

The Alex Cave Series Book 1

## Dead Energy.

Edition 11

Published by James M. Corkill

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Other books by James M. Corkill.

The Alex Cave Series Book 2. Cold Energy.

The Alex Cave Series Book 3. Red Energy.

The Alex Cave Series Book 4. Gravity.

## Chapter 1

PUGET SOUND, WASHINGTON, USA:

The wind had died to a whisper, and Alex Cave was lashing down the white nylon sails of his chartered thirty-five-foot sailboat. It was the last day of his two-week vacation, sailing through the San Juan Islands of Washington State. He paused and took a deep breath of salt air, knowing he would not smell it again for at least a year. A brilliant flash of light caught his attention. As he looked around, he saw the outline of a large ship, about four miles away.

He stepped down onto the main deck and grabbed his binoculars, focusing them on the ship. An oil tanker, he surmised from its design. Suddenly a panic filled voice crackled from the VHF radio speaker.

“*Mayday! Mayday!* Something’s happening to the ship!”

He was about to grab the microphone to respond, when he heard the Coast Guard answer the distress call. He listened to the conversation as he scanned the area through the binoculars. The oil tanker he had been looking at was the only ship in the area. He realized the Coast Guard would probably reach the tanker first, but decided to fire up the internal gas engine in the sailboat and head towards the tanker, thinking that maybe he could be of some assistance.

He was surprised to arrive at the tanker before the Coast Guard. He didn’t see anyone on deck, and no one answered when he yelled up from below. He hung the rubber bumpers over the side of the sailboat, and tied off to the rusted metal rungs of a ladder welded to the side of the tanker. With the sailboat secure, he climbed the ladder to the tanker’s main deck.

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“*Mayday! Mayday!* Something’s happening to the ship!” a young, hysterical voice crackled from the radio speaker.

The four men on the bridge of the U.S. Coast Guard ship *Adler* snapped their heads away from the windows to stare at the speaker mounted on the gray bulkhead.

“Not again, damn it!” Commander McBride grumbled, slamming his coffee cup on the table. “Don’t they know we’ve left the area?” he growled, his face flushing beneath his khaki ball cap. McBride’s gray eyebrows bunched together in thought, his hard brown eyes squinting through the window at the Olympic Mountain range of Washington State, one-hundred-fifty miles away. He was nearing his home base in Port Angeles, after spending two weeks chasing illegal fishing trawlers across the Pacific Ocean. The trawlers had a new tactic. Transmit a false mayday from the opposite direction, forcing him to break off pursuit to render assistance to a fictitious ship, and always just beyond the range of his radar.

“*Mayday! Mayday!* Can anyone hear me, damn it?”

“What should I do, sir?” the radio operator asked.

McBride leapt from his chair, charging across the rolling deck. *My ship’s low on fuel and I don’t have time for this kind of crap*, he thought. “Give me that!” he snapped, and the operator jumped out of his chair. McBride grabbed the microphone. “Listen, you moron! I’m not in the mood for any more of your games! Now, get off the emergency frequency!”

“This *is* an emergency, damn it!”

McBride glanced at the men on the bridge and shook his head skeptically. “This is the U.S. Coast Guard. Who are you and what’s your location?”

“This is the Americrude oil tanker *Scorpio*, forty-nine degrees, five minutes south, and one-hundred-twenty-three west. Shit! Get us some help out here!”

McBride heard terror in the voice and glanced at the OOD, (Officer of the Deck), who nodded, he had the tanker on radar.

“Thirty miles, sir,” he said.

McBride nodded. “*Scorpio*, say again your situation?”

“There’s something happening to the oil! I think it’s going to explode!” the voice screamed.

“Can you identify the cause?”

“No! I mean, I don’t know. It’s just...of bright light. It’s ...and ...out ...of ...”

“*Scorpio*, you’re breaking up. Say again!” Static erupted from the speaker, and McBride handed the microphone to the operator. “Try to get him back.”

McBride walked to the radarscope and stared at the screen. He ran a hand through his gray hair and shook his head in frustration.

“She’s the only ship in that sector,” said the OOD.

“Shit! We’d better go see what’s going on. Come left to course 080. All ahead flank speed.”

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Thirty-five minutes later, the thrumming of the *Adler*’s engines dropped to a low rumble. McBride stared through a set of binoculars at the rust streaked black paint on the side of the behemoth oil tanker, about two-hundred yards away. Thin streams of black smoke trailed from her exhaust stack, but all forward movement had ceased. The tanker rode high in the water, he noticed. He scanned her entire length through the binoculars, but there was no sign of an explosion and he could not see anyone on deck or up in the bridge.

McBride grabbed the microphone for the public address system. “Ahoy, the *Scorpio*. This is the United States Coast Guard. Do you need assistance?” He waited several minutes for someone to appear, but the *Scorpio* looked deserted.

“Take us alongside,” McBride ordered the OOD. “I don’t know what happened here, but I intend to find out.”

The *Scorpio* towered above the *Adler*, as she drifted thirty-feet off the starboard side. Suddenly, a man wearing blue jeans and a white sweatshirt appeared on *Scorpio*’s deck and stood at the railing.

McBride grabbed a bullhorn, stepped through the hatch, and was buffeted by a cool breeze. He pointed the bullhorn up at the man. “You, on the tanker!” he hollered. “This is the Commander of the *USS Adler*. What’s going on?”

The man at the railing hollered back, but the rumbling engines of both ships drowned out his voice.

“Damn it,” McBride muttered and pointed the horn at the man again. “You’re in a lot of trouble, mister! Just stay where you are. I’m coming aboard.” McBride spun toward the first class boatswain mate standing nearby. “Well, don’t just stand there! Get the skiff in the water!”

With the Coast Guard cruiser on the opposite side from where he had tied off to the tanker, Alex realized the Commander would assume he was part of the crew, and dropped the boarding ladder over the side. He leaned his forearms across the railing in a nonchalant manner, as he watched the procedure.

McBride came across in a small launch and ascended the ladder with two of his sailors right behind him as he stomped across the deck to the stranger and stopped. When the stranger straightened from the railing and turned to face him, McBride realized he was taller in person, with a tanned, rugged face marked by a few small scars. The man's wavy black hair accented his dark blue eyes under thick black brows.

"Where the hell do you get off calling in you had an explosion?" McBride snarled. "You're under arrest, mister!"

Alex folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the railing.

McBride could see the anger surfacing in the man's eyes. They locked stares and McBride noticed the stranger didn't blink. Finally, the stranger broke the silence, his voice low and firm. "It's customary to ask permission to come aboard, Commander," he said.

The tone of voice hit McBride like a slap in the face and he flushed with anger, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. "Who the hell are you and where do you get off talking to me that way?" he growled, his voice rising in volume to match his temper. "In these waters I'm the *law*, mister! You got that?"

Alex remained against the rail and shrugged indifferently. "If you say so." He let the moment hang, refusing to be intimidated. "The name's Alex Cave and I haven't broken any laws. I heard the distress call and came to help. There was no explosion, and there's no one onboard. And just for the record, I claim the salvage rights according to maritime law. You're on my ship now, Commander."

McBride spun to one of his sailors. "Have the ship radio to shore and find out everything you can about a Mister Cave."

McBride flashed Alex a vicious look. "How did you get onboard?"

Alex waved a hand across the deck. "My sailboat is tied off on the other side. I suggest you look around, Commander. I think you'll find it interesting."

McBride brought his temper under control and the redness slowly faded from his face. "All right lead the way."

Alex led McBride and the sailors across the deck, through a hatch, and into the superstructure. They followed him along a passageway and into the crew's quarters.

McBride looked around. The bunks were made, but personal items were scattered around the room and on the floor as if the crew had left in a hurry. *What would cause the entire crew to abandon a perfectly sound ship?* He wondered. He looked at Alex. "Did you see anything from your sailboat?"

Alex nodded his head. "There's more."

McBride nodded and Alex led them into the dining room, waving a hand to indicate the dishes, silverware, and food left on the table. "Whatever happened, they left in a hurry," Alex told him.

McBride nodded agreement as the sailor with the portable radio interrupted. "We have the information about the ship, Commander."

"Turn that thing up and let's hear it," McBride ordered.

The sailor spoke into the radio, turned up the volume, and set it on the table. A moment later, the voice of *Adler's* radio operator came through the speaker. "The *Scorpio*. United States registry, homeport, Valdez, Alaska. A 326,000-ton universal class oil tanker. It departed Valdez on March 9, carrying eighty-thousand tons of heavy crude oil. Destination, March Point, Washington State. Seven crewmembers. That's it, sir."

McBride looked at Alex. "She looks empty to me."

Alex nodded. "She's not only empty, Commander. The holds are as clean as the day she left the shipyard, with only a few inches of salt water in the bottom."

McBride looked at him skeptically. "That's impossible!"

"I've been down inside the holds."

McBride thought Alex was mad and studied his expression for some sign he was, but Alex stared back evenly, again, without blinking. McBride shook his head. "It doesn't make any sense. What made them abandon ship?"

"I don't think they did. All the life rafts are still in the containers along the railing."

"You don't miss much, do you?"

Alex grinned in reply.

"Just who the hell are you?"

The radio operator's voice crackled through the portable radio speaker to interrupt. "I have the information you wanted about Mr. Cave, Commander."

"I think you're about to find out," Alex said and walked out of the dining room.

"Don't even think about leaving this ship, mister!" McBride hollered after him, but Alex continued along the passageway without looking back.

"Insubordinate bastard!" McBride grumbled and picked up the radio. "Go ahead."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Cave was born in San Diego, California, to Mister . . ."

"Forget the details; just give me a run down on who he is and what he does."

"Yes, sir. He's a professor at the University of Montana. He teaches geology and geophysics."

McBride grinned. "Ha! Just a damn teacher talking to me that way," he said to his men. "I'm going to teach that arrogant bastard to show a little respect to an officer." He keyed the radio. "What about a criminal record?"

"Nothing on record, sir."

"Humph. Well, that doesn't mean anything."

"Another thing, sir. It says Mister Cave has a top secret government clearance, and is a special advisor to the Director of National Security."

McBride's jaw dropped open as he glanced at the faces of his men, who grinned at his apparent embarrassment. "Stand by," McBride said into the radio in a more subdued tone, and led his men out of the dining room.

Alex was standing at the railing, staring down at his sailboat, and turned when he heard McBride and the sailors approaching. He saw McBride looked slightly embarrassed as he stopped in front of him.

"I apologize for the misunderstanding, Mr. Cave. You should have told me who you work for."

Alex looked him steadily in the eyes. "That shouldn't have made any difference, Commander. Maybe you'll be a little more considerate to the next stranger you encounter."

McBride felt rebuked and glanced away for a moment, wondering if this would reflect on his record, then looked at Alex. "So what do you intend to do?"

Alex smiled. "I intend to get back on my sailboat and finish my vacation. This ship is in your hands now." Alex turned and climbed down the ladder.

McBride stared after Alex for a moment, then turned and walked back across the deck with the sailors right behind. "We'd better send a message to headquarters in Port Angeles. Tell them to start searching for an oil spill somewhere off the coast between here and Alaska."

Alex started the engine of his sailboat and set a course for the marina in Port Angeles. His mind kept turning over every detail of the incident, searching for a logical answer. However, by sunset that evening, when his boat was tied in her mooring slip, he had none. It was now the Coast Guard's problem, he decided, and after fixing a sandwich in the galley, retired to the salon with a good book.

He bolted upright in bed, his sheets soaked in sweat. It had been a year since he'd had the recurring nightmare. Even now, he could vividly see the stretcher being wheeled out the door of his demolished apartment in Holland. With a sense of dread, he had raised the sheet and saw the face of his beloved wife, Sevi, and after that, the world became a blur of emotions.

He rolled off the bed and grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator, and thought about that day three years ago. He couldn't quite remember what happened during the following month, but apparently, he had gone on a killing rampage to get even with the people who had tried to kill him. His friend had managed to extract him from the Russia, and one week after returning to the United States, he had resigned from the CIA.

Alex crawled back into bed, but it was over an hour before he finally fell asleep.

Just after sunrise, Alex stepped off his sailboat and walked between the yachts and sailboats tied in the mooring slips of the marina. He couldn't stop pondering the fate of the *Scorpio's* crew. Suddenly, he recalled seeing the flash of bright light on the water, realized it had come from the direction of the *Scorpio*, and wondered if it might be connected.

Alex walked up the ramp, past the marina office, and entered the restaurant. Someone had left a Seattle Times newspaper on a vacant table, and Alex noticed the article about the tanker on the front page. He sat down to read it and ordered breakfast from the waitress. The Coast Guard said there was no oil spill, but the news reporter continued about past oil spills and the danger of having tankers enter Puget Sound.

He set the newspaper aside when his breakfast arrived and halfheartedly read the other articles on the front page as he ate. An article on the lower corner caught his attention. *SKIERS FIND SIX MEN FROZEN TO DEATH ON MT. BAKER*. The article named the two members of the ski patrol who found the bodies, and talked about the kind of training they went through. The ski patrol stated that the six dead men might have been drunk or part of a prank because they were not dressed for the conditions. Five of them were wearing only tee shirts, jeans, and tennis shoes. The sixth man was wearing oil-stained coveralls and smelled like diesel fuel. The Whatcom County Sheriff stated one of the dead men was carrying an Alaska driver's license.

Alex set the paper aside while he finished his breakfast, but couldn't stop thinking about the article. The *Scorpio* was out of Alaska, but she had seven men onboard and only six men were discovered on the mountain. Then again, the crew *would* be dressed like those men. The man in coveralls could be the ship's mechanic. *That's ridiculous*, he thought. *How could they end up on a mountain so far away?*

He decided it was worth a little more investigation, just for his own peace of mind, and called directory assistance to get the number for the Coast Guard.

"United States Coast Guard Station, Port Angeles," a young male voice answered.

"The station commander, please," Alex asked.

"Who should I say is calling, sir?"

"Alex Cave," he informed him and waited. A moment later, a female voice came on the line.

"This is Captain Taylor, Mister Cave. Commander McBride has explained what happened. He's usually more considerate."

"This is a different matter, Captain. Have you found any of the crew?"

“Not yet, we haven’t found an oil spill, either.”

“Would you happen to have the names of the crew members?”

“Just a second,” the Captain told him. Alex heard the rustling of papers. “She had a seven man crew. The skipper’s name was Joseph Bower.” Captain Taylor gave Alex the rest of the names. “Do you need a copy of the report?”

“Not right now. Thanks for the help.”

Alex looked up a number and dialed the Seattle Times newspaper, and was transferred to the reporter who wrote the article. He asked the woman if she had learned the names of the six men, and was informed the Whatcom County Sheriff’s Department in Bellingham wouldn’t release the information. Alex thanked her and thought about calling the Sheriff’s department himself, but assumed they wouldn’t give him the information over the phone. *It’s just a coincidence*, he thought again, but something tugged at the back of his mind. He called the local airport and made a reservation on a flight leaving for Bellingham in an hour.

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The flight took just forty-five minutes, and from there, Alex took a taxi to the Whatcom County Sheriff’s Department. At the front desk, he spoke to a deputy. “I might have some information which could be helpful in your investigation of those men found on Mt. Baker.”

The deputy studied Alex for a moment. “Oh? And who are you?”

Alex realized he was only playing a hunch and decided to play it cool for the moment. “First, I’d like to know the name of the man with the Alaska driver’s license.”

The deputy shook his head again. “I won’t give out that kind of information without the sheriff’s approval.”

“Fine, then let me talk to the sheriff.”

The deputy shook his head. “The sheriff’s a busy man. If you have anything to report, it’s your duty to tell me.”

Alex shrugged. “Fine. Solve it yourself.” He turned and walked toward the door.

“Shit!” the deputy mumbled. “Wait a minute!” he hollered.

Alex stopped and turned to stare at the deputy, but didn’t approach the desk.

“Just hang on a minute. I’ll see if the sheriff can spare a few minutes.”

The deputy picked up the phone and spoke and, a few moments later, a tall, overweight man appeared behind the counter. “I’m Sheriff Ralston. What can you tell me about the men on Mt. Baker?”

Alex decided to take a chance on his gut instinct. “I know where they came from.”

The sheriff studied Alex for a moment, and then nodded. “Come on back to my office.”

Once in the office, Sheriff Ralston indicated a stiff wooden chair near the desk and sat on his own padded chair on the other side. “What do you know about all this, Mister?”

“Alex Cave. Have you heard about the oil tanker the Coast Guard brought into Port Angeles?”

The sheriff nodded. “Read about it in the paper. Why?”

“What the paper didn’t say was that the crew was missing. If my suspicions are correct, the skiers found them on Mt. Baker.”

The sheriff stared at Alex for a moment, a skeptical grin forming on his lips. “Mr. Cave, most of those men were young and this is a college town. It was probably some fraternity prank turned sour.”

“The paper said you found identification on one of the bodies.”

The sheriff nodded, reached into the file basket on his desk, and grabbed a folder.

As the sheriff scanned through the first few pages. Alex sat up in tense anticipation.

“Only one of the bodies had a wallet,” said the Sheriff. “An older man had a driver’s license.”

“Was his name Joseph Bower?” The look in the sheriff’s eyes said he was right. Alex sighed with relief and leaned back in the chair. “Bower was the skipper of that tanker.”

The sheriff’s jaw went slack. “You’re shittin’ me.”

Alex slowly shook his head. “I’m positive the fingerprints will match the ones taken from the ship. There should have been seven bodies. Did you search the area?”

Sheriff Ralston nodded. “The ski patrol did. It was odd, though. They said the bodies were found in soft powder snow, but there weren’t any tracks leading in or out of the area. We can’t figure out how they got there.”

“Have you performed an autopsy yet?”

“They’re working on it today. The way they were dressed, I figure they died of exposure.”

“I’d like to see the bodies.”

The sheriff stared at him for a moment, still a little skeptical. “I don’t have any idea who you are, Mr. Cave. I can’t authorize that.”

Alex began reaching for his government identification and then remembered he’d left it at home when he went on vacation. He knew he could get a copy of the report later, through Martin Donner, the Director of National Security. He smiled and stood, extending his hand. “Of course.”

The sheriff stood and accepted the outstretched hand, staring after Alex as he left the office. The sheriff shook his head, wondering who this man was and how he knew the dead men were from the tanker.

As he left the building, Alex’s mind kept turning over the facts, but nothing made sense. And what happened to the seventh crewmember? Another thought occurred to him, and he decided to try to talk to the coroner. *Getting information might be difficult*, he thought. *And this wasn’t a matter of national security*. Still, his curiosity wouldn’t let the matter drop. He had to know what happened and how the crew ended up on a mountaintop.

He walked down the street to the coroner’s building, entered, and stopped at the front desk. A middle-aged woman sat on the other side, and he took note of her nameplate. “I’d like to talk to the coroner, Mrs. Bayer.”

The woman smiled. “Do you have an appointment, Mister . . .?”

“Alex Cave. No, I’ve been tied up with Sheriff Ralston about the men found on Mt. Baker, and didn’t have time to call.”

“Oh, I see. Just a moment,” she told him and picked up the phone. “There’s a Mr. Cave to see you, Mr. Walton. He’s from the sheriff’s office. Yes, sir. I’ll tell him.” She hung up and smiled at Alex. “He’ll be out in a few moments.”

“Thanks,” Alex said and smiled in return as he walked to a large map of Washington State hanging on the wall. From the scale at the bottom, he estimated it was about one-hundred and fifty miles from where he found the *Scorpio* to the top of Mt. Baker. *How could the crew turn up so far away?* He wondered.

Alex heard footsteps from the hall and turned as a short, nearly bald man with thick glasses approached. Alex smiled and extended his hand. “Nice to meet you at last, Mr. Walton. I’ve heard so many good things about you.”

