


# DANI PETTREY

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE  
ALASKAN COURAGE AND CHESAPEAKE VALOR SERIES

A woman's face and neck are submerged in clear blue water. She is looking upwards, and her hair is floating around her head. The water is bright and clear, with some light rays visible. The overall mood is serene but also mysterious.

## THE KILLING TIDE

COASTAL GUARDIANS  BOOK ONE

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DANI PETTREY



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To Karen

Thank you for your keen eye, for making my stories shine,  
and most especially, for the blessing of your friendship  
all these years. It's a joy to partner with you.

So this was how she was going to die. . . .

# ONE

## WRIGHTSVILLE BEACH, NORTH CAROLINA

Fire ripped through Finn's right shoulder, ricocheting down his arm. Battling the eight-foot swells, he struggled to get his charge to the swaying basket and up into the Coast Guard helicopter.

Gritting his teeth, he swam backward. His right arm encircled her waist, but his grip kept slipping. "We're almost there," he hollered over the rumble of crashing waves.

She squirmed and flailed forward. "Stan!" she sobbed, lunging for the listing boat Finn had just dragged her from.

"I need you to be still, so I can get you to safety. I'll go back for your husband. You're going to be all right." He tightened his grip, ignoring the lancing pain.

Light faded to darkness. The storm was moving swifter than anticipated. The team would insist they go, but he wasn't leaving without the husband.

Finding strength he didn't think he possessed, Finn rolled the woman into the basket.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. Sloshing whitecaps slapped them away.

Gripping the edge of the basket, he strapped her in, the clips pinching his finger. Once she was secure, he circled his throbbing finger. Tony retracted the cable.

Buffeting winds rattled the basket as it swung up into the air.  
*Please, Father, let her reach safety.*

“We’ve gotta go,” Tony yelled down. “Storm’s moving in.”  
“Three minutes.” *Please*. He’d never left anyone behind.

Lifting the basket into the bay, Tony hollered to the pilot, then turned his gaze back to Finn. “You got two.”

Finn headed for the sinking boat as Tony lowered the basket.

The wind at Finn’s back carried his failing strokes through the water. *Just one more, God*, he prayed. *Let me save one more*.

Spots clouded his vision, his right arm refusing to rotate. A torn rotator cuff?

Time ticking away, he dug in with his left arm but was barely crawling forward.

The man, according to his wife, was trapped belowdecks, his left leg broken and pinned beneath debris. The wife had tried to get him out but wasn’t strong enough.

The wave-lashed boat listed nearly full to port. He had to swim faster, harder . . . ignore the pain.

The copter’s blades swooshed almost silently over the ocean’s roar as it rose higher above the heightening waves. The basket swung over the raging surface.

A fierce wave pummeled over him, dragging him under. He breached the surface only to be lashed by another wave.

Rising above the surface, he watched as the boat sank mere yards away.

The wife’s piercing shriek echoed over the reckless, churning sea.

Tony hoisted the basket up and lowered the cable for him.

“No!” Finn hollered, shaking his head. He’d never left a man behind.

“Time,” Tony insisted, “or you’ll get us all killed.”

His entire being sinking inside, Finn clipped in and rose above the angry sea.

# TWO

## RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

Gabby Rowley drove through the nearly deserted downtown streets. The press-awards banquet had been a success, according to her boss at the *Raleigh Gazette*, but the local event was nothing like the press galas she'd attended before Asim Noren destroyed her international journalism career and nearly ended her life.

She glanced at the moonlight glinting off the faux crystal trophy she'd been awarded for excellence in journalism for her exposé on drug dealer Xavier Fuentes.

A shiver tickled her spine at the thought of their last encounter—his dark eyes boring into hers.

She jumped as her cell rang—her Bluetooth signaling a call from Noah.

She exhaled a steady breath and answered. “Hey, bro.”  
“Hey, kid.”

She glanced at the clock. 11:03. “You’re calling a bit later than usual. Everything okay?” In his line of work, she never knew.

“Everything’s fine. Just wanted to check in.”

