

The Alex Cave Series Book 2

COLD ENERGY

Edition 10

Published by James M. Corkill.

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Other books by James M. Corkill

The Alex Cave Series Book 1. Dead Energy.

The Alex Cave Series Book 3. Red Energy.

The Alex Cave Series Book 4. Gravity.

Chapter 1

MONTANA STATE COLLAGE, BOZMAN:

Alex Cave sat on the edge of his old wooden desk, looking at his second year geology students while they headed toward the door. He heaved a deep sigh at the thought of having to teach the same old material to his *first* year students. The subject matter was becoming so routine, he could do it in his sleep. Ever since the Dead Energy operation, he yearned for the adrenalin rush of being on the hunt again.

David Conway waited until the last student walked out of the room before strolling over to Alex. He noticed the nearly healed scar just above his left eyebrow. “What did you do last weekend to get so banged up?”

Alex grinned. The physics student was like the little brother he never had. “Just a field trip, David. You never can tell when a few rocks might fall when you go underground.”

“Speaking of a fall, Greta Bernstein, the English Literature teacher, seems to be really interested in you. She keeps asking me if you’re gay, since you never accept her offer to go out on a date.” He noticed the look in Alex’s eyes change to one of deep sorrow, and realized Alex was still mourning the death of his wife in Holland not too long ago.

“I’m sorry, Alex. Hey, listen. I thought you might find this interesting. I logged into one of NASA’s northern imaging satellites and it was taking pictures over the Arctic Ocean when a small section of ice suddenly changed color from white to clear.”

“That’s interesting. Could it just be a refraction of the light through the ice?”

“It’s possible, but that’s not what it looked like to me. It took several seconds before the satellite moved out of range, but even when the angle changed, the ice was still transparent.”

“Have you contacted anyone who was watching at the same time?”

“I’ve been trying, but so far, no one has responded to my request.”

“Let me know what you find out.”

“I will.”

*

CHARS, (CANADIAN HIGH ARCTIC RESEARCH STATION), CAMBRIDGE BAY, NUNAVUT:

Sonja Hanspevin studied the computer map and lightly shook her head. Thirty minutes ago, the GPS unit on the Polar Ice Sheet north of Canada began flashing a warning. The elevation had just increased by two-hundred meters in only three minutes. “This cannot be right,” she whispered with a strong Icelandic accent. *The sudden increase in elevation has to be a mistake*, she thought.

She entered a test procedure into the computer, and the data indicated the GPS unit was functioning correctly. She ran another test, and the data was the same.

She grabbed her phone and entered the number for her District Manager, Peter Hendrix. “Hallo, Peter. We are getting a warning from GPS unit 2635. I thought the unit was malfunctioning, but I did two different tests and they are identical. I want to fly out to look for myself, but I need your approval for the helicopter.”

“Tom is scheduled to pick up the Regional Director at the airport in three hours. Can it wait until he returns?”

“I would rather not wait, Peter. We could have a serious problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“If the GPS unit is functioning correctly, the elevation of the ice sheet has gained two-hundred meters in only a few minutes.” She waited for a response. “Peter?”

“I’m still here. That’s impossible. It has to be a malfunction.”

“There is only one way to find out. If it *is* a malfunction I will exchange the unit, but we need to be sure.”

“Okay. I’ll call Tom and tell him you’re coming.”

“Thank you, Peter.”

*

Thirty minutes later, Sonja and the helicopter pilot, an American named Tom Hatfield, thought they were seeing an illusion. Directly ahead, a two-hundred meter vertical wall of transparent ice had risen out of the Arctic Ocean.

“Now that’s different.” Tom stated.

Sonja was speechless as they closed the distance to the ice wall. “Take us higher, Tom.”

Tom increased their altitude for a better view. From the higher elevation they could see that the transparent ice sheet extended two-hundred kilometers south into the Beaufort and East Siberian seas.

“This is not logically possible, Tom. We should find the GPS unit and retrieve the data. That will help us determine how this could happen.”

Tom gave her a nod and entered the new coordinates into the navigation system. “If all this happened as quickly as you say, I would imagine it made one hell of a wave.”

The surface of the newly formed ice sheet was as transparent as the sides and Sonja’s heart broke at the sight of dozens of white pilot whales now frozen in the surface of the ice sheet. *What could have caused the water to freeze that quickly?* She wondered.

When they approached the GPS unit, Sonja’s mouth opened. The unit was still mounted on top of the original white ice, but it was as if a section of the original Polar Ice Sheet had been sheared off the end, and forced up into the air on top of the massive new sheet of clear ice.

Tom set the helicopter down fifty-feet from the GPS receiver and brought the engine speed down to idle. When Sonja climbed out to exchange the units, she noticed that the air felt extremely cold. When the rubber sole of her shoe touched the ice, it immediately stuck to the surface and she struggled to pull the shoe free. When it tore loose, chunks of black rubber remained stuck to the ice. “What is going on?” she whispered.