Walton accepted Alex’s hand and beamed with pride. “Why, thank you, Mr. Cave. I don’t recall seeing you at the sheriff’s department.”

“Oh, I don’t normally work here in Whatcom County. I’m here strictly to inquire about the men found on Mt. Baker.”

“Oh, well that explains it then. I usually don’t forget a face. Now then, what can I do for you?”

“First, I’d like to take a look at the bodies.”

“Fine. Follow me.”

It bothered Alex he had let Walton assume he worked for the Sheriff’s department, but he hadn’t lied. It was something he was tired of doing while working for the government.

A strong antiseptic smell assaulted Alex’s nostrils as they passed through a double door and walked along the hallway.

“I’ve been waiting for the results of the fingerprints to come back from the FBI,” Walton told him as they passed through a stainless steel double door and entered a large refrigerated room.

There were a dozen small stainless steel doors along one wall, and Walton opened one of the doors to pull out the table. A naked man lay on top, feet first, with a tag tied to his big toe. “This is the only one with identification,” Walton began. “Preliminary examination indicates he died of exposure. He was wearing a flannel shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes. Couldn’t live very long up on Mt. Baker dressed like that, I’ll tell you.”

“Mr. Walton, it’s critical we verify if he was alive or dead when he first reached the snow.”

Walton looked at him quizzically. “Of course they were alive. How else could they have gotten there?” When Alex looked him sternly in the eye, Walton shrugged and nodded assent. “Fine by me. I’ll draw some blood and send it to the lab. They should be able to tell us one way or the other.”

“Did you notice any bruises or abrasions when you examined the bodies?” Alex asked while Walton stretched on a pair of surgical gloves and inserted a needle into Bower’s arm.

“A few,” Walton replied as he inserted a small glass tube to draw a sample. “Nothing that . . . Hmm.” He removed the empty tube and inserted a new one, but nothing was drawn from Bower’s arm. “What the hell?”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure.” Walton grabbed a scalpel, and slit open the skin and vein just above the needle. A dry brown powder fell out of the opening. “Oh my God! This couldn’t happen from freezing!”

Alex watched Walton make a few more slices in different parts of Bower’s body, including his buttocks. All the blood had turned to powder. Walton grabbed a large syringe and drew some of the powder into it. “This is really strange. Normally, after death occurs the blood will settle to the lowest part of the body, but it appears the blood was dehydrated, either before or during death. Come on,” Walton told him. “I want a closer look at this blood.”

Walton led him to a small laboratory, dumped the powdered blood into a petri dish, and then put it under a microscope and focused the lens as he peered into it. A moment later, he looked at Alex and shook his head. “The blood cells are dehydrated.”

“Like it was cooked?” Alex asked.

Walton shook his head. “No. All the moisture has evaporated, but there’s no sign it was caused by heat.”

“Any idea how?”

Walton shook his head as he thought about it. “Not a clue, I’ve never seen this before.”

Walton looked through the microscope again. “I’ll send a sample to the University,” he said without looking up. “I’ll let you know what they find out.”

Alex glanced at his watch. 2:00 P.M. local time, 5:00 P.M. in Washington D.C. He looked at his cellphone, but there was no service available inside the building. “Can I use your phone?” he asked.

“Yes,” Walton told him, still concentrating on the sample under the microscope. “Use the one in my office.”

Alex dialed long distance and a woman answered, telling him he had reached the Office of the Director of National Security. "Hello, Margaret, Alex here. Let me speak to director Donner, please." He was put on hold for a moment.

"Hello, Alex," Donner said warmly. "What can I do for you?"

Alex gave Donner a brief account of everything that had happened and everything he knew. "The whole situation is crazy and I haven't a clue as to how the bodies turned up a hundred and fifty miles away. The coroner doesn't know what killed them either."

"Listen, Alex, I've just learned another tanker ran aground in Brownsville, Texas. It was also empty and abandoned."

*What the hell's going on?* Alex thought. "Do me a favor, Martin, make this official, so I'll get some cooperation, and tell the authorities in Houston I'll be down to investigate."

"I'll call right away. Let me know what you find out."

"Also, I'll have the coroner send you the fingerprints of the crew. See if you can match them with the names and identify the missing men."

"I'll do that. Call me from Houston."

"I will."

Alex called the Seattle, Tacoma (SEATAC) International Airport and booked the next flight to Houston, which wouldn't leave Seattle until 8:00 AM the next morning. With so much time to kill, he decided to rent a car and drive to Seattle, get a room, and take the tour of the underground city in Pioneer Square.

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## Chapter 2

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON:

Harold Woolly stepped on the brake to stop his little Geo Metro station wagon as the red tail lights of the car in front of him flashed. He looked at his reflection in the rearview mirror, unconsciously pulling his thin brown hair over the bald area in the center of his forehead. He reached down, turned up the volume on the radio, and hummed off key with the gospel singers. The brake lights in front of him flashed off, and Harold got a break when a trucker was late to respond. Harold stomped on the accelerator and darted into the right lane, receiving a loud blast from the trucker's horn. *It was like a warzone on the freeway*, he thought. *Everyone's in a hurry, and as inconsiderate as possible. Even the air was deadly while stuck on the freeways.*

Twenty minutes later, he eased onto the exit ramp, down James Street, and into the parking lot beneath the Citicorp Bank Building. The elevator took him to the 38th floor, and as he rushed past the receptionist, she announced that his boss wanted to see him, first thing. "This is not good!" Harold mumbled as he tossed his briefcase onto his desk and hurried to the manager's office. Harold drew a deep breath and stepped through the doorway.

"You're late again, Woolly!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Stuckford," Harold said meekly to the pompous man in a tailored suit sitting behind the desk. "It's the traffic, sir. It's getting worse every day and . . ."

"That's no excuse! I don't have a problem getting here on time."

Harold stared at the desktop. He knew better than to say he couldn't afford a nice big house on Lake Union like his boss. As it was, he had to leave two hours early to make it on time, and add another two hours to his workday just to get home. "Yes, sir, I'll do that."

"Good. What's the status on the Whidbey Island Bank merger?"

Harold told Stuckford he was having a hard time convincing the stockholders of Whidbey Island Bank to sell out to Citicorp Bank. "They think their stock will double by next year."

Stuckford glared at Harold. "You're not aggressive enough, Woolly!" he yelled. "Now either you start threatening them, or I'll get someone else to handle the merger and you'll be looking for another job. Is that clear?"

Harold looked down at the desk and nodded. He returned to his desk and spent the better part of the day, including his lunch break, on the phone. When he finally left the office, he wished all the other cars on the highway would run out of gas so he could be the only car on the interstate.

By the time he finished the commute home, Harold was mentally exhausted, as he retrieved his briefcase from the backseat and entered his three-bedroom, rambler-style house. "I'm home, Calli," he hollered toward the kitchen.

Calli Woolly wiped her hands on a dishtowel as she stepped around the wall from the kitchen and smiled at her husband. "Hi, Dear," she said. "Dinner is almost ready. Why don't you change clothes now, so we'll be ready to go to choir practice as soon as we're through eating?"

Harold sighed deeply. "I really don't feel like choir practice tonight, Calli."

Calli's normally soft hazel eyes hardened into fierce orbs in a scowling face. "It's only two weeks until the concert, Harold!"

“But Calli, I can’t even carry a tune. You’ve told me enough times. I get tired of just mouthing the words.”

“Well if you don’t practice, you’ll embarrass me by mouthing the wrong words!”

Harold released a frustrated sigh. “You go ahead without me. I’ll go next week.”

Calli flashed him a savage look and stormed back into the kitchen. Harold dejectedly walked down the hallway, pausing at the open door of his daughter’s room. Pamela Woolly sat at her desk, schoolbooks strewn in front of her as she worked on her homework. Harold beamed with pride. Pamela was an ‘A’ student. *She’d need all the advantages she could get*, he thought. *Although he loved her dearly*, he admitted to himself, *she would have a tough time finding a man to support her*. She had inherited not only his high intelligence, but unfortunately, also his somewhat beaky nose, giving her a very homely appearance. Her bedroom didn’t resemble a typical seventeen-year-old girl’s. There were no posters of young boy idols on the walls, and no dolls or feminine knick-knacks. In fact, Pamela was not very feminine at all, preferring baseball and soccer to home economics and cheerleading. Pamela didn’t notice him standing in the doorway, and Harold continued down the hall.

His son’s bedroom door was also open, and the interior could have belonged to Rambo, for all the war posters on the walls and camouflaged clothing scattered on the floor. One wall was studded with wooden pegs, each supporting a different type of toy gun, all phenomenally realistic looking. Mark Woolly longed to be a professional soldier, spending most of his time playing war games with his friends instead of studying, as reflected by the ‘C’s and ‘D’s on his report card. Harold remembered Mark’s last birthday, when his son asked him to sign a waiver so he could join the army at age fifteen. Harold had never had any desire to join the military, and wondered where the boy’s desire came from. Mark had his mother’s good looks and seemed to have her same need to be dominant.

Harold continued to his bedroom and changed clothes. When he returned to the kitchen, Calli was standing silently at the stove with her back to him. “Did we get any mail?” he asked, hoping she might have calmed down.

“It’s on the counter,” she said curtly without turning.

Harold grabbed the small stack of envelopes and sat at the table. Bills, bills, and more bills, he saw. They never seemed to stop coming. At the bottom was an official looking envelope addressed to Mark, with no return address, only the letters, **A.O.S.** printed in the upper left corner. He thought about opening it, but knew his son would probably enjoy opening it himself.

The back door suddenly burst open and Mark Woolly rushed through, slamming it closed and peering out the window. A bright yellow substance was splattered on the left shoulder of his camouflaged shirt, and he held a long barreled paint gun in his right hand. He glanced over his shoulder at Harold. “I’m all right, Dad. Just a shoulder wound,” he said seriously.

“Go wash up for dinner,” Calli told him.

Mark spun around and looked devastated, as though about to be executed. “But Mom!” he whined. “Brian is hiding behind the fence and I can sneak out the front door and nail him!”

“You can nail him tomorrow,” Calli said tersely. “Now, go wash up for dinner!”

Mark looked dejected as he shuffled across the kitchen and disappeared around the corner. Calli set plates and silverware on the counter. “Help yourself,” she said coldly to Harold as she walked past him and left the kitchen.

*So it was going to be one of those nights*, Harold realized. Pamela would come in and fill her plate, then disappear into her bedroom. Calli would take her plate into the living room and sit in front of the television, and Mark would join him at the table. A moment later, Pamela appeared.

“Hi, Dad,” she said as she walked to the stove and piled stroganoff onto her plate. “You upset Mom again, didn’t you?” she said as she walked past and disappeared from the kitchen without waiting for a response.

Harold watched Mark as he walked to the stove. He was tall for his age, still growing by leaps, and had no problem piling a mountain of stroganoff onto his plate. Harold was glad his son liked to buy clothes at the thrift store instead of demanding new clothes like his daughter did. Mark grabbed four slices of bread before sitting at the table. “Mom’s really pissed,” he said.

“Hey! Watch the language,” Harold said halfheartedly.

“What’s the matter with her this time?”

It always amazed him how his children could be so observant. *This time was right*, Harold thought. It seemed he and Calli were arguing a lot lately. On the other hand, at least, she was getting even more demanding. In the past, he had usually given in to her demands. He had fallen head over heels in love with her in high school, though she always ignored him. She was one of the most attractive and popular girls in school, and always dated the jocks. In their senior year, he had caught her on the rebound from a doomed affair with a macho football player, who had dumped her for a cheerleader from another school. He had gathered enough courage to ask her to the senior prom, and was elated when she accepted. That night she had talked on and on about wanting a more sensitive kind of guy, and, on impulse, he asked her to marry him. When she said yes he was shocked with elation, but she also stipulated they would have to elope to Nevada that night or the deal was off. He was so happy he could hardly control himself. He took her to her house so she could grab some clothes. He didn’t even bother stopping at his house and drove straight through to Nevada. She had continued to tell him what to do since that night.

Harold and Mark both looked up when they heard the door into the garage slam shut and heard Calli’s car starting. *It’s getting worse*, Harold thought. *Now she wasn’t even saying goodbye when she left.*

Harold lost his appetite and sat watching Mark shovel bread and stroganoff into his mouth as though he was starved. “This came in the mail for you, Son.” Mark quit eating and tore open the envelope. “What does AOS stand for?” Harold asked.

“Army of Survival,” Mark replied and dumped several brochures onto the table.

The brochures had pictures of men and women in camouflaged clothing, posed in various stages of combat. One picture was of a group of men and women standing at attention in front of a raised cabin. On a porch behind them was a tall, dark-haired man with a black patch over one eye. “Where did you learn about this?” Harold asked.

“From Brian’s older brother, John. He heard about it when he was in the Marine Corps.”

“That’s strange, Max Everex never told me he had another son.”

“He’s from Mr. Everex’s first marriage. He doesn’t come around much. Brian says it’s because neither of his parents like him. I think he’s a neat guy. He let Brian and me hold some of the awesome guns and weapons he carries around in the trunk of his car.”

Harold suddenly felt a sense of alarm. It was one thing for his son to play with toy weapons, but quite another for him to play with real ones. “So where is Brian’s brother now?”

“Here, I think.” Mark held up a brochure. “That’s where he was headed when he left.”

*That’s a relief*, Harold thought.

Pamela appeared and set her plate in the sink, then sat at the table, looking very serious. “When you and Mom get divorced, I want to live with her.”

“Not me!” Mark said adamantly. “I want to live with you, Dad.”

Again, Harold was surprised how astute his children were to have noticed the rift forming between their parents. “Now, wait a minute, both of you. Who said anything about a divorce?”

Pamela looked at him, her expression one of forbidden knowledge. “I heard Mom and Miss Stoker talking. Miss Stoker told Mom to get a good attorney and take you to the cleaners.”

Harold was thunderstruck. He had no idea Calli was planning on a divorce. He looked at Pamela. “Uh, how long ago was this?”

“About three weeks ago.”

“What does ‘take you to the cleaners’ mean?” Mark asked.

Pamela answered. “It means Mom is going to get all of Dad’s money and property and put him in the poor house.”

Harold’s mind was reeling with the information. How could Calli do this to him without even talking about it?

Pamela interrupted his thoughts. “I just thought you might want to know what I want, Dad, so it will be easier in the custody battle.”

Harold looked at her and slowly nodded, then Pamela stood and left the room. He looked over at Mark, who was finishing his stroganoff as though nothing was wrong. Mark stood and put his plate in the sink and walked toward the back door. “I’m going to find Brian so we can finish our game.”

After the door slammed shut, Harold remained seated and tried to cope with the devastating news. *I don’t want a divorce*, he thought. *Why didn’t Calli talk to him about it? Maybe she really wasn’t going through with it. Maybe it was just talk. Maybe they could work something out.*

Harold remembered accidentally discovering where Calli had hidden old love letters from her high school flings. He slowly stood and walked down the hall to their bedroom. He opened her bottom dresser drawer and dug around beneath her lingerie until he found the ribbon bound stack of letters. On top was a copy of a petition for divorce. He sat heavily on the bed, and, as though in a dream, Harold untied the ribbon, opened the document, and read the demands. Calli wanted custody of the children, the house, child support, and maintenance payments.

“My God!” he mumbled. *It was all true*, he thought. *She is taking me to the cleaners.*

His fingers felt numb as he retied the ribbon and replaced the bundle in the drawer. His mind was whirling, and after the mental stress of work and the commute home, this was more than he could take. He didn’t have the willpower to confront Calli when she came home.

Harold felt as though he couldn’t breathe. He needed some fresh air, so he slowly stood and walked down the hall. He glanced into Mark’s bedroom and saw all the guns hanging on the wall, and took two steps past the door before turning and entering the room. He stood in front of the wall of guns, carefully studying each one. Most of them were obviously plastic, but near the lower right corner was a real looking silver pistol. He gently removed it from its peg, feeling the weight of the metal as he lovingly ran his hand along its smooth barrel. *This one would do*, he decided. So beautiful. *Yes, this one would be perfect.*

Harold carried it back to his bedroom, and sat on the end of the bed so he could see himself in the dresser mirror. The man reflected in the mirror looked like someone else, he noticed. An old man with sunken eyes and a big nose. An old man with hardly any hair. Harold watched the old man in the mirror raise a beautiful silver pistol with his left hand. *Ha!* Harold exclaimed inwardly. *It is someone else. The man in the mirror was left-handed, and he was right-handed.* Harold stared in fascination as the old man turned the pistol and placed the end of the barrel against his temple. The old man in the mirror grinned at him, and Harold watched him pull the hammer back with his thumb

and pull the trigger. The hammer fell as if in slow motion, and he heard a quiet click. In the mirror, the old man's grin changed into a mocking grimace.

Suddenly, Harold couldn't stand to look at the old man anymore. He had to leave for a while, he decided. Without really thinking about it, Harold walked to the garage, retrieved an old suitcase, and returned to the bedroom. In something of a dream state, he packed a few clothes and his suit, and unconsciously tossed the silver pistol on top of the clothes and shut the lid. He didn't notice Pamela staring at him as he walked past her bedroom. He mechanically grabbed his briefcase by the sofa, and left the house.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 3

### BOULDER, COLORADO:

At the end of his sermon, Minister Menno Simons stared out over his congregation of two-hundred devout Mennonite worshippers. Outside the church, one-hundred and fifty more were sitting on the lawn or in chairs, listening to the speakers mounted to the building. *All mine to do with as I please*, he thought. *Only a handful of the thousands who follow my every command*. The incredible sense of power he felt nearly made him giggle with delight, but as always, he managed to keep his expression divine.

He looked at his mother, sitting in the front row, her thin, straight hair now completely gray. *How frail she looks*, he thought. He watched her bring an inhaler to her mouth and take a deep breath. Her asthma was getting worse, and the air pollution throughout the world was only making it worse for her. *I hope she lives long enough to see our dream come true*, he thought.

Elizabeth Simons was the only member of the congregation not hypnotized by her son, even though her sense of pride was nearly overwhelming. From the morning she opened the door and found him lying naked on her porch, she felt the power radiating from his little body. She knew he was destined to be a great leader and named him after her favorite religion, the Mennonite faith. *He's so handsome*, she thought proudly. He didn't look fifty-seven. Not a trace of gray showed in his thick blond hair and his pale skin was still taut over his sharp-boned facial features. His hypnotic gray eyes were still clear and bright; a sharp contrast to his jet-black coat and trousers. She took a deep breath from her inhaler and sighed with pride.

Menno clasped the fist-sized gold cross hanging from a heavy gold chain around his neck; his signal the sermon was finished. He turned and left the pulpit, disappearing through an ornate wooden door behind him.

His private chamber was sparsely furnished, as a constant reminder that he must maintain a humble image, though his wealth was staggering. He sat in a wooden swivel rocking chair behind a plain wooden desk. He leaned back, placing his feet on the desk's scarred surface before closing his eyes. The sermons always drained so much of his energy and he needed some time to relax before talking with the stream of people who would come to see him after a sermon.

He heard a soft rapping at the door, but ignored it. *Too soon*, he thought. The door opened, and Menno looked to see who would dare enter without being asked.

When Elizabeth stepped into the chamber, she saw the fury in her son's eyes and left the door open. "I'm sorry," she said softly, "but Desmond, Gary, and Peter, have returned. I thought you might want to see them first."

The fury faded from Menno's eyes and he smiled. "Good news, I hope?" he asked in a smooth, baritone voice.

Elizabeth smiled. "I think so."

Menno nodded, and Elizabeth stepped back through the doorway. A moment later, three young men stepped through, closing the door behind them. Menno gave them a questioning stare, and all three men smiled.

Menno smiled broadly, clasping his hands together with a sharp clap. “Wonderful! Marvelous!” he exclaimed. “Sit. Sit. I want to hear all about it.”

