

A continuation of the Davenport series, Safe Passage picks up where Black Dawn left off. With the Rickter plague sweeping across the globe, Reed and TJ are in the Arctic to cleanup an oil spill but all is not as it appears and soon they find themselves stranded in an unforgiving world, and fighting the pirates who put them there.

SAFE PASSAGE

by Brett Diffley

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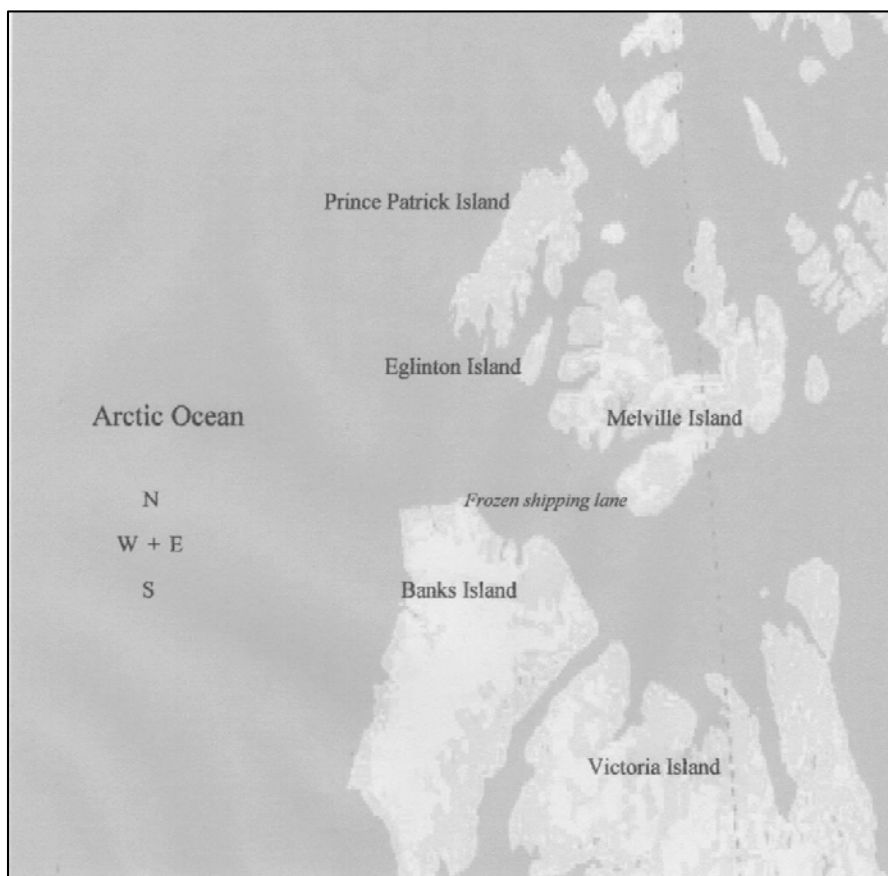
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BOOK FIVE OF THE PINNACLE AWARD WINNING
DAVENPORT SERIES

"A PAGE TURNER!"



BRETT DIFFLEY



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Brett Diffley



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First Edition

Chapter 1

Winter Seas

Standing at the controls, Captain Lee Courtiar was looking out the bridge window of his one hundred and sixty foot skimmer, *Goliath*. The midday sun was bright, its beams breaking through the broken clouds, and highlighting the Arctic Ocean's distant icebergs, their mountainous peaks shimmering under the sun.

One in particular stood a quarter mile off the starboard bow. It looked spectacular. More than three hundred feet above the water, the sun's rays penetrated the clear ice, turning it glacier-blue, and the smaller chunks at its base, glistening like diamonds.

Breathtaking, he thought, but that mood changed when he looked forward, beyond the bow, at the black ribbon of oil. Stretched more than a half-mile long, it left the water ugly and dark, and the ice floating within it tainted black like large chunks of charcoal.

Understaffed due to the sickness that was sweeping across the globe, his thoughts drifted to getting more help from the support vessel *Freelance*, which had left port a day after the *Goliath* due to similar staffing problems. A sister ship, the eighty-foot oceangoing tug with a deep-hull-design for extended operation in open waters, was scheduled to arrive by nightfall. It wasn't a skimmer, but he needed the added manpower. Better yet, he also knew their crew.

Both ships, normally stationed at the Port of Valdez, were Crude Technologies vessels specifically used to fight oil spills. This trip had been no different. Five days prior, the Nigerian oil tanker *Lybell*—a small bunker freighter at 1561 dead weight tons—had issued an open channel mayday. Both the American and Canadian Coast Guards had responded, sending helicopters to the last reported position: the Americans from Port Clarence Station on the western point of Alaska, and the Canadians from the Northern Quebec Region. Neither had found the ship, but they did find a growing oil slick; the ship presumably sunk with no survivors.