She climbed back inside and looked at Tom, who noticed what had happened. “The ice is extremely cold. I do not think we should stay here. We will have to come back with different equipment.”

“Works for me.”

Tom shoved the throttle forward and pulled up on the collective, but the helicopter runners were frozen to the ice in a vice-like grip. He shoved the throttle forward to full power. When he pulled up on the collective, the vibration threatened to tear the helicopter apart, but the runners remained frozen to the ice.

“What’s wrong?” Sonja asked.

Tom let go of the collective and pulled back on the throttle until the engine was idling. “I can’t break free. We’re stuck to the ice.”

“Can I do something to help?”

He shook his head. “If we can’t break free with the rotors, there’s nothing we can do.”

“Call for another helicopter to pick us up.”

“Are you kidding? No one else can land to pick us up. They would just be stuck, too. We’re trapped out here, Sonja.”

Sonja wrung her hands together on her lap while she tried to think of a way out of their situation. “Call the research station and tell them what happened. We have many intelligent people working at the facility. Maybe someone will think of a way to help us.”

Tom entered the research facility’s frequency into the radio and pressed the button on the side of his headset. “CHARS research station, this is CHARS helicopter one. Come in please?”

No one responded and he tried again. After several minutes without a response, he changed frequencies. “This is the CHARS research helicopter calling anyone on the emergency radio frequency. Please respond.”

Sonja and Tom waited in uneasy silence as Tom tried again, but the plea for assistance remained unanswered. “Something must be interfering with the radio signal, Sonja.”

“Do you have any survival equipment?”

“Not much. Spare water, a small supply of power bars, first aid equipment, and signal flares.”

“If we do not return to the station, they will send a search and rescue unit to find us.”

“Even if they do, they still can’t land to pick us up. Without radio communication, we don’t have any way to warn them about the ice. They’ll be stranded out here with us. When our fuel runs out, it’s going to get very cold in here.”

“How long do we have before that will happen?”

Tom looked at the digital readout. “Even leaving the engines at idle, we’ll run out of fuel in less than four hours, and without heat, we’ll be dead two hours later. I’m sorry, Sonja.”

* * *

Chapter 2

MONDAY. SEATTLE FEDERAL BUILDING. FEMA REGIONAL OFFICE:

“Listen up everybody,” Director Charles Simons hollered across the control room. “We’ve just received a report that there has been a major seismic event on Vancouver Island, Canada. It hit Victoria the hardest, but the United States’ San Juan Islands also felt some seismic activity. Call your contacts and find out the extent of the damage so we can get the emergency response teams moving. Make it happen, people.”

Sharon Aniston, the USGS, United States Geological Service, supervisor from the sixth floor stepped out of the elevator and hurried across the room, into Simon’s office. “It didn’t register as a major earthquake, Charlie.”

Simons stared up at her. “What do you mean?”

“We don’t know what it was. All we know right now is the ground suddenly rose up beneath Victoria. It was a small tremor that only affected that specific area.”

“Is that even possible?”

“Logically? Not a chance. We don’t have a clue how to explain what happened.”

“Do you think it’s a prelude to a major earthquake in the Pacific Northwest?”

“I don’t want to speculate right now. We just don’t have enough information. I’ll tell you one thing, Charlie. If whatever caused that destruction in Victoria happens here, in Seattle, there won’t be anything left standing. There’s a helicopter on its way to pick me up on the roof. I’ll look at the damage and try to figure out where it started. I’ll call you when I have more information.”

Simons stood. “I’m going with you. I need to see the San Juan Islands to get a better idea what I’m dealing with.”

“It’s only a two-person helicopter, Charlie, but I’ll let you know what I find out.”

Simons sat back down. “Okay, thanks, Sharon.”

*

Sharon stepped out of the elevator and climbed the stairs to the roof access door. When she looked at the digital thermostat mounted on the wall, the outside ambient temperature was close to eighty-five-degrees Fahrenheit. It should be in the upper seventies, but global warming was already causing the temperature of the planet to steadily increase.

She stepped out onto the roof, walked across to the two-person Bell helicopter, and climbed in next to her pilot, Steve Bolton. A few moments later, they were flying north over the Puget Sound. The damage to the San Juan Islands appeared to be minimal, so she asked Steve to drop down for a closer view of the damage to Victoria.

She stared down through the smoke to see the devastation was far worse than she had imagined. The old city was nearly destroyed. The beautiful castle built for a long ago Queen was now a pile of shattered marble. Large sections of the once majestic hotels had collapsed into mounds of concrete and shattered glass. The mooring docks had been tossed around the harbor like rubber bands and beautiful yachts lay smashed into tangled heaps of sunken wood, fiberglass, and sail masts. Dozens of emergency workers and dogs were searching through the rubble for survivors and bodies were being stacked in long rows on what remained of the streets.