Desmond told his tale about the oil tanker in Washington. “One man was vaporized, the rest of the crew we dropped in the snow on a mountain. That should drive them crazy, trying to figure out how they got there.”

Then Peter told him about the Arco tanker in the Gulf of Mexico. “I dumped them in the desert.”

“Are there any witnesses?” Menno asked.

A smirk formed on Peter’s lips. “Not anymore.”

Gary Darven hesitated only a second, and then explained what had happened with the Alaskan pipeline. “I didn’t have much time, but everything’s fine.”

Menno stared at Darven for a moment. He had caught the hesitation and knew there must be more to it, but was so elated his dream was coming true, he decided not to press him for the moment. “Then it begins,” Menno announced, and clasped the gold cross. The meeting was over.

The three men stood and left the chamber. A moment later, Elizabeth stepped through the door, closing it firmly. She stared at her son. “Well?”

Menno smiled and nodded. He watched his mother’s smile create more wrinkles on her lined face, and saw her eyes sparkle for the first time in years.

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Two hours later, Menno and Elizabeth arrived at his private research facility, twenty-miles south of town. They stepped out of the limousine, entered the two-story cement building, and walked to his office.

A few minutes later, the director of the facility entered and Menno smiled as he grabbed the frail looking man by the shoulders. “It’s started!” Menno told him. “They did exactly what I expected, Gerard. Well done.”

The director smiled. “Thank you. The genetic engineers will be pleased. Your instructions were pure genius. You should make millions selling these to the oil companies.”

Menno’s smile faded. “I already have millions, Gerard. I will not tell anyone about this discovery.”

The director looked puzzled. “I thought you wanted these to clean up the pollution?”

“Oh, I do, Gerard, but not that way. I have a much broader plan.”

The director wasn’t sure what his boss was getting at, but let it drop for the moment. He reached into his coat pocket and brought out a round, flat crystal, about the size of a silver dollar. “When can we start experimenting with these?”

Menno stared at the crystal and then looked into the director’s eyes. “Not until I’ve proven my point to the world. In the meantime, I’m shutting down this facility. We have enough to do what I want done.”

The director looked shocked. “But we have no idea what these are! We have to . . .”

Menno grabbed the gold cross, and the director instantly stopped his protest. “I know what they are,” Menno said sternly. “You may go.” The director hesitated for a moment, nodded, and left the office.

Menno smiled at his mother. “This is it, Mother! I will gather my followers in three days, and put an end to the pollution.” Menno was puzzled when Elizabeth didn’t smile back.

“What about the director and his engineers?” she asked. “If they tell anyone, the government will try to stop you.”

Menno grinned. “Don’t worry. Come. We must leave.”

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The director sat in his office and stared at the crystal while he thought about what Menno had said. *It was wrong, not telling the world what they had created. He thought. And if Menno didn't want the fortune they could make from selling this new technology, why shouldn't he have it? What about these crystals? They could be worth something, too.*

The director looked up at the wall safe. All the information about their research was on the flash drive. He could simply take them to another company and make millions of dollars. He smiled and walked to the safe, dialed in the combination for the door, and grabbed the electronic storage devices. *To hell with Menno, that religious fanatic, he thought. I want to be rich!*

\*

At that same moment, the limousine was about ten miles away and Menno instructed the driver to stop. Menno grabbed the phone and stepped out of the limousine. "Come, Mother," he said and helped her out.

Menno pointed back the way they came and entered a number into the phone. A brilliant flash appeared in the distance, and a few moments later, they heard a muffled explosion as a huge cloud of dust soared into the air where the flash had been.

Menno smiled. "I don't think we'll be bothered by the government, Mother."

Elizabeth smiled, and Menno helped her into the limousine.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 4

TEXAS:

The morning sun flashed blindingly off the Gulf of Mexico as the Boeing 777 jet airliner circled Brownsville International Airport. Alex stared out the window at the sprawling city below. Luxurious hotels lined the white sand beaches for miles on both sides of the city and small boats skimmed across the light blue water. South of the city, the behemoth oil tanker looked obscenely out of place with its bow so close to the shore in front of the million dollar homes lining the beach. Even from that height, Alex could tell there were many people wandering around the tanker.

*My God! What's happening to the tankers?* He wondered. *Six men were dead with no explanation as to how or why.* He sincerely hoped the crew from this tanker had escaped whatever had taken the lives of the *Scorpio's* crew.

The jet touched down and taxied to the terminal. It was only 7:30 A.M., but the outside temperature was in the upper seventies with a promise of climbing higher. Alex grabbed his tote bag, walked directly to the men's room, and changed into shorts, a polo shirt, and white tennis shoes. His next stop was the car rental desk, where he received the keys to a black Ford Thunderbird and a map of the city. When the young man handed him a small envelope, Alex tore it open and retrieved the government identification card Donner had sent him.

As Alex drove south along a two-lane road that paralleled the coast, the air smelled of saltwater and seaweed, and the blue water of the gulf stretched away to the horizon. As he drew near the tanker, he saw several police vehicles and several television news vans parked on the black asphalt driveway of what was probably a two million dollar home. He showed his identification to a police officer keeping the public at bay and drove past the barricade. He parked next to a police vehicle and walked around the side of the house, emerging on the white sand one-hundred-feet from the water. The tanker was another one-hundred and fifty-feet from shore, as if trying to make it to the small wooden boat dock in front of the house. Bold blue letters across the black bow stated the ship belonged to the West Gulf Corporation.

Alex saw two men standing on the shore and showed his identification to another police officer, who allowed him past the reporters. One of the two men near the shore was short, dressed in a tan police uniform and matching cowboy hat. The other was tall, but exceedingly overweight, and dressed in dark blue shorts and matching lightweight shirt. They turned and watched him approach across the sand.

Alex extended his hand to the police officer, a lean little man in his late forties. "Alex Cave," he told him.

"I'm Sheriff Jackson, and this is Kirt Hendrick, the representative from West Gulf."

Alex accepted Hendricks's hand, and cringed when he felt the limp handshake. Alex faced the sheriff. "Fill me in on what you've discovered so far."

Hendrick interrupted. "I can't figure it out, Mr. Cave," he began in a high-pitched voice. "Yesterday evening she left the off shore oil rig with fifteen thousand tons of crude, but she was empty when she ran aground here, eight hours later."

"What about the crew?" Alex asked hopefully.

“There were eight, but there’s no sign of them. They must have abandoned ship out in the gulf.” Alex looked at the sheriff. “Did the residents in the area see anything unusual?”

“These folks aren’t home,” said Jackson and nodded behind them. “The neighbors say they saw the tanker for the first time yesterday morning.”

“Did the tanker radio in that they have problems?”

The sheriff nodded. “The Coast Guard received a short mayday, but no one answered when they replied. They’ve been searching the gulf by helicopter all night, but only found an overturned pleasure boat with a man and woman sitting on the hull. The Coast Guard had a shrimp trawler pick them up.”

“I’d like to ask them some questions later.” The sheriff nodded assent, and Alex turned to Hendrick. “Have you been down in the cargo hold?”

Hendrick grinned. “Now why would I want to go down there? You can see she’s empty. The Coast Guard has been searching for an oil slick while searching for the crew.”

“I’d like to go onboard.”

Hendrick nodded and led Alex and the sheriff down the dock and onto the nineteen-foot motorboat. Hendrick turned the key and fired up the outboard engine, then drove them out to the tanker. To Alex, the tanker looked twice the size of the *Scorpio*, about one-hundred-feet from deck to waterline.

When they tied off to the boarding ladder hanging down from the main deck, Alex was the first to climb, followed by the sheriff. Both of them thought Hendrick might not make it to the top of the ladder, and when he finally crawled onto the deck, Hendrick spent several minutes catching his breath. Alex spent the time walking around the open deck and noticed all the inspection hatches were open. Fifteen minutes later, Hendrick led him and the sheriff into the crew quarters.

The bunks were made and looked as though they had not been slept in, but personal belongings lay scattered around the room. Hendrick led them to the galley, which was neat and orderly. Hendrick waited below, while Alex and the sheriff climbed the stairs to the bridge, which was also in perfect condition. *This was a new twist*, Alex thought. Apparently, someone had managed to steal thousands of tons of crude oil without any resistance from the crew.

Alex and the sheriff rejoined Hendrick on deck, and Alex pointed toward the long, capsule-shaped objects fastened to the railing. “Doesn’t it strike you as odd they didn’t use the life rafts?”

Hendrick nodded as he studied the capsules. “Doesn’t make sense, does it?”

Hendrick and the sheriff followed Alex over to the nearest inspection hatch, and watched him peer into the hold. Alex looked up at Hendrick and the sheriff and grinned. “Care to come along?”

Hendrick chuckled. “No, thanks.”

The Sheriff shook his head. “I’ll take your word on what you find down there.”

They watched Alex disappear down the ladder and, several minutes later, when he came out, the two men stared at him with a look of astonishment. Not a trace of oil could be seen on him or his clothes.

“What the hell?” Hendrick managed to say.

“I’ve seen enough,” Alex told them. “Let’s go back.”

Once back on shore, the three of them stared at the tanker for a moment before leaving. Alex decided to play a hunch and turned to the sheriff. “I imagine you have a helicopter at your disposal.” The sheriff nodded. “I’d like to use it for a search, if you don’t mind.”

“The Coast Guard is already searching,” the sheriff said curtly.

“So you’ve told me. They’re searching the gulf, I want to search the desert.”

The sheriff squinted and stared at Alex for a moment. *Kind of a demanding little bastard*, he thought. “Just who the hell are you, anyway?” he asked. “The governor called me personally and said to delay letting them move the tanker until you arrived. Told me to give you whatever help you needed. You seem to have a lot of pull, Mr. Cave.”

“The government asks for my help once in a while.”

The sheriff stared at Alex for a moment, and then spoke into his portable radio, requesting a chopper pick them up on the road.

“What about my ship?” Hendrick asked. “It’ll be high tide in two hours. I need to get it towed back out to sea.”

“I’m through with her,” Alex told him. “I’d like a list of the names and addresses of the crew. Have it sent to the sheriff’s office as soon as possible. I’ll pick it up when I get back.”

“No problem.”

They heard the helicopter approaching and Alex and the sheriff walked to the road. They shielded their eyes from the billowing sand as the blue police helicopter set down. Alex sat in front with the pilot, the sheriff in the back seat.

“Which direction?” the pilot asked.

“Inland, about a hundred miles,” Alex instructed.

The helicopter leapt from the ground and swung northwest. Mile after mile of green farmland passed below and, half an hour later, they were flying over brown sand and sagebrush. Alex and the sheriff stared out opposite sides of the helicopter as they flew back and forth, north and south, each time extending farther west and deeper into the desert. An hour later, the pilot informed them there was only enough fuel for the return trip.

The sheriff nodded assent to the pilot. “I gave you the benefit of the doubt, Mr. Cave, but we’re just wasting time. Ain’t no way those sailors are out here.”

Alex thought about arguing. He was sure the crew from the tanker would be found on land, just like up in Washington, but he had to admit the idea did sound crazy to someone not familiar with the incident. He nodded assent and stared out the window at the miles of barren desert. It would be sheer luck to find them anyway, he realized.

As they approached the homes along the coast, they saw the tanker being towed away from the shoreline by a large tug. The helicopter set down on the road, and Alex and the sheriff jumped out of the side door. When it had departed, the two men stared at the receding tanker for a few minutes while Hendrick approached.

The sheriff turned to Alex. “Look, Mr. Cave. It’s been a long night. I’m leaving, if you don’t mind.”

“Sorry for the inconvenience,” Alex said sincerely, and extended his hand. “I appreciate the help.” The sheriff accepted the handshake and started to walk away.

“One more thing, Sheriff,” Alex hollered.

The sheriff stopped and turned around, his expression one of irritation, but he didn’t say a word.

“I’m going to stay around until they find the bodies and I’d like to interview the couple rescued from the gulf this morning. Could you set it up?”

“Call my office in an hour,” he said curtly as he climbed into his patrol car and headed back to Brownsville.

“Any luck?” Hendrick asked. Alex shook his head. “I didn’t think you would,” Hendrick said in a condescending tone and grinned.

Alex looked at him and grinned back sardonically. “Yesterday, there was another tanker incident similar to this one. They found the crew in the snow on a mountain top, one-hundred and fifty miles away.”

Hendricks jaw dropped open in bewilderment. Alex smiled and walked back to his car, Hendrick staring after him.

Alex checked into a Best Western Hotel and dialed the sheriff’s office from his room. The husband and wife rescued from their overturned boat were named Sorenson. They had been released from the hospital, and Alex was given the address and phone number of their home in Hitchcock. Alex called to tell them he was coming, and Mr. Sorenson gave him detailed directions.

An hour later, Alex drove into the driveway of the Sorenson’s home; a huge, two story red brick mansion on a small ranch. Alex parked under the covered entryway and climbed out of his car.

As he approached the large, ornately carved wood front door, a gangly man dressed in white pants, white shirt, and white tennis shoes opened the door to greet him.

“I’m Alex Cave, Mr. Sorenson.”

“Howdy,” Sorenson replied in a decisive Texas drawl as he extended his hand. “Ya’ll come on in and I’ll fix us a drink.”

“Beautiful home,” Alex told him as they walked into the large foyer with a dark marble floor. Large, potted palm trees were spaced along the walls.

“Thanks. Built it three years ago. Tried to keep it small, now that the young’uns are gone.”

*Small?* Thought Alex. *The house must be at least six-thousand square feet.*

Sorenson led him into a huge living room, where one entire wall of windows overlooked a large pasture. White rail fencing enclosed six beautiful thoroughbred horses standing under large, green shade trees.

Sorenson walked to a well-stocked, beautiful glass bar. “Whatcha gonna have, Mr. Cave?”

“Whiskey. Neat, please.”

Sorenson chuckled. “A man after my own heart. Hate to ruin good sour mash by watering it down.” He brought the drinks over and indicated for Alex to sit in a high-backed, white leather recliner, one of two matching a massive curved sofa. Sorenson sat in the other, facing Alex, and raised his glass. “To the *Gypsy*,” he toasted and took a sip. “That’s the name of my boat,” he explained. “Fifty-two-foot Chris Craft. Damn fine boat. Hated to see her end that way.”

“Mind telling me how it happened, Mr. Sorenson? I mean, it’s a pretty big body of water out there and it seems strange you and the tanker would collide.”

A look of bewilderment spread across Sorenson’s face. “Damndest thing I ever seen. The missus and me were coming back from a trip to Louisiana. She was below, napping, and I was having a drink on deck. Had the autopilot set so I could get out and stretch a bit. Anyhow, I saw this bright light in the sky. Thought it was the mast of a boat or something. I ran back into the bridge to check the radarscope, but the whole screen was acting up. Couldn’t make out anything. My boat started turning, so I looked at the compass, and it was spinning, crazy like. When I looked back out the window, I could see the tanker outlined in a sparkly rainbow. Strangest thing I ever saw. I ran down to wake my wife so she could see it too, but had a hell of a time waking her. She’d tipped quite a few on the way back. By the time I got her up on deck, the tanker was damn near on us. I ran back onto the bridge and tried to turn away, but the damn autopilot wouldn’t release and we seemed to be gaining speed like we was a couple of magnets sucking at each other. We were headed straight at the tanker, so I ran back out and grabbed a couple of life jackets from under the seat, but we didn’t have time to put them on. I shoved my wife overboard and jumped in myself, told her to swim like hell.

Scared the living shit out of me. That tanker didn't slow down a bit. Just kept on plowing through the water like we wasn't even there. Damn lucky we weren't sucked into the propellers. Anyhow, when the tanker passed by, I saw the bottom of the *Gypsy* floating on the other side, and we swam over and climbed on. Seemed like we was sitting there forever before a helicopter came by. I waved like hell, but it didn't stop. I was so damn mad I could have chewed horseshoes. Next thing I know, this shrimp boat comes along and picks us up."

*Another new twist*, Alex thought. He hadn't seen any colored lights around the *Scorpio* when he heard their mayday. "Tell me more about the light and the rainbow you saw around the tanker."

Sorenson shrugged. "The light was brighter than all get out."

"And it was on the water, you say?"

Sorenson looked thoughtful for a moment. "Ya know, now that you mention it, it seems like it was kind of high for a boat. Like it was mounted way up on a mast, or something."

Alex thought about it for a moment, but put it aside. "Can you describe the rainbow around the ship?"

Sorenson's eyebrows moved closer together. "Damn strange. It was as if the tanker was in a halo or something, only it was full of colors. Kind of sparkly. By the time me and the Missus got back on deck, it was gone."

Alex's phone rang "Hello?"

"Sheriff Jackson here, Mr. Cave. I, uh, I owe you an apology. It seems you were right. A rancher found the eight men from the tanker on his ranch just outside Austin. Seven of them are dead, but one's still alive. Busted up pretty bad, but the hospital says he might make it."

"Where are the bodies now?"

"At the General Hospital, in Austin."

"I'm on my way."

"I'll call and let them know you're coming."

"Thanks," He turned off the phone and looked at Sorenson. "Anything else you can remember?"

Sorenson shook his head. "Not really. The missus and me just sat on the hull and stared at the moon. A real pretty moon that night, too. A crescent moon, brighter than usual. A cloud must have moved in front of it, because it just suddenly vanished."

Alex stood and extended his hand. "Thanks for your help, Mr. Sorenson, and for this excellent whiskey."

Three hours later, Alex walked into the Austin General Hospital, and the woman at the front desk gave him directions to the emergency ward. A tall man in a tan police uniform stood outside the door to the intensive care facility, Alex introduced himself.

"I'm Sheriff Earl Bowdy, Mr. Cave," said the officer as the two men shook hands. "Sheriff Jackson said you'd be coming, so I wanted to be here."

"I appreciate that. How's he doing?"

Sheriff Bowdy slowly shook his head. "Damned if I know how he's even alive. The doctor says his whole spine is a bunch of fractured bones. Early indications are he's paralyzed from the neck down. They have him heavily sedated and the doctor says he probably won't regain consciousness for a while."

"Was he conscious when you arrived at the ranch, Sheriff?"

Bowdy shook his head. "Nope. They were already loading him into the ambulance by the time I got there. The old man who found them said the man was mumbling when he first found him. We

didn't find a single sign of how they got there. No footprints, no tire tracks, nothing. Beats the hell out of me."

"Have you identified the bodies?"

"Yeah, they were all carrying identification. They match Sheriff Jackson's list from the oil tanker."

"I'd like a copy of the report."

"Sure. Stop by my office and pick it up from my secretary."

"I'd like to talk to the rancher, too."

Bowdy nodded and gave him directions. "His name is Gus Tilman," Bowdy told him. "He's an ornery old cuss. Wouldn't say much when I spoke to him."

Alex nodded, "If this man regains consciousness, I'd appreciate it if you would call me at this number." Bowdy nodded and Alex gave him his card.

Alex left the hospital and stopped at the sheriff's office for the report. Half an hour later, he saw the battered mailbox, the weathered black paint read *STAMPEDE RANCH*. Alex turned off the asphalt, onto a narrow dirt road, leaving a cloud of brown dust in his wake. A mile farther, he stopped in front of a doublewide mobile home sitting on cement blocks, surrounded by desert sand and sagebrush. Behind the mobile home stood a large wooden structure that might have been a barn.

No one came out of the mobile when Alex shut off the engine and climbed out of the car, so he walked up the rickety wood steps and pushed the doorbell button. No one answered, so he knocked loudly. When no one came to the door, he walked around the mobile toward the wooden building behind it. Dust from the dry dirt swirled around his tennis shoes as he walked past several pieces of rusted farm equipment partially hidden by the overgrown weeds. He breathed in the strong smell of sagebrush as he walked to the wooden structure.

The building was an old gray barn with a flat-sloped roof. Several additions had been crudely built onto both sides and every part of the structure was in desperate need of repair.