Since Fuentes’s arrest and the confiscation of millions in cocaine, her brother’s protective side had come out in force.

“How’s Mom?”



“Good. I know she gets lonely at times, but the kiddos are keeping her busy.”

Kenzie’s son and daughter had brought so much joy to their lives, especially with Owen’s birth just three months after Gabby’s, Noah’s, and Kenzie’s dad—affectionately known as Poppy to Kenzie’s daughter, Fiona—passed unexpectedly.

She slowed, making sure she was clear for a right turn, and the silver car behind her honked.

“Was that a horn?” Noah asked.

“Yep. Just on my way home from the awards banquet,” she said, making a right. The silver sedan sped around her, disappearing into the night.

“How’d it go?” Noah asked.

“Fine. What’s new with you?” She stopped at a signal, the red light refracting off her windshield, making an upside-down *L* across her dash.

“Just finishing up some paperwork. The games start tomorrow.”

Every year the Coast Guard Investigative Service team went head-to-head with the NCIS unit from Camp Lejeune in a battle of strength, endurance, and all out-fun. “What kicks it off?” she asked, a strange uneasiness seeping through her. Why was the light not changing?

She glanced around as Noah said something that didn’t even register. Sunday night in the business district left dark buildings surrounding her. Her sense of isolation heightened, despite being on a call with her brother.

Tapping her two-inch heel against the floorboard, she ticked off the seconds with no cars passing by, and yet the light remained red.

“Gab? Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Sorry. Just waiting for the light to change.” And for the uneasiness sloshing inside to dissipate—an uneasiness she hadn’t experienced since that day in South Sudan.

The guttural roar of a motorcycle reverberated behind her. Headlights glared across her rearview mirror as a Triumph slowed to a stop beside her. Relief at not being alone filled her until she glanced over at the black bike.

The man shifted toward her, raising his arm. *Is that a . . . ?*

Lunging over, she'd barely collided with the passenger seat when a *thwack* shattered her window.

"Gabby!" Noah said.

Clutching her hands over her head, she stayed low as glass rained over her.

Praying for protection, she scrambled out the passenger door, her hands and knees colliding with the pavement.

She crawled toward the alley only to be yanked back. Her heart racing, she turned to find her hem was caught on the car door. A quick tug tore the sequined fabric loose.

"Gabby!" Noah called.

She couldn't afford to give up her position, so she remained silent, sweat slathering her back.

Heavy footfalls hit the pavement.

He was coming for her.

Sucking in a gulp of air, she kicked off her heels, said a quick prayer, and darted for the alley.

Shots retorted, one ping off the dumpster to her left.

Her pulse pounding, she dove behind it. The pavement scraped flesh from her flattened palms. Ignoring the stinging, she crouched low and prayed.

*Please keep me safe, Jesus.*

Footfalls grew closer.

Tears stung her eyes. With a deep breath, she darted for the next dumpster. A bullet whizzed past her, ricocheting off the container with a shrill ping. She flattened her back against the cool metal. The stench of rotting trash violated the air. An acrid taste skittered across her tongue.

Swallowing her upchuck reflex, she scanned the alley for a

way out. A dim light shone at the end. The Renaissance Hotel. If she could make it there, surely she'd be safe.

His footfalls nearly upon her, she broke into a flat-out run. Muscles heating, she stumbled into the road, headlights glaring into her eyes. Her heart sank.

What if the man had backup?

The car screeched to a halt.

“What are you—crazy?” the man yelled through the open driver's window.

She broke into a run as the car sped away. Refusing to look back, she flailed forward as fast as her trembling legs would carry her. Another bullet whizzed past her right ear, shattering the glass front of the hotel. She barreled into the revolving door, nearly tumbling into the lobby.

The front desk attendant lifted his radio. “Security!” He rushed to her side. “Are you okay, miss?” His attention darted to the door. Her gaze tracked with his, praying her would-be killer wouldn't be bold enough to enter. Thankfully he wasn't.

She collapsed into the employee's arms, winded and covered with damp, cold sweat.