“I’ve seen enough, Steve. Take me back to the Federal Building.”

She leaned back in her seat and stared out the front window as the helicopter turned south, back to Seattle. *For registering as a minor tremor, the damage was horrific, she thought. What could have enough energy to do that much damage without registering as a major earthquake? And why did it only damage that specific section of the Pacific Northwest?* None of it made sense.

Steve set the helicopter down on the roof of the Federal Building, and Sharon climbed out and walked across to the single grey steel door. She entered the building and went down the stairs to the elevator. When the doors opened, her geophysics expert, Patrick Chandler, was waiting.

She stepped inside the elevator and leaned against the back wall. "I hope you've figured out where this started, Patrick."

Chandler shook his head. "We don't have any idea. It's unlike any seismic disturbance we've dealt with before. What did it look like from the air?"

"The damage was extensive and very precise, as if planned to hit only that specific city. I need to find out if the CIA knows of any terrorist activity in the area."

"You can't be serious. It was a seismic disturbance, not a bomb."

Sharon sighed and leaned her head back against the wall. "You're probably right. I'm just frustrated and searching for answers."

The doors opened and they stepped into the hallway of the USGS headquarters. Chandler followed Sharon to the command center. All the seismic data for the western region of North America was collected and analyzed in this large room and her team was trying to pinpoint the origin of the event using sophisticated software.

A young woman ran up and handed Sharon a sheet of paper and they stopped walking while she read the information. She shook her head and gave it to Chandler. "This day just keeps getting worse by the hour. The tsunami warning detectors in the northern Bering Sea just activated."

Sharon looked at the young woman. "We need to find out if there was any seismic activity in that area. Put it up on screen number three, please."

Sharon turned and walked across the room to study the information displayed on the large video screens mounted on the walls near the ceiling.

Chandler stopped while he read the report, and then caught up to her. "This is very bad, Sharon. If this is happening along the entire northwest coast, it means there is some major tectonic activity along the Pacific Rim. I'm just surprised we haven't noticed an increase in volcanic activity."

"Did you call Wesley Patterson about this? He must be monitoring the volcanic activity here, in the Pacific Northwest."

"Three times, but he didn't answer."

"After the Mount Saint Helens incident, can you blame him?"

Chandler looked down at the floor for a moment as he remembered the devastation caused by the eruption, and then stared up at the monitor. "I guess not. Even so, he must have noticed what happened."

They stopped in front of a large display showing all the seismic detectors in Western North America. The only flashing red dot was the one in Victoria. The tsunami sensors in the Bering Sea showed a ten-foot surge radiating south toward the Pacific Ocean, with nearly no surge past the Aleutian Islands.

"That's a bit of luck," Chandler stated. "It would seem the islands broke up the surge before it reached the Pacific."

Sharon crossed her arms and continued to stare at the screen. "I wouldn't be so sure. If it wasn't an earthquake that created the surge, what did?"

Chandler stared at the screen. "None of this makes any sense."

*

MOUNT BAKER, WASHINGTON STATE:

Wesley Patterson had ignored the messages from the USGS, but his seismic detector on Mount Baker registered a significant disturbance deep beneath his sleeping volcano.

His personal seismic activity center was his barn, near the Mount Baker National Forest and State Park, where he lived in his cabin and had studied the volcano for the past ten years. He knew that most seismic activity on Baker was caused by a normal rise in elevation, but this activity was coming from several thousand-feet beneath the surface, and that would only occur if the sleeping giant was awakening because of the new seismic activity.

He studied the picture on a thirty two-inch flat screen television sitting on a beat up wooden desk. It displayed two seismometer readings recorded during the first and second event. What was puzzling was they did not show major seismic activity on the surface, so why was it affecting his mountain?

He rewound the recording back to the time of the last event, and moved the cursor to an area just past the end of sensor needle. He clicked the mouse to zoom in on the black line, and when he saw the magnified view, he leaned back in his chair and released a long, slow sigh. "What the hell is going on?"

*

BOZEMAN MONTANA:

Alex threw a yellow tennis ball for his dog to chase, grabbed his ringing phone from his front pocket, and recognized the caller ID from the United States Geological Survey headquarters in Seattle, Washington. He walked up onto the back porch and sat in one of the green plastic chairs. "This is Alex Cave."

"Hello, Mister Cave. I'm Sharon Aniston, from the USGS in Seattle. Sorry to bother you, but we've had a major seismic event in this area. It did significant damage to Victoria earlier today and we've just had another event in the San Juan Islands. This may sound impossible, but they did not register as a major earthquake. None of our people know what caused it and we're worried it could be a prelude to a major earthquake in the Pacific Northwest."