"Anybody here?" Alex hollered as he approached the weathered building.

The door on the first addition to the barn opened and a short, skinny man appeared in the opening. He was dressed in oil stained jeans, badly scuffed cowboy boots, and a tee shirt that might have been white at one time. He wore an old, sweat-stained cowboy hat.

As Alex walked closer, he saw the man's face was as weathered as the barn. Deep wrinkles gave the impression of a prune with the texture of rawhide.

The man stared at him suspiciously. "What can I do for ya?" he said in a raspy voice.

"My name's Alex Cave, Mr. Tilman. I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Tilman pulled a dirty rag from his back pocket, lifted his hat, and wiped the tattered cloth across his bald head. "Nothing that can't wait. What's on your mind?" he asked curtly as he set his hat back on his head and stared at Alex.

"It's about the men you found, Mr. Tilman. The sheriff said one of them was mumbling when you found him."

Tilman stared at him quizzically. "You don't look like a law man, not dressed in them duds."

Alex grinned. "You're right, I'm not. Actually, I'm a teacher at a university in Montana."

Tilman's leather face looked as though it would crack when he smiled. "Montana," he said wistfully. "I always wanted to move to Montana. Seen pictures of it when I was a boy. Gaud almighty that's pretty country." Tilman took on a faraway look as he stared into the distance for a moment and then looked back at Alex. "A teacher you say? I have a lot of respect for teachers. Never

made it past the tenth grade, myself. Lied about my age and joined the Army when I was sixteen. Anyhow, why's a teacher interested in those men?"

"It's a long story, but basically I'm just curious."

Tilman stared at Alex for a moment, and then nodded. "Yeah, the man was hurting something fearful. Kept mumbling about a bright light."

"Do you remember his exact words?"

Tilman rubbed his jaw as he thought about it. "Seems to me he said something like, '*Stay away from the purple light. I have to hide.*' He must have been delirious."

"Anything else you can remember, Mr. Tilman? Anything at all?"

Tilman slowly shook his head. "Not in particular."

Alex nodded and extended his hand. "Thanks for your help, Mr. Tilman."

Tilman smiled. "You keep on teaching, ya hear?"

Alex smiled. "I will, Mr. Tilman." Alex turned and started walking toward his car. He had just reached the corner of the mobile home when he heard Tilman yell his name. Alex stopped, turned around, and saw Tilman shuffling toward him, small clouds of dust swirling around his boots.

"I just remembered something," Tilman told him. "Come to think of it, he did say something about a ship. Must have been delirious, though. He called it a spaceship."

Alex nodded. "Thanks again," he said, and continued to his car.

On the drive back to Brownsville, Alex kept repeating the words the injured crewmember had mumbled to Tilman. The light had to be the same one Sorenson saw, but what about another ship? Sorenson didn't say anything about a ship. So where did the crewmember see a ship?

When he arrived in Brownsville, Alex drove to the Coast Guard station and talked to the duty officer; a sea-weathered man with white curly hair named Brian Conroy.

"Got a call about you, Mr. Cave," Conroy told him. "I've been told to extend you every courtesy. What can I do for you?"

"I appreciate it, Commander. I'd like to know how many ships were in the area of the West Gulf tanker last night."

"I've already checked into it. There were a few pleasure boats in the area, but no ships along the tanker's course."

"None? Isn't that unusual?"

"Not really. Take a look." Conroy waved Alex over to a large map of the gulf and tapped his finger on an X with a red circle around it. It was directly in a southeasterly line from Brownsville. "That's the offshore oil rig where the tanker was filled. The tanker normally runs a straight course into Brownsville, but last night she veered south and ran aground here." Conroy pointed to the spot on the map, then placed his finger on the eastern end of the shoreline, a short distance off the coast, and drug it along the map. "Most of the shipping traffic follows this course, about fifty miles offshore. We track them on radar and at the time of the incident, there were no ships in the area of the tanker until well after she ran aground."

"Interesting," Alex said as he stared at the map for a moment, and then looked at Conroy. "Did you know they found the crew?"

"Yes. Sheriff Jackson called a few hours ago. Said the one survivor is still unconscious. They promised to let me know as soon as they learn anything. He thought you would stop in here, and he wants you to call him before you leave."

Alex nodded. "I interviewed the man who found the crew on his ranch." Alex told him what Tilman had said.

Conroy looked skeptical. "From what I hear, he was probably delirious as hell."

"You're probably right. Thanks for your time, Commander."

Alex called Jackson's office.

"I got a preliminary autopsy report, Mr. Cave," said Jackson. "The coroner's baffled. It seems the blood in all the bodies of the dead crew had been dehydrated. Must have been the dry desert air."

"It was the same in the bodies of the *Scorpio's* crew. I appreciate the call." Alex hung up and walked out to his car.

It was nearly dark when Alex returned to his hotel room. He tried calling Martin Donner, but was transferred to voicemail. He ordered dinner from room service, and while he waited, sat at the desk and wrote down the details he'd discovered so far, churning them over and over in his mind, trying to come up with some logical conclusion, but an answer eluded him.

His dinner arrived, and Alex ate at the desk, occasionally jotting down his thoughts. He finished the dinner and stepped out on the balcony to see the lights of the city. The room was on the east side of the building and the moon was just creeping over the horizon; a dull yellow full moon against an indigo sky. Suddenly, Sorenson's last statement leapt to the front of his thoughts. "A crescent moon, brighter than usual," Alex said aloud. The moon doesn't change phases that fast, he knew. So what was Sorenson looking at? Alex sighed and left the balcony. After a quick shower, he crawled into bed and turned on the television, switching channels until he found a news broadcast. He wasn't really listening too close while his mind churned over the strange events of the past three days. A map of Alaska suddenly flashed on the screen and the camera zoomed in on an oil tanker in Prince William Sound. Alex grabbed the remote control and fumbled with the buttons until the volume increased.

*“. . . EXXON Valdez incident. This is the way it looked after the spill,”* the female announcer was saying as the picture changed to show work crews in yellow rubber coats and pants cleaning up the thick, slimy crude oil along the rocky shoreline. The picture changed again, and a dotted line ran down across a map of Alaska. *“The pipeline was completed in 1974, using state of the art technology and it is supposed to be impossible for a rupture to occur. In a statement released an hour ago, authorities said they don't think the pipeline is ruptured, but they refused to speculate on why the oil from Prudhoe Bay has failed to reach its destination in Valdez. They have shut down the pumping stations and crews have been dispatched to check every foot of the pipeline for any sign of leakage. Some sections can't be searched because of the severe snowstorm that has moved over the area. Our meteorologist, Mike Banner, will explain what's going on.”*

The picture changed, and a heavysset man appeared next to a satellite image of North America as he explained about the storm. His phone suddenly rang and Alex grabbed it. "Hello?"

"Alex, it's Martin Donner. We have a major problem in Alaska."

"I know. I just saw the news broadcast."

"Listen, Alex. This is no longer just an investigation. The President called a moment ago and informed me the Joint Chiefs think someone is sabotaging our domestic oil supply. I don't have to tell you what that would do to our nation. He wants an all-out effort to find who's behind it and stop them any way we can."

Alex didn't reply for a moment as he thought about the idea of sabotage.

"Alex? Did you hear me?" Martin said in a tone of desperation.

"Yes, Martin. I'll fly up to Valdez on the next available flight."

"Good, I'm putting you in charge of the investigation. I'll call and tell them you're coming. What have you discovered there?"

“It’s almost identical to the incident with the Americrude tanker.” Alex explained all he knew. “We’ll know more when the survivor regains consciousness.”

“Okay, stay on top of it. Call me day or night if you find out anything.”

“I will. I’ll send you the names of the crewmembers. I’d like a background check on them as soon as possible.”

“Okay, I’ll see to it.”

“Thanks, Martin.” Alex hung up and called the airport. The next connecting flight to Alaska was in three hours, and he booked a seat. He packed his tote bag, grabbed his notes from the desk and shoved them inside, then checked out of the hotel and drove to the airport.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 5

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON:

Harold Woolly lay back against the pillows propped against the headboard in his room at the Motel. He stared at the television screen, the only illumination in the tiny room. The announcer on the eleven o'clock news broadcast was explaining how the disabled pipeline in Alaska might have an effect on the availability of petroleum products in Washington State.

*“Authorities tell us there should be enough reserve gasoline and heating oil to carry us through a temporary shutdown of the pipeline, and there is no reason for anyone to panic. The same situation has occurred many times over the past several years, when the pipeline has been shut down for routine maintenance, and it has never created a shortage. We are not the only ones dependent on the supply of oil from the pipeline. Oregon and California also receive most of their crude oil from Alaska, and the refineries on the west coast ship the refined products to Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Nevada. In a statement released to the press early this morning, our Governor has asked that nobody panic over the news from Alaska.”*

Harold shook his head at the stupidity of the news media. *Those guys at the news stations are idiots*, he thought. Nobody would even think about panicking if the broadcasters didn't plant the idea in people's heads.

His thoughts turned to his family. *What would Calli think of all of this?* He wondered. *Since she didn't work, she probably could not care less if there was a gas shortage. The school busses would still run, so the kids would be okay. It might interfere with her social life, though.* Harold grinned as a mental picture came to mind of Calli all upset because she couldn't get to her precious choir practice. He chuckled. Wouldn't it be funny if they had to cancel the whole concert? That would really fry Calli.

Harold's smile slowly faded as his thoughts returned to his situation. Sure, his boss was happy he made it to work early for the past two mornings, but he really missed his family. What good was it to have such a short drive to and from work when he didn't have anything to do with all the extra time? All he could do after leaving the office was return to this tiny room and stare at the television.

He desperately wanted to call Calli and ask if it was all right to come home. *But wait a minute*, he thought. *I left her. She didn't kick me out. Why should I have to ask permission? She is the one filing for a divorce, not me.* He thought about packing his suitcase and going home, but the idea of a confrontation with Calli changed his mind. He decided that maybe staying away for a while might be good for their marriage. He decided to give it a little more time, hoping Calli might change her mind about divorcing him.

He sat on the end of the bed. “Why me?” he mumbled softly in the dark as a tear slowly rolled down his cheek. A soft sob escaped his lips, and suddenly he couldn't hold back the steady stream of tears. He fell back onto the bed and let them flow.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 6

### VALDEZ, ALASKA:

Alex managed a few hours of sleep on the flight from Houston, and, during the two-hour layover in Seattle, he purchased warmer clothing and an additional suitcase. His next stop was Anchorage, Alaska, where he joined two elderly women on a small plane bound for the southern end of the Alaska pipeline, in the town of Valdez. They landed on a runway covered with brown colored snow, and taxied to the air terminal. It was cold when he stepped off the plane, and a sign on top of the terminal read twenty-two degrees. When Alex entered the small passenger terminal, he looked around for a moment, and noticed a petite woman standing a short distance away. *Attractive*, he thought. Her long, light red hair hung loosely inside the pulled back hood of her pale blue snow parka. She smiled warmly as she walked toward him.

“You must be Mr. Cave,” she said in a slightly husky voice and extended her hand. “I’m Christa Avery.”

Alex smiled as he accepted her hand, and felt a surprisingly strong grip. He noticed she had eyes the color of green candy and small dimples at the corners of her mouth when she smiled. She wore very little make up and was in her late twenties, he guessed. “Nice to meet you, Miss Avery. Are you in charge here?”

Christa smiled. “No, I’m just part of the hired help for the All Alaska Company.”

Alex looked at her. “Come again?”

“All the major oil companies joined forces to build the pipeline under the name, All Alaska Corporation.”

“What do you do?”

“Oh, I do the brain work and tests for the corporation. I thought I might be of some help in your investigation.”

“Do you know about the tanker incident in Houston?”

“Not all the details. You can fill us in on the way to the loading docks. I have a ride waiting outside.”

Alex nodded and grabbed his bags, and together they walked across hard-packed snow through the chilly evening air. White smoke blossomed from the exhaust of a black Chevy Suburban, with ALL ALASKA painted on the door in large white letters. As they approached, the driver’s door opened and an enormous man crawled out, smiling broadly from inside the hood of a heavy orange parka.

Christa introduced him. “Mr. Cave, this is the head honcho for the pipeline, Jerhamia Peterson.”

Alex’s first impression was Peterson could have just stepped off a Viking longboat. He appeared to be of Norwegian descent judging by his blond hair and light blue eyes. The hand he extended was nearly twice as big as his was. Alex estimated Peterson stood six-foot-six, and weighed about two-hundred and eighty pounds.

“Everyone calls me Bull,” Peterson said in a voice that could have come from the bottom of an empty oil drum.

“I can see why,” Alex said with a smile and accepted his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Bull.” He looked at Christa. “Since we’re going to be working together, let’s use first names.”

Christa smiled. “Fine with me.”

Bull opened the tailgate. “Toss your bags in and I’ll take you to our office.”

Alex tossed his bags inside, and everyone climbed into the front seat, with Christa in the middle. On the drive to the office, Alex filled them in on what he had discovered in Houston.

“The incidents on the West Gulf tanker were the same as the *Scorpio*. Not a speck of oil was left in the hold. We lucked out with the crew, though. There’s a survivor. When he regains consciousness, I hope we’ll learn what actually happened. What’s bothering me the most is what happened to the other crewmember? We’ve learned their names and I’ve asked for a background check on each of them.”

As they drove past the loading dock, Alex saw the *Scorpio* moored to the docks. She rode high in the water, apparently still empty. Bull stopped in front of a single story building with the company logo above the door. Light gray smoke escaped from a single silver stack on the roof, and soft white light escaped through two windows on either side of a metal door in the center.

They climbed out and followed Christa into the building. It was warm inside the sparsely furnished office, so they removed their parkas and hung them near the door. Bull introduced them to a wiry little man sitting at one of the desks. “This is Herb Bell, our station manager.”

When Herb stood, it was as though he was still sitting, for he could not have been over four and a half feet tall. His dark brown eyes sparkled behind horn-rimmed glasses perched on an oversized nose. His long black hair was streaked with gray, and tied in a long braided tail. His dark brown complexion and facial features declared he was a native Alaskan.

“Herb, this is the government man we were expecting, Alex Cave.”

Herb shook Alex’s hand. “Everybody calls me Herb, Mr. Cave.”

“Just Alex, will do,” he told him. Herb’s friendly smile exposed his widely spaced teeth.

“I’ll show you what’s going on,” Herb told him and walked to a large chalkboard with columns of numbers scrawled across it. When he released a pin on either side and flipped it over, a large map of Alaska was tacked to the other side, and a narrow red line depicted the pipeline.

“Late yesterday afternoon, the engineers at pumping station thirteen reported a low pressure alarm,” Herb told him. “We called the main station in Prudhoe Bay, and they reported they were still pumping oil into the line at eighty three thousand barrels an hour. We knew immediately something was wrong and shut everything down. We closed all one-hundred and forty-two valves in the line, and had all the pump stations report their status so we could isolate the area where the pressure drop began. The problem is here, at pumping station twelve, just west of Black Rapids. They’re the only one we haven’t heard from. Unfortunately, the storm is stopping us from finding out why.”

“And here’s the kicker,” Bull added. “When we checked the reservoirs here, in Valdez, we discovered they were empty except for a few inches of sea water.”

A frown formed on Alex’s lips. “I found salt water on the floor in the holds of the ships. How much oil was in your reservoirs?”

“About six million barrels give or take, plus whatever was in the pipeline.”

“My God!” Alex mumbled. He looked at Herb. “Can you estimate when this started?”

“Already have,” Herb told him. “We move two million barrels a day through the line. It figures the sea water began replacing the oil on the twelfth of March.”

“That’s the same day the *Scorpio* was attacked,” Bull added. “She was the last tanker to receive a full load of crude.” Bull shook his head in wonder. “What bugs the shit out of me, is how in the hell did sea water get into the line from the middle of Alaska?”

“Any idea when the storm will break?” Alex asked.

Herb nodded. “Sometime tonight, if the forecasters are right.”

“I’ve made arrangements for you at the hotel,” Christa told Alex. “It’s just down the street.”

“Thanks. It’s getting late, and I have a few calls to make. I’ll meet you here in the morning.”

Christa watched Alex leave the office, and then turned to Bull. “A good looking stranger comes to town, and you’d think he could have at least invited me out for a drink.”

“Maybe he’s married,” Herb offered.

“I didn’t see a wedding ring,” Christa told him. “Maybe he’s the bashful type. I’ll have to work on it. See you in the morning, guys.”

Christa stepped through the door and saw Alex pulling his suitcase across the snow. On a sudden impulse, she jogged up beside him.

Alex stopped and looked at her. “Is there something else?” he asked.

Christa smiled, feeling a little ridiculous. “Can I buy you a drink?”

Alex smiled. “That’s the best offer I’ve had all day.”

They walked without speaking and entered the hotel, where Alex checked in and asked for his bags to be taken to his room. Once Alex had his room card, they entered the dimly lit cocktail lounge and sat at a small table.

“Where are you from?” Christa asked.

“I have a small ranch just outside of Bozeman, Montana.”

“And you work for the government?”

Alex smiled. “Sometimes. I’m more of a consultant, now. I spend most of my time teaching at the university.”

“Oh? What do you teach?”

“Geology and geophysics.”

The server arrived and they ordered, Alex a bourbon and water, Christa a vodka tonic with a twist of lime.

Christa’s curiosity was driving her mad. She felt strangely attracted to Alex, and wondered why. He wasn’t exactly handsome, but decent looking. When he walked, it was with an easy stride, as though unconsciously knowing where each step would land. He seemed so self-confident. *Not in an egotistical way*, she thought, *but more like he knew who he was and what he wanted, and was at peace with himself*. She couldn’t restrain herself any longer. “Are you married?” she blurted. She saw a trace of anguish as he looked away. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, feeling foolish for being so blunt. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

Alex looked back, saw her embarrassment, and smiled. “Don’t be. It’s just a sore spot, is all.”

Alex sighed. He had put that part of the past out of his mind for a long time, and the question suddenly brought back a flood of painful memories. He looked over at Christa, who was staring at her folded hands on the table. He hadn’t spoken about his past to many people, but something about Christa’s apparent bold and affable personality appealed to him, and he felt he could confide in her.

“I was married,” he began. “She was killed three years ago.”

Christa looked up, saw his painful smile, and felt a strange urge to share his pain. “I’m sorry,” she said sincerely. “What happened?”

“I met Sevi when I was an agent in Holland, and, after a whirlwind courtship, we were married.”

Christa saw him smile at the thought, and wondered what Sevi had looked like. “Agent, like in CIA?”

Alex’s smile suddenly turned to a look of hatred as he nodded. “I’d made a few enemies over the years, and they decided to get even. They planted a bomb in our apartment. One with a timer activated when the door was opened. I was five blocks away when I heard the explosion, but wasn’t sure what it was from. When I arrived at our block, I saw the windows blown out of the apartment. The police and fire departments had already arrived, and the ambulance crew was bringing a body out on a stretcher. I had a sinking feeling deep in my stomach, even before I pulled back the blanket. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. My mind just went blank. I don’t remember everything that happened over the next few days. I guess I went crazy for a while and went after the men responsible. The CIA finally tracked me down and pulled me out of Russia, but I’d somehow managed to kill the three men who did it.”

“Is that how you got those scars?” Christa asked.

Alex looked at her and nodded, then smiled and touched the scar on his nose. “Didn’t help my appearance much, did it?”

Christa smiled. “So, then what happened?”

“I came back to the states, went back to college, and managed to get a job at the university in Bozeman.” Alex felt a little foolish and changed the subject. “Enough of my rambling on. Tell me about yourself.”

“Oh, not much to tell, really. Born and raised in Salem, Oregon. After college, I was hired by All Alaska. Pretty boring, huh?”

Alex smiled. “Never married?”