So Crude Technologies had been called to limit the further spread of the spill. This had been easier said than done, considering the

position of the slick was two hundred and fifty miles off the northern Canadian coast...and in the Arctic Ocean; one of the most remote regions of the world. Adding to the difficulties, was the average daily temperature of -25 degrees Celsius, which left most of the area ice-covered in one form or another year round.

“Give us a minute captain,” came a winded voice over the radio.

“Roger that,” he said on the handheld radio as he watched the two motorized, deep-hulled, aluminum skiffs off the bow. In each were three men, and all wore hooded survival suits as a precaution against not only the frigid temperatures but the occupational hazard of falling overboard. Without them, the life expectancy in the water was less than two minutes.

Lee watched the man in the bow of the lead boat. Holding a waterproof two-way radio in one hand, he was gesturing commands to the men with the other. His name was Steve Waters. A brash and intelligent young man at twenty eight-years-old, he was second in command, having served under the captain for the last two years.

Lee grinned. The first time he had seen the young man, with his shoulder-length brown hair, bright blue eyes, and trim physique, Lee had thought he had more in common with a surfboard than with ships, oceans, and more importantly, responsibility. But his looks had been deceiving. Steve was a man of the sea, with aspirations of one day becoming a captain himself. Better yet, Lee genuinely liked the man, and that alone said it all, considering the long hours the two of them worked together—side-by-side, day-in and day-out—in the same boat. His biggest attributes? Steve seemed always willing to learn, and eager to take on any new task.

This task was no different.

Like wranglers in front of the vessel, the two boats were herding the larger chunks of ice out of the path of the ship, while at the same time, two men in back of the boats were using firehoses from the ships bow to spray the ice with a concoction of chemical dispersants and microbes to eat the oil from within. Reliable and proven, it was a revolutionary concept, but the efficiency of the process slowed greatly with the manual cleaning of ice, which added both work and time to the already grueling workload. So to keep the men fresh, Lee rotated

two men every two hours to and from the boats. But considering *Goliath* had only a twelve man crew for this trip, it still wasn't enough, especially when coupled with the subfreezing temperatures and the physicality of dealing with a never-ending ice flow.

And time was everything when dealing with an oil slick.

He glanced at his watch, and slowly shook his head. Arriving in the early dawn hours, this was only their second pass over the slick, which under normal conditions, would have been multiple times with a spill this size. Even the time-sapping-work in Alaska's harshest weather and turbulent seas paled in comparison to this, and only confirmed that life in this hostile environment didn't come easy. In fact, it was painfully slow. Making it worse, a storm would arrive before nightfall, and according to the weather report, it would be packing snow and gale-force winds, which was never good for a ship in an ice-filled sea. That meant, sooner than later, they would have to seek shelter in Canada's ice-covered islands twenty miles to the east, or at the very least, behind one of the many big bergs.

With thoughts of the impending weather, he looked across the slick again. Winding like a black ribbon of road, shifting and expanding, through the ice flow, he had to wonder how much further it would expand in a storm, and how much more environmental damage would occur. So far they had been lucky with only a few effected animals, including a dead leopard seal and several birds. But he expected that to change. With any oil slick, big or small, there would be animals in distress and fatalities. It was part of the job, but they were prepared as well as they could be, having already set up a treatment room for that eventual task below deck.

He shuddered with the thought. It meant even more manpower for cleaning the animals and care—manpower he didn't have.

"Alright captain, you can come forward," the first mate finally said, waving him ahead.

Lee thumbed the handheld. "Roger Steve, moving now." Once again he put the ship in gear.

The deck vibrated under him, and he looked at the ships storage-capacity-gauge for skimmed oil. The 300,000 gallon tank was less

than a quarter full, which was good, but he could already feel the extra burden on the engines.

As the ship began to move forward again, he glanced at the upper row of gauges on the control console to make sure they were in the green. They were. These instruments were for the eight Moryno filtration pumps. Unlike the other skimmers in Crude Technologies three fleets, the *Goliath* was smaller, and had a closed bow design, which made it much more desirable when dealing with large chunks of ice or floating debris. But the tradeoff with this design was the lack of efficiency. Instead of sucking large swaths of oil through an open bow, the ship had four intakes on each side of the hull that would draw the tainted water in like a vacuum. Then much like a regular skimmer, it would collect the oil by sending the fowled water through a series of filters and scrubbers. During this process, and before discharging the cleaned water under the stern, it was treated—much like the water through the hoses in front—with those same chemical dispersants and microbes to attack and break up the oil from within.

Lee leaned forward.

On the ice-covered deck below, the four crewmen helping with the firehoses, had stopped and were pointing to the starboard side of the ship. Following their gestures, Lee turned to see two fishing boats approaching from the other side of the huge iceberg. They were still distant, but closing fast.

