifted a hand, shielding her eyes from the floodlights

mounted on the front. “Ben?” Had he followed them? “Thank goodness.” He could help them track Frank down, get him to sit still so they could make sense of what he had said.

Reef grabbed her hand, tugging her close. “I don’t think that’s Ben.”

“What?”

The man, hooded and in full snow gear, stepped toward them, his head angled down. His right arm lifted, his thinly gloved hand gripped around a gun now aimed straight at them.

Kirra swallowed, her mind too muddled to wrap around what was happening.

“What did he tell you?” the man grunted.

Reef stepped back, pulling her with him toward the tree line.

“Nah-uh.” The man extended his arm, his gloved finger hovering over the trigger, his face covered with a ski mask. “Stay right where you are.” He stepped forward, snow crunching beneath his boots. “What did Frank Weber tell you?”

“Who are you?” Reef asked, trying to buy time while he figured out a way to get Kirra and himself closer to the trees. This was only going down one way. He could read it in the man’s eyes.

“None of your business,” the man replied.

Reef moved his hand to Kirra’s wrist, strengthening his grip on her. If they could just make it to the trees, they’d have some cover. Only a few feet . . . He held up his free hand, inching back. “Look, we don’t want any trouble.”

The man's arm stiffened. "I said stop moving!"

Reef held in place, his lungs burning. Adrenaline heating his veins. His legs itching to move.

"*What* did Frank tell you?" the man gritted out.

"He told us he was fine, that he didn't need any assistance," Kirra said.

Reef looked to her. *Smart.*

"What else?"

"That's it." She shrugged. "He didn't check in at Rainy Pass, so we came looking. He said he was just running behind."

"That's it?"

"That's it. The storm has held up a number of mushers."

"All right. Well, then I suppose it's a shame I'm going to have to kill you over nothing, but I can't risk it."

Reef didn't waste a moment. He yanked Kirra into a run, pushing her in front of him. "Go!"

The gun fired, the explosion reverberating with a hollow *ping*. They wove through the trees as the gun fired repeatedly. Fierce heat lanced Reef's side.

Kirra screamed as the ground gave way beneath them.

Reef's jaw slammed onto the rock-strewn ice as he barreled down a steep incline, pain throbbing afresh with each bump and bounce. Everything whirled white around him as gunshots echoed. His free fall spun in a rapidly increasing rate until he slammed into something solid with bone-shattering pain.

"Reef?" Kirra crawled to his side. "Are you okay?"

He nodded, ignoring the pain surging through him. "Are you?"

“Yes. Come on.” She tugged his hand. “I know where we are.”

“What?”

Her gaze darted up the hill. “He’s coming.”

Reef made out the form stumbling down after them.

“Come on. I know where we can hide.”

He scrambled to his feet. The pain was throbbing, but he pushed forward.

The man’s footsteps crunched after them, unrelenting as the howling wind.

“Hide?” Had Kirra said *hide*? “Shouldn’t we keep going?” Keep moving. Nausea roiled through him.

“We can’t outrun him. Not with you injured.”

“I can keep going.”

“I don’t doubt that, but this is best. Trust me.” She clamped hold of his hand.

Jagged slits of breath burned his lungs, moisture seeping down his right side.

“It’s just ahead . . .” She surveyed the terrain as if suddenly uncertain, then pointed. “There.”

All he saw was snow. “I don’t see . . . anything.”

“That’s the point. He won’t either.” She bent and pulled him down. He crumpled against the snow. It felt cool against his face.

“We have to go low from here,” she said, tugging him.

Swallowing the pain, he crawled forward, following Kirra into deeper darkness.

Branches and undergrowth slashed at their jackets, scraping the fabric with slithering sounds.

“Keep low,” she said.

The moonlight around them dimmed, debris thickened beneath them, the earth growing . . . *warmer?*

“Just follow the sound of my voice,” she instructed. “Only a little farther . . .”

Queasiness sloshed in his gut.

“Here,” she finally said. “Sit down.”

Exhausted, he slumped against something hard.