Christa grinned shyly and shook her head. “Just never met the right man, I guess. I’ve had a few boyfriends, but just couldn’t seem to get into any long term relationships.”

Alex stifled a yawn and Christa noticed. “Listen,” she said. “I imagine you’ve had a long day, with the flight and all. I’d better let you get some sleep.”

Alex smiled and nodded. “It’s been a long couple of days, matter of fact.” He reached for his wallet.

“Oh, no,” Christa told him as she reached into her coat pocket. “I said I’d buy you a drink. Women’s lib and all.” Christa set a few bills on the table and stood.

Alex stood, too. “Thanks. I guess I’ll see you in the morning?”

Christa smiled and had to restrain herself from reaching up and hugging him. She extended her hand instead. “You bet.” When Alex took her hand, she could swear she felt a mild tingling sensation from his touch.

Alex felt a strong desire to hold her. Perhaps it was because he had just shared something very personal with her. Christa turned, and he watched her leave the cocktail lounge. *Was it more than sharing his past with her?* he wondered. He hoped not. He’d gotten involved once, and had caused her death. He slowly shook his head. “Damn! Don’t do it again, Alex,” he said softly as a picture of Sevi lying on the stretcher flashed through his mind as he walked down the hall. Never again, he swore.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 7

AMERICRUDE/WEST GULF OIL REFINERY. MARCH POINT, WASHINGTON:

Fifty-four year old Bob Henley laid his cards down on the table in the refinery's control center. "Gin," he said with a grin through his gray beard. "That's twenty bucks you owe me now, Tony," he added and chuckled.

The night watchman threw his cards on the table. "I've had enough!" he snarled.

"Come on now, Tony. It beats wandering around the storage tanks out in the cold, doesn't it?"

"Not when you're on a lucky streak," Tony Mancuso said and stood. Though he was two years younger than Henry, he was completely bald, his brown eyes dull and slightly bloodshot. He pulled a stocking cap over his head. "I'm going for a drive. Be back in an hour."

Mancuso left the control center and stepped into the cold night fog. He walked down the steps to his pickup truck, started the engine, and turned on the wipers to remove the dew, which had accumulated over the past six hours. For twenty-two years, he had driven through the sprawling spaghetti farm of oil pipelines at the refinery, conscientious and devoted for the first ten, now bored with the whole routine. Since nothing ever happened anyway, he spent most of his watch in the control center with whoever had the graveyard shift.

Mancuso shifted into drive and followed the winding road down to the tank farm. The massive metal holding tanks were bathed in bright lights, which illuminated the swirls and eddy of the fog.

Mancuso stopped near tank number thirty-four and climbed out of the truck. He walked a few paces to the large pipes welded to the bottom of the crude oil storage tank and grabbed the whisky bottle hidden behind them. As he tilted his head back and took a long drink, he thought his imagination was playing tricks on him. He thought he saw colored lights dancing on the outside of the tanks. Some of the whisky dribbled down his cheek, so he brought the bottle down to wipe it away with his hand. When he looked up again, sparkling rainbows of light were all around him. He could feel their heat against his skin, like tiny warm pinpricks. Mancuso stared in rapt fascination for several moments until the rainbows ceased and bright light suddenly blinded him.

The whiskey bottle fell from his grip and shattered on the ground. A moment later, Mancuso collapsed on top of it, dead.

In the control station, Henley suddenly heard alarm horns screaming in the night. Flashing red lights dotted the control panel, and a smaller alarm horn was screaming in the room. He leapt out of the chair and studied the control panel. All the pumps were cavitating, and there was no pressure in the lines.

The telephone began ringing as workers throughout the refinery called in to find out what was happening. Henley let them ring while he continued to shut down the plant. One by one the lights on the panel returned to green, and with the final throw of a switch, the irritating horn became silent.

Henley began answering the phones and giving instructions. "Get someone down to the tank farm and check the levels in the crude oil tanks! We've lost pressure, so make sure the cooker is off!" he screamed into the phone and slammed it down. "I don't know what happened!" he roared at someone on the third line. The phone kept ringing, and Henley kept yelling instructions.

“Yeah,” he said curtly, his face a mask of anger as he grabbed another phone. Henley’s expression turned to one of stunned disbelief. “Are you positive? All right. Check the levels in the other tanks and call me back.”

Henley hung up and shook his head in wonder as he stared at the control panel. “The tanks are empty,” he mumbled. “They’re all empty!”

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#### VALDEZ, ALASKA:

At 5:00 A.M., the cellphone rang and Bull fumbled on the nightstand for it. “Yeah?” he answered groggily and listened to the caller. “Okay, Herb, be there in a few minutes,” he replied and hung up. He turned to look at his wife, who was snoring softly. He rolled out of bed and shuffled to the bathroom. After splashing cold water on his face, he dressed and grabbed his heavy orange parka, pulling it on as he walked out the door. The sting of frigid air on his face helped him gather his senses as he walked in the half-light of morning toward the office. Bright light escaped through the windows in the entrance, and Bull could see someone moving around inside. When he walked through the doorway, Herb turned to greet him, a deep apprehension etched on his face.

Herb handed Bull three sheets of paper. “This is a copy of the report from the refinery at March Point.”

Bull read the report and stared at Herb. “Has this been verified?”

Herb nodded somberly. “I just got off the phone. After the alarms went off, they sent a man into the tanks and he said the only thing in them was a little water.”

“Shit!” Bull mumbled. “That’s over ten million barrels.”

Herb nodded. “They said there’s no oil in the harbor, and the retaining areas around the tanks haven’t been contaminated.”

“What about the night watchman. Have they questioned him yet?”

“They found him, but he was dead.”

Bull walked to the desk and sat down. “This whole damn thing is getting ridiculous. I’m calling the company president to recommend we suspend transporting any more crude on the west coast until we find out what’s going on.”

Herb listened to Bull argue for several minutes with the man on the other end of the phone. He was shocked to hear Bull use such strong language with the president of the company.

Bull slammed the receiver down. “Damn! That asshole has no idea what’s at stake here. He’s going to keep loading tankers from the Kenai Peninsula oil wells and the offshore rig at Cook Inlet. He wants us back on line as soon as possible.”

“Maybe Mr. Cave can get Washington D.C. to intervene?” Herb asked.

“I’ll ask him, but I doubt it. What’s the weather report, Herb?”

“The storm’s moving east. We should be able to get to the pumping station in a couple of hours. You won’t have much time, though. Another storm is supposed to be coming in.”

Bull nodded. “I’d better wake Alex and Christa. Have you eaten yet?” Herb shook his head. “We’ll meet them for breakfast in the hotel restaurant. I have a feeling it’s going to be a hectic day.”

In the restaurant, Bull explained what happened at the refinery. “Listen, Alex. I was wondering if you might be able to have Washington order the company to stop transporting until we find out what’s happening to the oil.”

Alex nodded. “I’ll try, but let’s check out the pumping station first. Maybe it will give us more ammunition.”

Bull nodded agreement. "I'll round up a pilot. We have a small plane at the airport, and there's a big landing area near the station."

"I'm a pilot," Alex informed him. "Mind if I fly us in?"

Bull shrugged. "Fine by me," he said, and stood from the table.

"I'd like to go, too," Christa told them, and Bull gave a nod of approval.

"I'll monitor the radio from the office," Herb told them.

Bull nodded assent, and they left the restaurant.

Alex and Bull shoved the airplane out of the metal hanger at the airport. The single engine craft was equipped with huge skis, which could be locked down over the tires for landing on snow. Alex climbed into the pilot seat and began his preflight check, while Bull helped Christa into the rear seat before climbing in front next to Alex. Fifteen minutes later, they were airborne, headed north up the southern slopes of the Alaskan Mountain range.

Blue skies and sunshine enhanced the spectacular view of the desolate, snow-covered mountains, as they followed the route of the pipeline. Small areas of the huge pipe were exposed occasionally, but most of it was either underground or covered with snow. As they neared the summit, Bull pointed to a pass in the mountain range, and a large, snow covered meadow just below it. As they circled the meadow to assess their landing area, Bull suddenly leaned forward in his seat and stared out the side window.

"Shit!" he moaned softly and turned to look at Alex. "There's a section of the pipeline missing! Take us around again."

Alex did as instructed, and Bull pointed out the window. "See that shadowed area? That's the entrance to the underground pumping station. There is supposed to be fifty-feet of pipe coming out of the building before it drops underground, but it's not there."

"Maybe it's buried under the snow?" Christa offered.

Bull shook his head. "Not possible. That section of pipe was twenty-feet above the ground. It's gone, I tell you! Take us down, Alex, and we'll take a closer look."

Alex brought the plane down in a smooth landing, and taxied to the northern edge of the meadow before shutting down the engine. About a hundred-feet directly ahead was a large shadowed arch rising above the snow; the entrance to the underground facility.

"The snow shoes are in the rear compartment," Bull told them. "Stay on the plane's skis until you put them on or you'll sink to your waist in the snow." Alex and Christa did as instructed. "We'd better find the crew first," Bull told them, "then we'll take a look at what happened to the pipeline."

Bull led them to the covered entrance, where a flat cement wall separated the chamber from the interior of the facility. White light illuminated the windows, built into large double doors in the center of the wall.

"At least the generator is still working," Bull said, as they removed their snowshoes and leaned them against the wall. "It runs off a natural gas fired turbine." Bull led them through one side of the doors, and they felt the warmth of the interior walkway, which ran to their left and right.

"Anybody here?" Bull yelled down the concrete tunnel as he removed his gloves and unzipped his parka. No one answered, so he waved a hand to the right. "Down there are the pumps and the generator." He turned left. "Let's check out the living quarters."

The first room they entered was the dining and recreation area, with cooking equipment along one wall. Several plates of partially eaten food sat on the table, in the center, and the air had an acrid, burnt smell. Bull immediately spotted the large pot on the stove and grabbed a dishtowel to slide the pot into the sink. Steam hissed and billowed from inside as he turned on the water to fill the pot.

“Shit,” Bull moaned softly. “This doesn’t look good.” He walked across the room to another opening in the concrete wall. “There are six bedrooms down this corridor, three on each side, and a bathroom at the end. Let’s check them out.”

Bull opened the door to the first room on the right and looked into the bedroom, while Christa and Alex looked into the open doorway of the room across from it. The furnishings consisted of two beds, one on either side of a single desk in the center of the wall directly ahead. Both rooms were unoccupied, as were the rest of the bedrooms and the bathroom.

“Come on,” Bull told them. “Let’s check out the rest of this place.”

They walked back down the main tunnel, past the entrance door, and past another door directly across from it. “What’s in here?” Christa asked.

“Just a storage room,” Bull told her before entering the pumping facility. The muffled whine of the gas turbine driven generator filled the massive room. In the center of the room, two gigantic pumps rose above the floor. On either end of the room, the forty-eight inch pipeline entered through the wall, into the pumps, and exited through the opposite wall. The pumps were motionless and quiet, and the large control panel appeared dead.

“Where the hell are the engineers?” Bull mumbled. “Come on, let’s go back to the living quarters and call Herb.”

Bull led the way back through the tunnel. Out of curiosity, Christa opened the small door to the storage room across from the main entrance to see what was inside. She flipped on the switch and gasped in surprise. “In here!” she shouted, and rushed through the opening.

Alex and Bull ran back and stepped inside. Christa was kneeling next to a man huddled against a stack of cardboard boxes. The man was shaking uncontrollably, his face was a mask of terror, and his eyes stared straight ahead as if no one else was in the room with him. The room was frigid, and the man was wearing only jeans and a tee shirt.

“Let’s get him into the living quarters,” Bull told them and knelt next to the man. He cradled him in his arms and stood as if the man was as light as a feather. Bull carried him into the first bedroom and laid him on the bed. Christa stripped two blankets off the other bed and spread them over the man, who continued to shake uncontrollably, his eyes wide with fear and still staring into space.

“I’ll make some coffee,” Christa told Bull. She turned to leave the room and noticed Alex wasn’t with them. When she entered the kitchen, she still didn’t see Alex. Setting her curiosity aside for the moment, she dug through the cupboards until she found the coffee and filters.

Alex remained in the storage room, staring at the stacks of cardboard boxes lining three walls, directly ahead and to both sides of the doorway. Something bothered him about the way they were stacked. He stepped forward, grabbed the top box in the center, and pulled it down. There was a wide gap between the stack and the back wall, so he set the box to the side and dragged the next box down from between the others and set it on the floor, then bent over the bottom box. Behind the stack, two faces stared up at him through open, sightless eyes. They lay head to head on their backs, and below them were two more bodies.

When Christa entered the kitchen, Alex was returning to the living quarters. “I was wondering where you’ve been,” she told him.

“I’ve found the other engineers. They’re all dead.”

“Oh my God! How?”

Alex shook his head. “I don’t know. How’s this one doing. Has he said anything?”

“We’ve managed to get some coffee into him, but he’s still in shock and . . .”

“Christa! Alex! Come quick!” Bull shouted from the bedroom.

Christa and Alex ran into the room, and Bull was leaning over the engineer. “He’s coming around.”

When Christa and Alex knelt next to Bull, they could hear the engineer mumbling. “The light!” he moaned. “Stay away from the purple light!”

“What’s his name?” Alex asked.

“I don’t know,” Bull told him. “These guys rotate through, and I don’t usually get to meet them.”

“See if he’s got any ID,” Alex told him.

Bull rolled the man onto his side and felt the back pockets of his jeans, but there was no wallet. Christa leaned over the engineer and pulled on a thin chain around the man’s neck. A small medallion slid out from the collar of his tee shirt.

“His name’s Mike Broden,” Christa informed them as she read the inscription on the back of the medallion. “And he’s allergic to penicillin.”

Alex leaned closer to Broden. “What happened, Mike?”

“I can’t let them find me!” Broden muttered in fear and tried to get out of bed.

Bull and Alex held him down. “It’s all right,” Alex assured him. “This is very important, Mike. Do you understand?”

Broden began thrashing savagely. “I have to hide!” he shouted.

It took both Bull and Alex to hold Broden down, as he continued to thrash like a madman for several minutes, then as if all his energy had been spent, Broden passed out.

“Shit!” Bull mumbled.

“I think we’d better take him out of here,” Christa told them. “He needs to get to a hospital.”

Alex stood. “I agree. Let’s get him into the plane.”

“We’d better tie him up,” Bull warned. “If he starts thrashing like that in the plane, we won’t be able to control him.”

Alex remembered seeing a stretcher in the pumping room, and while Bull tried to call the office in Valdez, Alex went to get it.

“The lines are dead,” Bull told Alex when he returned with the stretcher, “And so is the radio. We’ll have to use the one in the plane.”

After they wrapped Broden in several blankets and tied him securely into the stretcher, Alex and Bull carried him out to the entrance area and put on their snowshoes. Christa led the way over the snowdrift at the entrance and out to the airplane. She removed one of the rear seats, and then Bull and Alex slid the stretcher inside.

“What should I do with the seat?” Christa asked.

“Leave it,” Bull told her. “We don’t have room for it.”

Christa tossed the seat onto the snow, and everyone turned and stared when it made a loud thud.

“That seat should have sunk out of sight!” Bull told them.

Alex slipped his foot out of one of his snowshoes and gently stepped onto the snow. His foot sank through the small white flakes for a couple of inches before it was stopped by a solid surface. He knelt down, brushed the surface snow away, and then looked up at the others, shaking his head in wonder. “It’s solid ice,” he told them as he stood and looked around the meadow. “Christa, you stay here with Broden. Let’s take a walk, Bull. I’d like to know how big this sheet of ice is.”

Bull nodded. “Okay. Let’s split up so we can cover more area.”

Alex agreed, so they stepped out of their snowshoes and set off in opposite directions. Both men took slow, careful steps, testing the snow ahead as they walked. About two-hundred-feet out, Alex’s foot suddenly dropped off the ice into deep snow. He turned to see where Bull was, and saw him

kneeling in the snow, about three-hundred-yards away. When Bull stood and looked at him, Alex indicated they should follow the edge. Bull waved acknowledgement and followed the edge in one direction, Alex the other. It was a huge circle, and when they found the start of each other's tracks, Bull waved him over and both men walked toward the area where the pipeline came out of the pumping station.

"My God!" Bull said when they were standing at the open hole of the forty-eight inch pipe. "What the hell happened to it?"

Alex removed his glove and touched the outer edge of the metal pipe, it was rounded and smooth. "This was melted," he told Bull.

"Yeah, but what could have done it? And where's the rest of the pipe?"

Alex shook his head, and then noticed a small amount of clear liquid in the bottom of the pipe. He reached in and touched it, wetting his fingers, and then sniffed the liquid on his fingertips. "It smells like salt water," he told Bull. "It must have a heavy salt content or it would have frozen by now."

"Now how in the hell could there be salt water way up here?"

"I don't know, but maybe Broden can tell us. Let's go."

Bull nodded and they walked back to the airplane. "Damndest thing I've ever seen."

"We'll need to do an autopsy on the four men hidden in the storeroom," Alex told him as they walked back to the plane.

Bull shook his head. "There should have been five men in there. Where the hell's the sixth man?"

"This is too much of a coincidence. There has to be a connection with the other missing men from the tankers."

Fifteen minutes later, they were airborne again, and Bull stared out the window, watching the snow-covered mountain range pass below them. He kept searching for the missing section of the pipeline, though he knew it was useless. The mountain range turned to foothills, then to valleys, as the sprawling city of Anchorage appeared against the deep blue water.

Alex radioed the hospital as soon as they were within range, and an ambulance was waiting at the airport when they arrived. Christa and Bull waited at the air terminal, while Alex rode with Broden in the ambulance until they arrived at the emergency room. Alex showed his identification to the hospital's director, explained that Broden was a government witness, and was not to leave the hospital without his approval. Alex gave him his phone number, and asked to be called the moment Broden regained consciousness, and then took a cab back to the airport.

When Alex walked into the air terminal, he saw Bull pacing the floor, a scowl distorting his features. "What's going on?" he asked him.

Bull stopped pacing. "I got a call from Herb while you were gone. Those assholes on the board of directors went ahead and sent two more tankers of oil down to the refinery in Washington. Now they're missing. They pay me to run this end of the business for them, damnit, and then ignore my advice. They just don't realize lives are at stake here. All they care about is the almighty dollar!"

Alex nodded. "Let's go. I'll see what I can do about it."

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Herb Bell was waiting at the airport in Valdez when they arrived. "The two tankers left early this morning from Cook Inlet," Herb explained as they walked toward the Suburban. "I just got word that one of the tankers was spotted by a Japanese fishing trawler. They reported it was running in a circle out in the Pacific Ocean. Nobody's seen the second tanker. All we know is we can't raise them on the radio."

“Have you sent a new crew out to the tanker the Japanese reported?” Alex asked as they drove to the office.

“Yeah, they called and said the tanker was empty and the crew is missing. The Coast Guard said it’ll be blind luck if they find the second tanker. It’s a pretty big area to search.”

When the group entered the office, Alex used his phone while the others shrugged out of their parkas and explained the situation to Donner. He listened for several minutes before hanging up. Christa, Bull, and Herb were staring at him when he looked up.

“Director Donner is ordering the Navy to help with the search,” Alex explained. “He’s asking for the P-3 Orion submarine hunter aircraft from the Whidbey Island Naval Air Station to help. It appears we’re not the only country losing crude oil.”

Alex saw the stunned expressions of his colleagues. “There’s more bad news. Our witness in Texas died this morning,” he told them, his voice reflecting his disappointment. “It looks like Broden is our only hope of finding out what’s going on.”

Alex looked at Christa. “I’m wanted in D.C. as soon as possible for a briefing. It’s crucial you talk to Broden the moment he comes around. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

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Christa stood on the bridge of the *Scorpio*, talking to one of the engineers working on the ship’s instrument panel. “Were the instruments damaged when the ship was attacked in Washington?” she asked the young technician.

“Yes.”