“Someone’s coming off the starboard side,” Steve said, as his boat nudged another thick ice chunk out of the way.

“Yeah, I see them. Someone order pizza down there?” Lee replied with a grin. But that warm humor quickly vanished when he lifted the binoculars hung from his neck, and saw the manned fifty-caliber-machinegun on the bow of the closest boat. “What the fuck...” These weren’t fishing boats.

Processing the situation quickly, he picked up the radio again. “Steve, get back to the boat.” The first mate started to say something, but Lee cut him off. “Now! And use the port side ladder.” Then he picked up the ships radio mike, switched to the deck speaker, and spoke to the four crewmen on the bow. “Get those hoses reeled in!”

An unfamiliar voice came over the ship's common radio frequency. "*Goliath*, my name is Sabastian, prepare to be boarded." The words were flat, unyielding, and cold.

Just then, the silver haired Chief Engineer, Mack Dawson, came up from below decks through the door at the back of the bridge. "I needed a break, and I see my timing is impeccable," he said. "What's going on?"

"Not sure. Get to my cabin and get the rifle out of my closet," Lee answered.

Sabastian spoke again, his words short and concise. "If you attempt to evade, or shoot at us, I'll kill everyone on board."

Lee swallowed hard. If there had been any doubt about their intentions before, there wasn't now. He quickly changed the radio channel to 1021 for the US Coast Guard. He noticed an unusual static on the line, but confirmed the channel and spoke swiftly anyway. "US Coast Guard, this is the skimmer *Goliath*. Latitude: North 74 degrees, 32 minutes, 35 seconds. Longitude: West 125 degrees, 30 minutes, 28 seconds. We are working an oil spill two hundred and fifty miles north of Canada in the Arctic Ocean, and we are being boarded by armed men. Acknowledge please." There was only static, loud and intrusive. He pushed the emergency-transponder-button on the radio, which would send out continuous updates of their current position through both the satellite navigation system and also through the GPS tracking system on the radio.

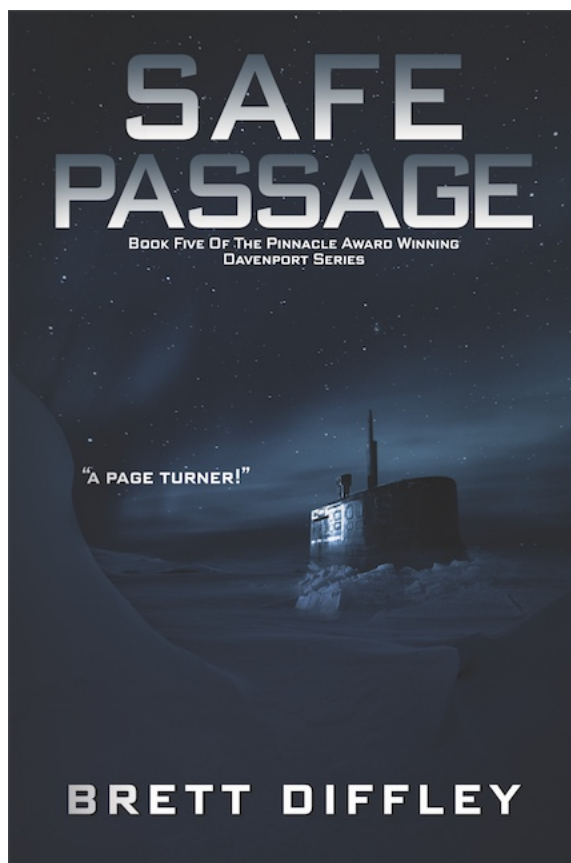
The *Goliath's* second boat was just pulling up to the boarding steps, which had been left down on each side of the skimmer for the crews. Lee tried to remain calm. He already knew they wouldn't have time to load the two small crafts. Their only hope—their only defense—was to run. So as soon as he saw Steve and his men step onto the portside deck, he put the ship in gear, and jammed the throttle lever all the way forward.

The two four-stroke MAN diesel engines vibrated, and the twin screws cavitated, as the surge of horsepower went directly to the propellers. To limit the drag on the already heavily burdened ship, he turned off the eight Moryno filtration pumps and looked at the ship's speed indicator, willing it to rise. But even at full power, the *Goliath*

reacted sluggishly. Like a freight train, she required time—time they didn't have—to build up speed.

Upon hearing the *Goliath's* engines, and seeing the surge of white water boiling at her stern, the man behind the fifty-caliber-machinegun opened fire; the barrage of bullets easily carving through the starboard side of the bridge, creating golf ball sized holes, and shredding the interior.

The sound was deafening. Glass and electronic equipment exploded around where Lee Courtiar stood, but he never saw much beyond those first few seconds. Lifted off his feet and thrown across the bridge, multiple large-caliber-rounds passed through both his torso and chest before exiting cleanly out the portside wall. He was dead before hitting the floor.



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