“What caused the damage?”

The young man scratched his head and looked bewildered as he stared down at the panel. “Near as I can figure, it was an electrical short or a sudden power surge or something.” He looked over at Christa. “You know, if I didn’t know better, I’d swear somebody waved a giant magnet over the control panel. Every gauge has been magnetized.”

“Then how did the new crew manage to drive her back here to Valdez?”

“Oh, that wouldn’t be too hard. The compass is still working, and the speed selector has a mechanical back up. Same with the steering. All the electronic gear was added last year.”

“I see. Thanks for the help.”

Christa made her way back down to the main deck just as Bull was entering the inspection hatch into a section of the hold. “Mind if I come along?” she asked.

“Not at all,” Bull told her and disappeared through the hatch.

Christa noticed the electrical cable tied off to the deck cleat. She stepped over it and began climbing down the ladder after Bull. The interior of the hold was dark and gloomy until she was about halfway down, and suddenly the area was filled with bright light. She stopped, looked down, and saw Bull adjusting a large spotlight mounted to a tripod. She continued down the ladder and stood next to Bull as he looked around the vast hold.

Bull shook his head in wonder. “It’s hard to believe this room was full of crude oil only a few days ago,” he told her.

“So what are you looking for?” Christa asked.

“Just curious, I guess. We pumped all the salt water out this morning.”

Bull and Christa slowly walked along the port side of the hold, between the massive baffling plates, concentrating their attention on the steel deck. When they reached the far end, they walked to the starboard side and followed it back. As they walked past the last baffle, Christa happened to look up and noticed something sparkle, high up on the side of it, and stopped.

“What’s that?” She asked and pointed.

Bull was a few paces past her and turned to look up at where she was pointing. “I don’t see anything.”

Christa moved beside him, but the angle of the light changed, and she couldn’t see the sparkle. She moved back a few paces until she could see it again. “Move over here.”

Bull moved behind her and looked up. “Beats the hell out of me.”

“Let’s get a ladder so I can take a closer look.”

“Here. Stand on my shoulders,” Bull told her and leaned his back against the steel baffle.

Christa stood on his knee, and then stepped into his laced fingers as Bull lifted her in the air as if she weighed nothing at all, and then she stepped onto his shoulders.

The sparkle was just above her head, and came from an object about the size of a silver dollar. “It’s some type of crystal,” she informed Bull and reached up to touch it. Her finger barely grazed the surface when the crystal suddenly fell free. As she reached out to catch it, she lost her balance.

Bull felt Christa’s weight shift on his shoulders. He reached up to steady her, but was too late, the motion made him lean too far out and he fell face first to the deck.

Christa heard a loud swoosh of air as she landed on something softer than the steel deck, and heard Bull moan beneath her. “Oh God, I’m sorry!” she said and rolled off him. “Are you all right?”

Bull grunted softly as he rolled onto his back. “Yeah,” he said between deep gulps of air. “Just knocked the wind out of me for a second.”

Christa sat up, leaned against the baffle, and realized she was clutching something in her right hand. She opened her fist and saw the crystal. “I got it!” she exclaimed.

Bull rolled to a sitting position and stared at the crystal in Christa’s hand. “So what do you think it is?”

Christa placed the crystal on edge between her thumb and finger and held it toward the spotlight. It was nearly transparent, with a multitude of cracks running through it. “I’m not sure. I’ll know more when I put it under a microscope.”

Bull stood and helped her up. “Okay. Let’s get out of here.”

They left the ship and walked along the pier. “Thanks, Bull,” she said sincerely. “I could have broken my neck.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said, and smiled. “I’ve been carrying this extra weight around for years. Glad it was finally useful for something.”

Christa returned his smile, and Bull opened the door to a small building at the end of the pier and turned on the lights. Two small tables sat in the center of the single room, and laboratory equipment was set up on a long table fastened to the far wall. This was Christa’s laboratory, where she tested the oil from the pipeline for contaminants.

Christa gently placed the crystal under the microscope. At first, she thought the light was affecting what she saw, so she moved the optic lens to a lower position and looked into the microscope again. “This is incredible!” she whispered. She looked up at Bull and saw his puzzled expression. “Take a look.”

Bull placed his eyes over the lens and saw thousands of minuscule cracks, but they were not cracks, he realized, because they were changing shape inside the crystal. “Damn!” he mumbled. “It’s moving!” When he looked up, Christa was nodding at him. “What the hell is it?” he asked.

Christa shook her head. “I have no idea, but I’m going to stay here until I find out.”

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## Chapter 8

### BOULDER, COLORADO:

At two in the afternoon, FBI agent George Pickowski sat in his unmarked sedan and watched the driveway leading up a hill to Menno Simon's private home. A tall chain link fence surrounded the five-acre parcel and kept prying eyes from viewing the mansion, but Pickowski had been following Menno's limousine all day and knew he was there.

The explosion of Menno's research facility had been more intense than even Menno had expected. Plastic explosives had caused the initial explosion, but an extremely volatile explosive must have been manufactured at the facility to cause so much damage. Menno's federal registration license stated it was a genetic research facility, and the FBI had been called in to investigate and find the person or persons responsible. Menno had denied any knowledge of the incident, but the FBI decided to keep him under surveillance anyway.

Pickowski saw the ornate steel gates open, and started the sedan's engine. The limousine drove through the gate, and Pickowski followed it for nearly three hours before it turned off the main highway, onto a dirt road winding through thick evergreens. He had to drop back and lose sight of the limousine to keep from being spotted, and nearly missed the road where the driver had turned off. Only a lingering cloud of dust caught his attention, and Pickowski slammed on the brakes and backed up to follow. He was about to stomp on the accelerator to catch up when he saw a red flash of taillights through the trees just around the bend. He waited, thinking he'd been spotted, but the taillights didn't move. He eased the door open, grabbing the small binoculars sitting on the seat next to him. As he stepped out and trained the binoculars on the taillights, he heard muffled voices. The words were indistinguishable, but he could hear two separate voices. *Must be a checkpoint*, he thought.

He heard laughter, then the taillights blinked out and he heard the limousine drive off. He had a gut feeling trying to get past the checkpoint would be useless, and it wouldn't do to tip them off that Menno had been followed. He wasn't dressed for hiking, but the underbrush didn't appear to be too thick.

Pickowski climbed back into the car and backed out to the main dirt road. Now the problem was where to hide the car. He decided to continue past this turn off so someone else going to the same place wouldn't spot his car. A quarter mile farther, he found an abandoned road and backed the car into the trees. As he stepped out, he realized how quiet it was in these woods. He decided he could hear a car coming for quite a distance, and he could jog back to the turn off and duck into the trees if he heard a car approach. He grabbed the binoculars and began jogging back.

After the quarter mile jog, Pickowski was sweating in the eighty degree heat, his white shirt sticking uncomfortably against his back and chest, and he was slightly out of breath as he approached the turn off the limousine had taken.

When he heard the noise of an engine growing louder, he jumped the culvert and ducked into the trees, stifling a groan of pain as a small stick poked into his left ankle just above his street shoes. When he was sure he couldn't be spotted, he stopped and listened. The engine noise changed pitch and he could hear it change direction. He followed the sound to his right and saw several flashes of

bright light through the trees caused by the sun's reflection off the chrome on the vehicle. A few moments later, the engine noise dropped to an idle and he could hear voices at the checkpoint, one-hundred-feet to his right. He continued in the same direction, occasionally stifling a groan of pain as his ankles were subjected to more pokes, then he saw the vehicle still stopped at the checkpoint.

When the vehicle drove away, Pickowski continued through the trees until he was well past the checkpoint. With a sigh of relief for his tortured ankles, he stepped back onto the road. He stayed within the protection of the trees as they ended on the edge of a vast, open meadow.

The perimeter was lined with cars and recreational vehicles, and a large crowd of people were sitting on the grass in front of an elevated stage. There were no chairs, speakers, or microphones on the stage, and no one was standing on it.

Below the stage and to the left, was a long table, and two young men were setting large trays on it. Whatever was on the trays seemed to sparkle in different colors, but at this distance he couldn't quite make out what the objects were. He decided to work his way through the woods and try to sit with the others on the grass so he could see and hear what was going on. The sun had set over the mountains, and the meadow was getting very dark. By the time he worked his way through the woods and stepped out from between the cars and RV's, he doubted anyone would notice him. It worked, and he found a place to sit, about forty-feet from the front of the stage. He hoped no one would see the blood on his socks around his ankles.

The man sitting next to him asked for the time, and Pickowski told him. He wanted to ask the man what this was all about, but knew it might make the man suspicious. It turned out he didn't have to.

"So where are you supposed to take your seeds?" the man asked.

Pickowski thought quickly. "The East Coast."

The man nodded. "I'm headed for Florida." He pointed at the girl sitting in front of them. "She has to go all the way to Kuwait. She and about fifty others have to catch a chartered flight first thing tomorrow morning. A friend of mine is Russian, and he's taking a bunch of seeds to his friends over there." The man shook his head. "People are taking seeds all over the world."

*What the hell were these seeds?* Pickowski wondered.

The rumble of voices suddenly died out, leaving the pitch-black meadow in an eerie silence. Up on the stage, a beam of pale blue light had suddenly appeared in the center. Pickowski tried to see where it was coming from, but couldn't spot any light fixtures around the stage or in the trees. The light grew wider by the second, but only reached a height of ten-feet above the stage. When it was five-feet wide, it ceased to grow and looked as though something was materializing in the center. At first it was just a white silhouette, and then the outline of a body took shape. A moment later, a person stepped out. With the blue light behind the body, there were no discernable features, only a white-robed figure standing with its arms at its sides. The figure extended its arm and began to rise into the air until it was four-feet above the stage, then stopped.

A voice suddenly echoed across the meadow, as if amplified through a huge speaker system, which Pickowski hadn't seen.

"The time has come, my children." The baritone voice had a very soothing effect.

"The age of the machine is about to end," the voice continued. "We will once again breathe clean air and the war machines will cease to threaten our planet with global destruction. We will live in peace once more. I am a messenger from God, and I command you to spread these seeds of peace throughout the world."

The voice droned on, and Pickowski felt lightheaded. *Yes, it makes sense*, he thought.

“And when you have fulfilled my command, God will once again live among you in a world full of love for all the lifeforms he has created.”

*Oh, yes, Pickowski thought. I want God to live among us.*

“Come forward, my children, and gather to your bosoms the seeds of world peace and begin your journeys to the far corners of the planet.”

As Pickowski watched, the figure appeared to float back into the blue light and seemed to disintegrate. He felt very sad, as though someone very precious had been taken away from him. When nothing was left of the figure, the blue light shrank to a thin line and vanished.

Pickowski heard the meadow erupt in muffled conversation as flashlights were turned on throughout the crowd and they all stood.

The man next to him turned on his flashlight and stood, but Pickowski remained seated.

“Are you coming, brother?” the man asked.

Pickowski looked up and smiled. “Yes! Oh yes!”

The man reached down and Pickowski took his hand, but when he stood, a searing pain shot through his ankles. Suddenly his mind cleared and he realized where he was. The man was frowning with concern, and Pickowski realized he must have flinched. “I guess my legs fell asleep,” he said and smiled.

The man grinned, and Pickowski joined him as lines started forming back and forth across the meadow. He looked toward the stage and saw a steady line of people passing in front of the table with the trays.

*That son of a bitch hypnotized me!* Pickowski realized as he followed in line. He saw the people who had already been through the line walking toward the vehicles. In their hands, which were held close to their chests, were small glass vials of sparkling colors. Some had several vials, others only one or two.

He hadn’t noticed it before, but there was a crescent moon straight up above him. He thought it strange he couldn’t see any craters on its surface, but dismissed it as an optical illusion created by the atmosphere.

As he passed in front of the table, he saw the trays held thousands of the small glass ampules, all sparkling in rainbow colors. He watched the man in front of him take one vile and clutch it against his chest, so he did the same and followed the crowd back to the vehicles. He made his way to the last car, and when he was sure no one was watching, dashed back into the trees.

There was enough light from the vehicle headlights filtering through the woods for him to see his way around the underbrush as he made his way in the direction he figured the main road was. His sense of direction was correct, and half an hour later, he emerged from the woods onto the main dirt road. When he found his car, he climbed in and started the engine, and, with the lights off, drove down the road until he was close to where the headlights were emerging from the side road. He waited for a break in the traffic, pulled in behind a large recreational vehicle, and turned on his lights. A moment later, another set of headlights pulled in behind him. With a sigh of relief for not being discovered as an imposter, he retrieved the small glass vial from his shirt pocket. The sparkling colors appeared to be moving.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 9

IDAHO:

Retired Army Colonel George Blackwood stood before the bathroom mirror in his private cabin, examined his naked body, and noticed the slight bulge around the waist. *Not bad for a man of fifty-six*, he thought. He ran a hand through his short-cropped salt and pepper hair, and adjusted the black patch over his left eye. With a grin of satisfaction, he turned and strode into the bedroom, opened the closet door, and grabbed a crisply pressed olive green uniform. On the left sleeve of each shirt was a custom patch with a circle of gold leaves and three lightning bolts coming together in the center to form a 'Y'. In gold letters around the circle were the words, ARMY OF SURVIVAL.

When he heard the short array of bugle notes from the camp's public address system, Blackwood peered out the window at the crowd of two-hundred men and women assembling in neat rows on the parade ground. He waited for his second in command to give a subtle signal that everyone was in place, and then he threw back his shoulders and stretched his body ramrod straight. He yanked the door open and strutted out onto the large front porch overlooking the parade ground. At the top of the steps, he stopped and slowly turned his head to study his troops before nodding at his second in command.

Major Robert Conrad snapped to attention. "All personnel present and accounted for, sir," he shouted.

"Thank you, Major," Blackwood began, his voice deep and slightly raspy. "Men and women of the Army of Survival, we are under attack!"

Muffled conversations of surprise erupted from the crowd. Blackwood waited a few moments before continuing. "The civilians in the surrounding cities have turned against us. They have cut off our supplies in a vain attempt to shut us down. This cannot be allowed, and the time has come for us to make our presence known. We will show them we will not be dictated to by a bunch of cowardly civilians. We will acquire the fuel and supplies we need to survive by any means necessary. Report to your company commanders at 1300 hours for instructions. All company commanders report to headquarters at 1100 hours."

Blackwood studied the faces of his troops for several moments, and when he saw most of the people nod in approval, felt a great sense of pride and hope for his army. He snapped to attention and gave a smart salute, spun on his heels, and strode back into his cabin.

Major Conrad turned to the men and women on the parade ground. "Dismissed," he shouted. As the crowd broke up, several of the company commanders approached him to ask what was going on. Conrad was as much in the dark about Blackwood's plan as the rest of the troops, and frustrated he hadn't been consulted ahead of time. "You'll all be briefed at 1100 hours!" he said curtly, then strode across the parade ground and up the steps to Blackwood's cabin. He reached out to rap on the door, but before his knuckles hit the wood, Blackwood hollered to enter. When he opened the door, Blackwood had his back to him, leaning over a desk in the far corner of the room. Conrad stepped into the room and closed the door. "What the hell's going on, Colonel?"

Blackwood continued studying the maps. "We're broke, Robert. Or damn near it, anyway."

“I knew we were losing contributions, but I thought we still had enough coming in to keep the camp going.”

“Not anymore.”

“So what are you planning to do?”

“Come over here and take a look.”

Conrad moved next to the Colonel and looked down at the maps. Blackwood pointed to the map of Idaho and indicated two red lines drawn from east to west. “Interstate 90 to the north, and Interstate 84 to the south of us,” he said to Conrad, and slid a map of Nevada below the one of Idaho. He pointed at the red line near the center of Nevada. “Interstate 80. These will be our battle grounds.”

Conrad looked up and stared at Blackwood. “I don’t follow you, Colonel. What do you mean by battle grounds?”

“These are the three main transport routes to and from the west coast. Every commodity imaginable is trucked across these roads. Food, dry goods, and fuel. Everything we need to survive. These roads are where we are going to get our supplies.”

Conrad’s jaw dropped slightly as the realization of Blackwood’s plan jelled in his mind. “Are you talking about hijacking?” Blackwood grinned sadistically and Conrad shook his head. “That’s the craziest idea I’ve . . .” Conrad stopped when Blackwood’s stare turned savage. “But Colonel, the police would be onto us in a heartbeat.”

“Not if we have a plan. Where there are truckers, there are truck stops. We hit them hard all along the interstates. Just one night and we’d have enough supplies to last us a year. Maybe more, if luck’s on our side.”

“It’s still a big risk.”

“Damn it, Robert! Would you rather risk losing our army? Everything we’ve worked so hard for?”

Conrad hesitated to answer. He didn’t like the idea at all. “If some trucker suddenly finds his rig gone, he’ll be talking to the highway patrol before we’re ten miles down the road.”

Blackwood grinned. “Not if he’s dead,”

Conrad was shocked with disbelief. This wasn’t his army. It was Blackwood’s, and he did not intend to kill some innocent trucker. “Look, Colonel. When I joined this army I did not sign on to become a cold-blooded murderer.”

Blackwood’s face turned red with anger. “This *is* survival, damn it! I’ve worked years to build this army, and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep it together!” Blackwood moved his face to within inches of Conrad’s, fire in his eyes. “Now, are you with me?” he growled.

Conrad stared back and slowly shook his head. “You’re completely mad, Colonel. Count me out.” He turned and walked toward the door.

Blackwood began shaking with rage. “You’re a Goddamn coward!” he snarled, but Conrad didn’t respond and reached for the doorknob. Blackwood yanked open a drawer, grabbed a pistol, and pointed it at Conrad’s back. “No one deserts my army!” he yelled and squeezed the trigger.

The explosion echoed throughout the camp as Conrad was hurled against the door and slid to the floor. He managed to roll onto his back and stared up at Blackwood, stunned disbelief in his eyes. He tried to speak, but only a gurgled moan escaped his crimson-stained lips, then his head lolled to the side.

Blackwood stared down at Conrad and realized what he’d just done. He didn’t feel remorse, but realized now he’d have to explain what happened. “Damn!” he swore softly, and tried to figure out

what to do. *If anyone finds out about this, I might have a mutiny on my hands*, he thought. *What can I tell the rest of my officers? Conrad was sent on a mission*, he thought. *Yes, that would work! But how do I get rid of the body? Wait until late tonight and take it deep into the woods? No, that's no good. The sentries would see me. I'll have to get somebody else to do it. But who could I get? None of the officers would do it. Possibly an enlisted man. A new recruit. Yes, if he gets caught, I'll deny everything. He'll take the blame. What was the name of the new recruit I met three weeks ago? There was something cynical about the man. He had a dead, cold look in his eyes. What the devil was his name?*

Someone beat on the door. "What's happened, Colonel?"

Blackwood grabbed Conrad by the arms and dragged him into the bathroom, leaving a long smear of blood on the floor. He heard the frantic beating on the door again as he spread a throw rug over the pool of blood where Conrad had been. "An accidental discharge!" he yelled back. He opened the door a foot and held up the pistol. "Everything's fine. Just an accidental discharge."

The man on the porch nodded and began descending the steps, and then Blackwood remembered the new recruit's name. "Find Private Everex and have him report here at once."

The man on the steps nodded again, and Blackwood closed the door. Several minutes later, he heard another knock and opened it a couple feet.

"You wanted to see me, Colonel?" Private John Everex asked. He'd seen Major Conrad enter the Colonel's quarters and heard the gunshot several minutes later, and thought it odd when he'd heard that an experienced army colonel would accidentally discharge a firearm.

Blackwood nodded and stepped aside, indicating Everex should step in. When the door closed behind him, Everex turned and stared at the blood on the door, the dark stain spreading in the center of the throw rug. From the look in Blackwood's eyes, he realized the Colonel intended for him to see the carnage.

Everex followed the streak of blood into the bathroom and looked down at Conrad's body. His suspicions confirmed, he turned around and grinned sadistically at Blackwood. "It seems you're in need of a new second in command, Colonel."

Blackwood studied the man standing before him. Everex was short, but muscular. He might have been good-looking at one time, but several thick facial scars had taken that away, and the crooked nose showed evidence of being broken several times. The eyes told Blackwood what he suspected about Everex. They were nearly black, and as cold and evil as he'd ever seen.

Blackwood nodded. "That's right. And someone to dispose of the Major."

Everex leaned casually against the door jam. The Colonel needed someone to get him out of this situation, he thought, and decided to see how desperate he would be. "What's in it for me?"

Blackwood stiffened. He hadn't expected Everex to want something in return. "A promotion to sergeant."

"Ha!" Everex laughed sarcastically. "Sorry, Colonel. You'll have to do better than that."

Blackwood's face flushed red with rage. "How dare you, you little son of a bitch! One word from me and you're out of this army, mister!"

"And one word from me and you're whole damn army would lose their respect for you, Colonel."

Blackwood clenched his fists. This wasn't going the way he'd planned, but he needed someone to get him out of the situation. "What do you want?" he said through clenched teeth.

Everex grinned evilly, and nodded down at Conrad. "I want his job," Everex watched Blackwood's eyes flash his anger and decided to push him to the limit. "And two friends of mine to be promoted to sergeant major."

Blackwood's eyes blazed with bitterness as he stared at Everex. He shifted his gaze to Conrad's body for a moment, then back to Everex. If he didn't agree to Everex's terms, he'd have to kill him, too, he thought. Could he find someone else willing to get rid of two bodies? What about the raid on the truckers? He needed someone who wasn't afraid to get his hands bloody. Someone who could kill without remorse. Everex definitely fit the bill.

His rage slowly faded, like the red flush on his face, and Blackwood nodded to Everex. "All right, but under two conditions," he said and waited to see if Everex would back down, but the man stared back almost mockingly. "First, get rid of Conrad's body so no one will find it, and clean up this mess." Everex nodded assent. "And second, you follow my orders to the letter, no matter what. Understood?"

Everex remembered what he'd learned in the Marine Corps before being dishonorably discharged. Always agree to a direct order, and then do what you want and plead you must have misunderstood. He grinned at Blackwood and nodded agreement. "Whatever you say, Colonel." He straightened from the door jam and walked toward the door. "Be back in a few minutes."

Blackwood was sitting at his desk when the cabin door suddenly opened without a knock. He hadn't even heard a footstep. He jumped out of the chair and spun around, ready to chew somebody's butt, and saw Everex grin at him as he stepped inside, a green duffel bag draped over his shoulder. Two men followed him in, both looking nearly as nasty as Everex. One carrying a mop bucket, the other a mop.

Everex closed the door and stood next to his companions. "Colonel, I'd like you to meet your new Sergeant Majors, Davis and Chapman." Everex saw Blackwood's scowl and grinned in satisfaction. "Just carry on with what you were doing, Colonel. We'll be out of here in no time."

Blackwood stared at the two men. Davis was short with bad acne scars and a crooked nose. Chapman had dirty brown hair, and an ugly scar from his forehead, across his right eye, and down past the corner of his mouth.

As Davis and Chapman began mopping up the blood, Blackwood followed Everex into the bathroom. Everex tossed the duffel bag onto the toilet seat, knelt down, lifted Conrad's body off the floor without the least sign of straining, and dumped it into the bathtub. With a speed that surprised Blackwood, a ten-inch knife suddenly appeared in Everex's hand.

Everex stared at it for a moment as if studying a fine instrument. He looked over his shoulder at Blackwood with a look evil enough to make the devil cringe. "Now the fun begins," he said in a tone that sent a shiver up Blackwood's spine.

Blackwood stared in stunned disbelief. It was like watching a replay from his time as a POW in Vietnam. Everex began dismembering Conrad's body, holding each piece over the tub until the blood drained out before tossing it into the duffel bag. The coldness of Everex's actions sent a shiver of fear through Blackwood, as he realized he'd probably just made the biggest mistake of his life by agreeing to this monstrous animal's demands.

The disgust he felt toward Everex and the flood of memories from the POW camp were more than he could stand. Blackwood broke into a cold sweat as the scene from his past began to take over his last shred of self-control and he was back in the POW camp. In his mind, the man who had tortured him looked just like Everex. *I have to escape!* his inner voice cried out.

Blackwood bolted from his quarters and across the parade ground, oblivious to the salutes and voices as he passed through his troops and broke into a desperate run down a well-worn path through the woods.

How far he had run or where he had gone he couldn't remember, but Blackwood found himself stumbling through the brush behind his cabin. His uniform was ripped to shreds and soaked with sweat. He felt as though he'd just awakened from a nightmare as he staggered up the steps and opened the door of his cabin. He was suddenly frozen with shock when he saw Everex leaning back in his chair, feet propped on his desk, and a folded map in his hands. He stared slack-jawed at the demon from his nightmare.

Everex smiled, but his smile was scorching. "You look like shit, Colonel. Better take a shower before you explain your plan to me."

Blackwood glanced at the closed door to the bathroom, a flood of horrible memories rushing through his mind again. He felt as though he was still fighting with his nightmare as he hesitantly approached the door, expecting to find the mocking remnants of the grisly scene. He grabbed the knob, held his breath, and opened the door. He released a great sigh of relief. The bathroom and tub were spotlessly clean, and smelled strongly of disinfectant. Without a backward glance at Everex, he stepped into the bathroom and closed the door.

As he stood under the cold water, he realized he had to take command of the situation and show Everex he was still in charge and a man to be reckoned with. He emerged from the bathroom twenty minutes later, completely naked. He glanced at Everex, still leaning back in the chair.

"Get your damn feet off my desk!" Blackwood commanded with renewed assurance as he turned and walked across the room to his dresser. As he grabbed a pair of shorts from the drawer, he watched Everex in the mirror. When Everex didn't move, he turned and shot him a menacing glare. To his relief, Everex slowly removed his feet. *I'm still in command*, Blackwood thought with satisfaction as he continued to dress.

The clean uniform added to his sense of command, and he felt full of confidence again. He strode across the room and leaned over the desk and maps. "Here's what I want you to do," he told Everex, and explained the entire operation.

\*

11:30 P.M. INTERSTATE 90, IDAHO:

It was a moonless night when the van pulled off the interstate at a truck stop and restaurant on the outskirts of a little town called Silverton. Identical to the rest of the twelve-person team inside the van, Colonel Blackwood was dressed in black pants and a black sweatshirt. He glanced over at Everex, who had the same evil grin as when he had dumped Conrad's body in the bathtub.

"Now the fun begins, Colonel," Everex said sadistically.

Blackwood felt a chill run up his spine and looked away. The headlights of the van flicked off as they approached the restaurant. Five civilian cars were parked in front of the glass windows, and he could see the sparsely filled tables and the waiter serving coffee to two tired looking men near the door. The van drove past the restaurant into the parking lot behind, where several large tractor-trailer rigs were parked in parallel rows. The street lamps illuminated two fuel tankers, a refrigerated grocery carrier, and four freight carriers without markings.

According to plan, the van stopped long enough for ten people to jump out, and then it made a U-turn and headed back onto the interstate. Everex and Blackwood ran to the front door of the restaurant and waited while the other eight people ran toward the trucks. Blackwood's plan was to wait for each trucker to leave the restaurant and grab them as they entered their rig. He and Everex stood guard in case a highway patrol car happened to stop for coffee.

Suddenly Blackwood heard the diesel engines rev up. "What the hell's going on?" he snarled at Everex.

“Change of plans, Colonel. We don’t have time to wait around.” Everex swung a backpack from his shoulders and reached inside.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m putting them to sleep for a while,” he said as he removed two small metal canisters. Before Blackwood could respond, Everex leaned against the door to hold it open, pulled the pins on the canisters, and tossed them into the restaurant.

The door swung closed as Blackwood and Everex stared through the glass. The two canisters rolled part way down the aisle between the counter and the tables, but appeared not to be doing anything. The server walked down the aisle and accidentally kicked one of the canisters. She bent over to pick it up, and continued falling forward, sending her tray of dishes crashing to the floor. A tall man at the counter stood to help her and collapsed beside her. The other occupants turned and stared uncomprehendingly at the two bodies, and within seconds of each other, slumped into their chairs or fell forward onto the tables and counters.

Blackwood felt a hand on his shoulder and looked at Everex, who was smiling.

“Let’s go, Colonel.”

Blackwood looked back into the restaurant. *Were they just sleeping?* he wondered. A hand grabbed his arm and spun him around.

“I said, let’s go!” Everex snarled.

Blackwood followed as Everex ran toward the trucks. The giant engines roared to life as the small squadron of men climbed into the trucks and drove around the building, heading onto the interstate for the drive back to camp.

\*

Blackwood bolted upright in bed, his sheets soaked with sweat from his nightmare of his time in the POW compound and the torture from the camp’s commander. In his dream, the camp commander looked just like Everex.

Someone was knocking on his cabin door, and he squinted at the clock on the nightstand. 10:13 A.M. “Oh, shit!” he moaned. Again, someone knocked. “Just a minute!” he hollered as he rolled out of bed and shuffled to the door. When he opened it, Everex was standing on the other side. Blackwood jumped back, stifling a scream of terror as he cowered against the wall.

Everex studied the Colonel for a moment. He wasn’t sure what it was, but Blackwood seemed scared to death of him. His once forceful composure and domineering attitude seemed to be disappearing. *Well, that’s fine with me*, he thought.

It had just been a bad dream, Blackwood realized, but he wasn’t dreaming now, and knew from the grin on Everex’s face he had better regain control. He drew himself up and stepped in front of Everex. “What is it, Major?”

Everex waved a hand toward the parade ground. “A good night’s work, Colonel.”

Blackwood stared at the rows of trucks filling the area. “How many did we get?”

“Six have arrived, so far, and ten are still making their way here.”

Blackwood smiled. His army would survive. Then another thought occurred to him. “We’re going to need more room.”

“I’ve already thought of that. Several crews are clearing out sections of the forest. Just enough to drive the trucks through, but still keep them hidden from anyone flying over the area.”

Blackwood smiled and nodded assent. He had to admit, even though Everex was sick in the head, he was very clever. Maybe it wasn’t such a big mistake promoting him after all. “Very good, Major. Carry on.”

“When we have enough room in the forest, I’ll set up another raid on the truck stops.”

Blackwood looked at him curiously. “Do we need more?”

Everex grinned. “All we can get, Colonel. We’ll concentrate on fuel tankers next time. We’ll need fuel to keep the refrigerated trucks running. We don’t have enough room in our cold storage lockers.”

Blackwood smiled again, nodded, and closed the door. *Yes*, he thought as he walked toward the bathroom. *Promoting Everex had been a very good idea, indeed.*

\* \* \*

## Chapter 10

### THE WHITE HOUSE.

The President inserted a video disk into the player, returned to his chair, and pressed play on the remote. He ate a piece of his club sandwich while he watched the news broadcast from Washington State, recorded earlier that morning. The picture on the television was of a young male news broadcaster sitting behind a desk.

*“The Governor has been forced to call in the National Guard to stop the fighting in the gasoline lines. Once again, until the refineries are distributing gasoline, he is asking you to refrain from driving and use the metro bus system. For those of you with oil heating systems in your homes, please try to stay with friends and relatives until this crises is over.”*

*“A man and a woman were shot while robbing a grocery store in Lynnwood yesterday. The owner of the store said he has to keep himself armed at all times because of the constant robbery attempts. This is just one of the many incidents caused by the lack of transportation to bring new food supplies into this part of our state. We go now to our reporter, Jan Smith, who is live with a representative of the Teamsters Union in Tacoma.”*

The picture changed to show a dark-haired oriental woman talking to a gray-haired man, both standing in front of a large truck and trailer rig. *“What seems to be the biggest problem with delivering supplies here to the West Coast? We have reports that transportation is continuing in Eastern Washington.”*

*“The problem is, once the trucks come over the mountains to bring in supplies, there isn’t any fuel available for them to get back. The trucking industry on this side of the mountains is nearly at a standstill until more fuel is available. If we don’t get any fuel soon, even the trucking in Eastern Washington will stop.”*

*“Is it true that trucks are being hijacked from the interstate highways?”*

*“Yes it is, and I’ve asked the Governor to have the National Guard patrol the interstates, but he says he doesn’t have enough people. I’m hoping he’ll ask the President for military support.”*

The President stood and switched recordings to one from in Los Angeles, returned to his desk, and pressed play.

On the television was a view from a helicopter flying over the city, showing live pictures of burning buildings and fighting in the streets as the voice of a male broadcaster narrated. *“It’s a war zone in Los Angeles as people begin to panic. They are literally fighting their way to the gas pumps. Our latest report is that over three-hundred people have died as a result of domestic shootings over gasoline.”*

The picture changed, showing the broadcaster sitting behind a desk in the studio. *“One of our biggest concerns is agricultural production. Without fuel for their equipment, farmers cannot operate, and even the early harvest won’t make it to market if the trucking industry can’t get fuel. If this oil crisis continues, California’s economy will be devastated. People are lining up outside grocery stores to buy anything they can before commodities run out.”*

The President shut off the player, picked up the phone, and waited a moment until Martin Donner answered. “Hi, Martin. Bill here.”

“Yes, Mr. President. What can I do for you?”

“Have you heard anything from Mr. Cave?”

“Not yet.”

“I see. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs says the Navy has a submarine standing by off the southern coast of Alaska. When you hear from him, tell Mr. Cave to inform his people to start sending the tankers.”

“Yes, sir.”

The President hung up and stared at his half-eaten sandwich. “Less than a year in office and this has to happen,” he mumbled to himself.

\*

ALASKA:

Alex Cave entered the small cement building at the end of the pier and saw Christa leaning over a microscope. “Anything new?” he asked.

Christa turned to face him, her eyes slightly bloodshot. “No, damn it!”

Alex raised his hands apologetically. “Sorry.”

A slight smile formed on Christa’s lips. “Oh, it’s not you, it’s this damn crystal. It doesn’t conform to any mineral standards I know of, and it doesn’t fit any biological standards, either.”

“How about taking a break. I’ve just received word Mike Broden is coherent. I’m about to fly up to Anchorage.”

Christa gave him a nod. “Give me a few minutes to change clothes.”

“Fine. Come on, I’ll give you a ride home.”

Alex walked her out to the Suburban, drove through the little town of Valdez, and then another quarter of a mile to Christa’s small apartment complex. The complex had been built during the boom days of the pipeline’s construction, but had since been neglected as far as cosmetic appearances were concerned.

“It’s not much, but the rent’s cheap,” Christa told him as he parked in front of the building. “You can come up, if you like.”

Alex nodded and followed her up one flight of stairs and into her unit. Her apartment was a living room/kitchen combination, with one door leading into a bedroom with a bathroom, but it was tastefully decorated.

“Make yourself at home. I’ll be out in a moment,” Christa said over her shoulder as she walked toward the bedroom.

Alex felt his phone vibrate and answered. “What’s up, Martin?”

“The Navy has a submarine standing by to escort the tankers. Tell All Alaska to get them moving. Things are getting nasty on the west coast, so the sooner the better.”

“I’ll tell him. I’m flying to Anchorage in a few minutes to talk to my witness. I’ll call you back in a few hours.”

“Good. Call me at home if I’m not here.”

“I will.” Alex hung up and called the All Alaska office to inform Bull about the escort. A few moments later, Christa walked into the living room dressed in light blue slacks and a matching sweater. They left the apartment and drove to the airport, and Alex used the All Alaska airplane to fly them to Anchorage.

Two hours later, they walked into the hospital and located the director, who escorted them through the hallways toward Broden’s room.

“I’m not sure he’s really all that coherent,” the director told them. “He insists we’re all going to die when some ship returns. Doesn’t make much sense, does it? Here we are.”

When they entered the room, Mike Broden was sitting up in bed, staring through the window at the fir trees bordering the land on that side of the building.

“You have some visitors, Mike,” the director told him. Broden didn’t acknowledge their presence and continued to stare out the window.

Christa walked to the foot of the bed and studied Broden. When they found him in the storeroom, she thought he was much older, but now it was apparent he was actually in his early forties, with thin brown hair above a narrow face. “We need your help, Mike,” she said in a soft voice.

Broden slowly turned to look at Christa, a sad smile forming on his lips. “It’s too bad someone as pretty as you has to die,” he told her.

“See what I mean?” said the director.

Broden shot a menacing look at the man. “I’m not talking to you anymore!” he snarled.

“Perhaps you’d better leave us alone,” Alex told the director, who nodded agreement and left the room. When Alex faced Broden again, the man was staring at him suspiciously.

“Are you a doctor, too?” Broden asked.

Alex smiled. “No, actually I’m a teacher at the University of Montana. My name’s Alex Cave and this is Christa Avery.” Alex extended his hand.

Broden hesitated, then accepted the handshake and nodded to Christa. “I’m not crazy!” he stated bluntly. “I know what I saw!”

Christa moved around the foot of the bed until she was standing next to Broden. “Would you mind telling us about it?”

Broden chuckled. “Why should I? You’ll think I’m a nut case.”

Christa glanced at Alex and received a nod of approval. “Mr. Broden . . . Mike. When you hear what I’m about to tell you, you’ll think *I’m* a nut case,” she said and smiled.

Broden smiled slightly, but didn’t say anything, so Christa continued and told him about the oil tankers. When she finished, Broden looked out the window for a moment. He let out a deep sigh of relief. “Thank God,” he said softly. “For a while there I thought maybe I really was crazy.” He looked at Christa, then Alex. “Okay. I’ll tell you what I saw.”

“Start from the beginning,” Christa told him.

Broden nodded. “I was in the bathroom,” he said shyly. “I could hear the rest of the guys in the kitchen talking and joking around, and then they started yelling. I thought that maybe they were yelling at Roberts. He’s always playing practical jokes on everyone. But they didn’t stop yelling. I felt the toilet shake and heard Marvin scream to get out of the building. I thought it was an earthquake and hurried as fast as I could. When I got to the kitchen, everyone was gone so I ran down the tunnel to get out of the building. I remember thinking about the light coming in through the windows in the doors, because it was too early for the sun to be up. I saw the guys standing outside, staring at the light, but it scared me. I was going to hide in the storage room, and that’s when the door opened and I saw it. Scared the living’ shit out of me and I ducked behind some boxes!”

“What did you see?” Christa asked.

“The, ah.” Broden looked down at the bed. When he looked up, his eyes were begging for understanding. “The spaceship.”

Christa and Alex exchanged looks, and Broden noticed. “I know you think I’m crazy, but I know what I saw!” he said adamantly. “I didn’t know for sure. I mean, not at first. Just that it was huge. Then they came out and I knew what it was!”

“Who came out?” Christa asked.

Again, Broden’s eyes pleaded for understanding. “The spacemen in white suits.” This time Christa and Alex restrained the urge to glance at each other and let Broden continue. “They started tossing the bodies of my friends into the store room. That’s when I realized . . . I mean, the way their eyes were open and all. I didn’t want to look, but I couldn’t stop. I’ve never seen dead people before, but I just knew they were dead. I felt like a coward, but I didn’t want them to kill me, so I stayed behind the boxes. They just kept staring at me, my friends, I mean. I couldn’t stand to keep looking at them. When I thought it was safe, I stacked a bunch of boxes up in front of them. Later, I don’t really know how long it was, I felt the ground shake again, but I wasn’t about to come out. The next thing I knew, I was here, in this hospital.”

“Can you describe the spaceship for us?” Alex asked.

Broden looked baffled for a moment. “It was a gigantic silver disk. Must have been at least a hundred-foot across.”

Broden saw Christa and Alex glance at each other, Christa smiling skeptically. He shook his head. “You think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

“No, Mr. Broden,” Alex said sincerely. “As a matter of fact, that would explain several mysteries.”

Christa glanced up at Alex, wondering if he really believed Broden’s fantasy.

Broden’s mood lightened. “Then I can leave the hospital?”

Alex nodded. “If the doctor thinks you’re physically fit, I don’t see why not.”

Broden smiled. “Thank God!”

Alex’s expression turned serious. “One of the men from your station is still missing. Gary Darven. Do have any idea what happened to him?”

Broden slowly shook his head, his brows knitting together in thought. “You know, come to think of it, he wasn’t in the storeroom with the rest of the guys.”

“What do you know about him?”

Broden shrugged. “Not much. Kind of a weird guy, though. He’d only been there for a couple of weeks and didn’t talk all that much. He did some strange things, too.”

“Such as?”

“Well, I don’t know how to explain it, exactly. He just did things somewhat different and wasn’t very friendly, but mainly it was what he did the night before all this happened. I got off watch, and as I was walking past his room, I heard him talking on the other side of the door and stopped to listen. It sounded like he was praying and I started to leave. Then I saw a bright blue light under the door. It’s common courtesy not to invade someone’s privacy, but I couldn’t help myself.

I opened the door a crack and peeked into the room. Gary was kneeling in front of the desk, saying a prayer or something, and staring at what looked like a blue light bulb, but it didn’t seem to be connected to a lamp. I couldn’t hear his words clearly, but I heard him repeat the word *MESSIAH* a couple of times, then he held up a small glass tube full of colored, sparkly stuff. He held it close to the blue light and I know it was just my imagination, but the sparkles looked like they were moving around in the tube. A moment later, the light got dimmer until it blinked out. I didn’t want him to catch me, so I closed the door.” Broden shook his head. “Of course, I couldn’t tell anyone. Then they would know I was spying and no one would trust me anymore. So I just went to my room and read for a while.”

“Do you know where he came from?” Christa asked.

“Not really.”

“Just one more thing, Mr. Broden,” said Alex. “Do you have any idea how this spaceship managed to steal six million barrels of oil out of the pipeline?”

Broden looked very bewildered by the question, and slowly shook his head. “I didn’t know anything about it.”

Alex smiled. “Okay. You’ve been very helpful. I’ll tell the director you’re free to go. By the way, I wouldn’t tell anyone else about the spaceship, if you know what I mean.”

Broden chuckled. “Damn right, I won’t. They’d put me away in a loony bin for sure.”

When Christa and Alex left the room, the director was standing near the nurses’ station and approached them as they came down the hall.

“Well?” the director asked. “What do you think?”

Alex smiled. “If he’s physically ready to leave the hospital, release him.”

The director’s jaw went slack for a moment. “What? You can’t be serious! He’s been in a delusionary state since he was admitted. I want to run a complete physiological evaluation, and that takes time. Our staff psychologist, Dr. Brandstrom, can’t fit him in until tomorrow afternoon.”

“I’ll see that he gets the help he needs. Send the hospital bill to this address.” Alex handed him a business card.

The director looked at Alex curiously, nodded, and accepted the card. Alex thanked him for his help, and he and Christa left the hospital.

“Do you believe all that?” Christa asked skeptically during the taxi ride back to the airport.

Alex hesitated while he mentally compared Broden’s story with the events of the past week. Finally, he looked at Christa and nodded. “I think I do.”

Christa stared at him, her eyes wide with surprise. “What?”

“I don’t think it was spacemen, but somebody wearing a protective suit. I’m not sure what the silver disk was. Perhaps a reflection off the chrome of an airplane.”

“So what are you going to tell Bull and the people in Washington D.C? Surely you don’t think they’ll accept Broden’s story.”

“Nothing for the moment. At least not until we have proof. Are you with me on this?”

“Okay,” Christa agreed. “Where do we start?”

“I’ll have Martin send someone to investigate Gary Darven’s background. Also, I think the crystal you found could be very important. I’d like you to take it to a more sophisticated lab for further testing. I’ll arrange it at the University in Montana. You can stay at my ranch while you’re there, if you like.”

“All right,” she answered and smiled at the thought of staying with Alex at his ranch. She thought this a great opportunity to learn more about him.

“How soon can you leave?” Alex asked.

“I can be ready for the first flight out, in the morning.”

“Good. I’ll pick you up and give you a ride to the airport.”

She suddenly realized he wasn’t planning to go with her. “What? Where will you be?”

“I’m going for a cruise on one of the tankers.”

Christa suddenly felt a deep, sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. If Alex left on one of those tankers, she’d never see him again. He’d end up like all the other crewmembers, either dead or horribly injured. *God! Why am I feeling this way?* She wondered. *I hardly know him!* “How about dinner?” she asked softly.

Alex was staring out the window absorbed in thought, and turned toward Christa. “Sorry, what was that?”

“I said, how about a last dinner together?”

Alex smiled. “You make it sound so final. I’ll be joining you in Montana in a few days.”

“You, of all people, should realize what will happen if you’re on one of those tankers.” she said quietly.

Alex saw the anguish in her eyes. “Listen, Christa. Now that we know what can happen, we’ll be ready. I’m not suicidal, you know.”

Christa realized it was useless to argue, and leaned back in the seat, and stared out the window. She felt Alex gently grab her hand, and realized he must think she was pouting. She looked at him and tried to smile. “So how about that dinner?” she asked.

“I’d like that,” he answered and smiled.

That evening, Christa met him in the hotel restaurant. She was wearing a black satin cocktail dress, cut in a deep ‘V’ at the neckline, with thin shoulder straps. She wore silver and diamond earrings and a matching choker necklace.

Alex stood from the table when he saw her. As he slid her chair to the table, he smiled. With his lips close to her ear, he softly commented, “You look ravishing.”

Christa smiled at his boyish manner and obvious approval.

After dinner, Alex drove them to her apartment building and walked her upstairs. “I’ll see you in the morning,” he told her.

“No! I mean, don’t you want to come in for a nightcap?”

*Oh how I’d love to*, he thought, but a picture of Sevi’s body on the stretcher flashed through his mind. *No! He chastised himself. I’m already becoming too emotionally attached to her. I can’t let it happen again.* “I don’t think I should,” he said, and saw Christa’s hurt expression. “I’m sorry,” he said softly.

Christa forced a smile. “Okay. I’ll see you in the morning.” Alex smiled, but she noticed lines of tension near his jawline. She watched him walk down the stairs, and then closed the door and sighed deeply.

The next morning, Alex carried her suitcase to the check in counter at the airport, and the attendant informed her to board immediately. Christa impulsively threw her arms around Alex’s neck and hugged him fiercely. “Be careful,” she whispered in his ear.

Alex felt the moisture of her tears on his neck. When she released him, he wanted desperately to kiss her, but smiled instead. “I’ll meet you in Montana. I promise. Now you’d better get on the plane or they’ll leave without you.”

Christa nodded and tried to smile bravely as she wiped the tears from her cheeks. She walked toward the door, glancing over her shoulder once before stepping through. Alex was smiling confidently, and she felt he meant what he said.

Alex’s smile faded as soon as the door closed behind her, for he had a premonition he might never see her again. He swore to himself he would as he walked through the terminal.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 11

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON:

“Oh dear god! I never should have left!” Harold Woolly mumbled as he staggered along the street, exhausted after running as far as his physical condition would allow. He stumbled and fell, gashing his knee on the asphalt as his rubbery legs gave out beneath him.

When he arrived at the office that morning, he'd been the only one there. He'd waited around until Calli had called him, screaming in panic that she had heard gunshots and seen a group of young people breaking into houses up the street. Harold left immediately and drove as far as he could on what little gas he had left in his car. He passed hundreds of abandoned cars on the freeway before his car sputtered and died. Then he grabbed his briefcase and ran until his chest heaved and his muscles ached. That was an hour ago. Since then, he had been walking, occasionally seeing tall columns of black smoke in different parts of the suburbs.

He quickened his pace as he rounded the corner and saw his house, half a block away. He heard gunshots and looked farther up the street. A group of ten young men and women were dragging what appeared to be an elderly man out the front door of a house at the far end of the block. They tossed the old man onto the lawn, kicking him viciously. Harold heard the man screaming for help and begging not to be killed. Tears ran down Harold's cheeks in sympathy for the man, and he wished he had the courage to help him.

A sense of foreboding suddenly filled his thoughts as he pictured Calli and his children lying on the lawn in front of his home. Harold's heart felt as though it was about to explode, but he ran the rest of the way and beat on his front door. “Calli! It's me. Let me in!” The door opened a few inches, and a shotgun barrel was shoved in his face.

“Dad?” a young voice asked.

“Mark!” Harold yelled with relief. “Yes, it's me!”

The rifle barrel withdrew through the gap, and Harold heard the familiar sound of the chain lock being unfastened. A second later, the door opened, and Harold rushed through as Mark slammed it shut behind him. When he turned, Mark threw his arms around him, and Harold could feel him shaking. Harold tried to sound confident. “It's going to be okay.” Harold felt his voice quivering. “Where's your mom? Where's Pamela? Is everyone okay?”

“Yeah, but they're really scared. Mom and Pam are in the back room.”

“Oh, Harold!” Calli hollered from the hall and rushed toward him. “Thank God, you're home!” Calli threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. “I've been so scared!”

Harold felt her flinch as they heard another gunshot. “It'll be all right,” he told her. He looked at Mark. “How long has this been going on? Did you call the police?”

“I heard the first shots early this morning, Dad, but the police said they were too busy and would come when they could. They still haven't come by. People have been going crazy, Dad. There isn't any food in the stores anymore, and people are robbing and killing each other for whatever they have.”

Harold eased Calli away and looked into her tear-swollen eyes. “I'm sorry I left.”

“No. I’m sorry I drove you away. It’s my fault for being such a nag. You work so hard and all I did was complain about everything.

“Shush. It’s both our faults, okay?”

Calli smiled as best she could and nodded.

“Do we have any food left?” he asked.

“Just some canned food.” It was Pamela’s voice.

Harold looked toward the hallway and saw Pamela standing with a baseball bat slung over her shoulder. Harold smiled at her for a moment, and she walked over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “I’m glad you’re home, Dad!”

When she looked up, Harold saw the tears in her eyes. Another gunshot echoed through the neighborhood. “Listen, those thugs are headed this way,” Harold said to his family. “I think it’s best if we pack some clothes and food and leave the area.”

Calli’s eyes went wide. “But this is our home! Everything we own is here!”

“Calli, it doesn’t matter anymore. We can’t fight those people out there. We wouldn’t stand a chance. I couldn’t stand it if something were to happen to any of you.”

“I’ve got all my guns,” Mark told him.

“Those are just toy guns, Mark.”

“Yeah, but they don’t know that. I did have one real gun, but I don’t know what happened to it.”

“What?” Calli said in shock. “You had a real gun? Oh my God! You could have hurt yourself!”

“Where did you get it?” Harold asked in an even tone.

“From Brian Everex. He got it from his brother, and I traded some stuff for it. It was really neat looking. Sort of like what the Lone Ranger used.”

The breath caught in Harold’s throat as he remembered staring at the old man in the mirror. He regained his composure and opened his briefcase. On top of his papers was the silver pistol. “Is this it?”

“Yeah! Where did you get it?”

Harold sighed deeply. “It’s a long story. Do you have any bullets for it?”

“Yeah, they’re in my bottom drawer. I knew better than to keep it loaded.”

“Okay. Get those and one of your biggest fake guns. Pack some clothes while you’re there. Not much, just a couple of changes.” Harold looked at his wife and daughter. “You two do the same. Try to pack light. I don’t know where we’re going, or how long it will take. I just know we have to get out of here, and fast.” He looked at Calli. “Is there any gas left in your van?”

“A little over half a tank. Once the rationing started, I decided to walk whenever possible.”

“Okay. We’ll load up whatever groceries we have. Pack some clothes for me, Calli. I’m going to stand guard until we’re ready.” He looked at Mark. “Better bring me the bullets for this gun, first.”

Twenty minutes later, the minivan in the garage was loaded. “Okay, everyone,” said Harold. “Those people are only a couple of houses away. Calli, I want you to drive. Pam will be in the car with you. Mark and I will be out in front of the house. I want you to back into the street and be ready to drive away from those people as soon as we get in, okay?”

“Shouldn’t you and Mark be in the car with us?” Calli asked in a frightened voice.

“No. It would be better if those people see we’re armed. Otherwise, they might shoot at the car. All right, is everybody ready? Let’s go.”

As soon as they heard the car start, Harold and Mark stepped out into the front yard, their guns clearly visible. The people up the street didn’t notice them until the garage door opened, and then

they all stared at Harold and Mark. As the car backed out into the street, two of the boys began to run toward it.

“They’ve got gas!” one boy yelled.

Harold was shaking. He’d never been so frightened in his life. He took a deep breath and pointed the gun at the two boys, and he could see the barrel of the gun shaking. Suddenly, the gun nearly tore his wrist off, and he heard a deafening explosion.

One of the boys was hurled backward by the shot and he crumpled to the ground. The other boy staggered to a stop. No one made another move while Harold kept the gun pointed in their direction.

Calli pulled forward and stopped next to Harold and Mark.

“Get in, Son!” Harold yelled, his voice wavering. He heard the door open and backed toward it.

“Come on, Dad!” Mark shouted from inside.

Harold kept the gun pointed at the crowd as he slid onto the seat. He kept the door open, leaning out so he could watch the other people in case they tried to shoot at him and his family. “Okay, Calli. Drive away, nice and easy.”

Harold watched the crowd get smaller, and no one attempted to stop them. Calli turned the corner, and Harold closed the car door. He collapsed against the seat and sighed deeply, still holding the gun on his lap. “Oh my God!” he mumbled. “I just killed that boy!”

“You didn’t have any choice, Dad,” Mark said reassuringly.

Harold looked over at him, feeling like he’d turned into some kind of savage beast. “I know, son. I know.”

The Woolly’s drove east on Interstate 90, out of Seattle. The highway was crowded with abandoned vehicles, and, on several occasions, Harold and Mark would have to shove cars out of the way so they could continue. They passed several people walking, their thumbs out for a lift and eyes imploring for sympathy, and a woman with two small children sitting on a suitcase beside the road. The woman stood and shouted for help, and Calli started to pull over.

“What are you doing?” Harold asked.

“Look at them, Harold. Those poor children must be exhausted, and that woman is all alone.”

“No, Calli.”

“Oh, Harold, don’t be so selfish. There’s room enough to squeeze them in,” Calli told him in her familiar, domineering tone as she slowed the car to stop.

“I said, *no!*” Harold stated firmly, his voice low and menacing.

Calli glanced in the rearview mirror at Harold in the back seat, and a chill ran through her tired and aching body. She’d never seen that look in Harold’s eyes before. *He’s changed*, she thought. “Whatever you say, Dear,” she sighed and stepped on the accelerator.

As they passed the forlorn mother, something slammed into the side of the car. Startled, Calli swerved across the road, nearly slamming into the guardrail before regaining control. Harold flinched and looked out the back window. A man was running after them, heaving large rocks at their car.

“My God! What was that?” Calli cried out.

Harold was shaking, more from rage than fear. “Those were rocks! It was a trap, Calli. Probably that woman’s husband was hiding nearby waiting to carjack us! We can’t trust anyone. Understand? The world’s gone crazy!”

Harold stared at Calli’s reflection in the mirror, her eyes showing stunned understanding as she nodded. Pamela was sitting up front and turned to look at him. She looked scared, and he patted her soothingly on the shoulder, trying to hide his own fear of this new reality. “We’ll be all right, honey. We just have to be careful.”

Mark leaned forward in the back seat. "We have guns, so nobody's going to mess with us!"

Pamela shook her head. "We have one gun and that stupid toy. What if somebody has more guns? What do we do then, dummy?"

"Don't call me a dummy, you wart hog!"

"That's enough, both of you!" Harold snapped. "Listen, all we have is each other. We're a family and we have to work together or none of us will survive. Is that clear?"

Pamela turned and stared out the front window, and Mark did the same out the side window. Silence filled the car until Calli spoke a few minutes later.

"We're getting low on gas, Harold. We're down below an eighth of a tank."

They passed a sign advertising three major gas stations in North Bend a mile ahead. Harold knew it was the last stop for gasoline until they made it over the Snoqualmie Pass. "Take the next exit. Maybe they still have some gas left."

Calli nodded and they continued up the grade. As they came around a sweeping turn, they saw thick, black smoke drifting across the highway, and a few moments later, they saw the source; a four car accident on the off ramp into North Bend. Half a dozen people stood off to the side, staring at the carnage.

"Get as far over to the left as you can, Calli," Harold said in a cool tone. "Keep the speed up. Go faster, if you can."

The group of people stared at them as they passed, but no one tried to stop them. The highway continued to climb, and Calli kept glancing nervously at the gas gauge. There were fewer abandoned vehicles along the road, and they didn't see any more people walking. The gas gauge was touching the red line when they reached the summit and the sign for Snoqualmie Ski Resort. The exit looked clear.

"Harold?" Calli asked. "We're on empty."

"All right, take this exit. It would be better than being stranded on the highway."

Calli took the off ramp and followed the road to the ski lodge. A large sign announced it was closed for the summer, so she drove past it into the little community. Everything appeared abandoned, and from all the broken windows, it was obvious all the buildings had been looted, even the motel.

"What are we going to do now, Harold?" Calli asked in a quivering voice.

The parking lot for the motel was nearly empty, except for a long fifth wheel RV attached to a one ton Dodge pickup truck parked at the far end. "I'm not sure, Calli. Pull in here at the motel and we'll think about it."

Calli parked at the opposite end from the trailer and shut off the engine. The four of them remained in the car, no one speaking as they listened to the ticking of the engine as it cooled down.

Harold sighed deeply. "It's getting late. I think we should hold up here for the night."

"Do you think it's safe, Dad?" Pamela asked.

Harold shrugged. "Safe as anywhere, I guess. At least we'll have beds to sleep in. I wouldn't want us to have to sleep in the car on the highway." Harold grabbed the gun sitting on the seat next to him. "I'll take a look around first."

Mark grabbed his toy gun. "I'll go with you."

Harold smiled at his son. "No, you stay here and protect the women."

"Yeah, right!" Pamela said sarcastically and stared out the window.

Harold sighed and tucked the pistol into his belt, opened the door, and slowly climbed out. He paused to look around and listen. At first, he heard only the wind, then faint traces of music. He

cupped one hand around his ear and tried to locate the source. It seemed to be coming from the RV trailer. As he stared at it, one of the curtains slid back and an elderly man stared back at him for a moment before the curtain closed.

Harold wondered why the old man didn't come out, and then realized he must be as leery of strangers as he was. *Not much I can do about it*, he thought, and walked to the front doors of the motel. The glass from one side lay scattered on the carpet inside. Harold pushed on the other and walked through. The reception desk looked unscathed, even the little bell still sat on the counter. Harold tapped it and heard the little ding. No one came to the desk, so he walked past it and stopped at the corridor, looking left and right. Most of the doors stood open, and the nearest one had been kicked in.

Harold's heartbeat faster as he began walking down the left corridor, wondering if someone might still be lurking around. He stopped at each room and took a quick look inside, and except for a few unmade beds, all of them looked as though they hadn't been stayed in for quite a while. He stopped at the glass exit door at the end of the hall and looked out. A cement walkway curved around the building and back to the parking lot.

His nerves settled down a little as he walked in the opposite direction and saw the same thing in the rooms down the right corridor, and again he looked out the exit door. The door suddenly flew open and a huge round rifle barrel was thrust in front of his eyes. Harold's heart leapt into his throat and he staggered backward, tripping and crashing to the floor. He stared up in stunned disbelief as a tall, slightly overweight man with gray hair stepped through the door and shoved the rifle barrel against his chest.

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