"I live in Montana, so I'm not sure what I can do to help."

"We have a mutual friend in Yellowstone. Jerry Mercer spoke very highly of you. He said you were the one person he could count on when all other ideas fail. I was hoping you could help me with this problem."

"Jerry might have exaggerated a little, but I'll make some calls and try to figure out what happened."

"Thanks, Mister Cave."

Alex turned off his phone, his dark brows bunching together in thought. He had grown up in the Pacific Northwest and there was very little seismic activity. Still, the amount of energy required to destroy an entire city could only be on a seismic level. So why didn't it register as an earthquake?

He tried to remember the name of a man he had met at a conference in Iceland three months ago. He lived in Washington State, and his particular field was volcanism, the study of volcanos. He was currently studying the volcanic activity in the Pacific Northwest.

* * *

Chapter 3

PACIFIC OCEAN. 60 MILES WEST OF VANCOUVER ISLAND, CANADA:

Mike Tanner stepped out from the control bridge of his white, two-hundred-foot ocean research ship, the *Mystic*, and stared down at the open deck on the stern. His research company in Seattle had developed a new type of ultrasound system capable of finding methane hydride, a compressed methane gas held together by frozen water molecules, and only found in deep water.

An hour ago, the ultrasound unit on the ship had located a large deposit, and he had sent the two-person submarine down to retrieve a sample. After decades of burning fossil fuels, everyone was desperate for a clean energy source, such as methane.

He leaned his arms on the railing behind the bridge and listened to the quiet humming from the hydraulic pump as the extension arm on the hoist raised a fifteen-foot white submarine from the ocean. Water dribbled across the dull-gray deck as the submarine was swung around and placed into a storage bracket on the left side of the stern.

A moment later, the winch shut down and Mike stood and looked at the slim Scandinavian man standing beside him at the railing. "They said it was a pretty big slab of methane, John."

Captain John Dieter grinned at his boss. He had waited years for an opportunity like this, but it was not just to be the Captain of the *Mystic* and searching for methane. He had a far grander need for this ship and its submarine. For now, he would play the part as the dutiful Captain and friend. "It appears your new unit is working as promised, Mike," he said with a slight accent.

They walked down the outside stairs to the deck, and across to the submarine. The deckhand leaned a white fiberglass ladder against the side of the sub. Both men looked up at the sound of the hatch being opened.

Lisa Harding climbed up through the opening of the submarine and waved down at Mike and Dieter waiting on the deck below. "It's what we expected, Mike," she hollered and then turned around to climb backward down the ladder.

Mike smiled as he remembered meeting Lisa at the alternative fuels seminar in Las Vegas, Nevada two months ago. At the end of the seminar, the slender five-foot-four brunette had timidly followed him to the lounge and asked to sit at his table. Her hazel eyes stared at him through thin steel-rimmed glasses, as she stated she was a chemical specialist and he needed her expertise. He liked her self-confidence about her ability and told her when and where she would start working for him here, on the *Mystic*.

When Lisa stepped down on the deck and turned around to face him, Mike noticed the concern in her eyes. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure. There's something else mixed in with the methane."

"Is it dangerous?" Dieter inquired.

Lisa shook her head. "The methane has an odd color, but it's not dangerous."

They heard the hatch close and looked up at the operator standing on top of the sub.

Okana, (O'Kaw-nuh), ran his hand through his shaggy blond hair, and then turned around and climbed down the ladder. "I have a recording you should look at, Mike. We saw something very strange going on with the methane."

Mike stared up at the six-foot-one, solidly built man from San Diego, California, and was even more curious about the methane. "Josh is waiting for us in the lounge. Let's go take a look."

They followed Mike across the fifty-foot-wide, by sixty-foot-long open deck, and through the double doors centered in the rear bulkhead of the ship. The doors opened into a long walkway that continued straight through the center of the main deck, to Mike's office and personal living quarters at the bow. Just inside the doors, they passed a single door on the left that went into Lisa's laboratory, and twenty-feet farther, they turned right, through a ten-foot-square opening in the wall. Just inside the opening on the right, a set of stairs went up to the control bridge. On the left, across from the bridge stairs, another set of stairs went down to the individual cabins, bathroom facilities, and the engine room on the lower deck.

They went past the stairs, into the large open lounge and dining area, with smoke tinted windows spaced along the far wall. On the right side of the room, a serving counter divided the open kitchen from the dining table and chairs, and on the left side of the table, was the lounge area.

A burly man stood up from a desk in the corner, near a window. "I hear you found the mother lode," Joshua Mason stated in his baritone voice.

Mike thought the six-foot-six gentle giant from the Midwest looked more like a lumberjack, not the computer and electronics expert for the ship.

Joshua grinned at Mike. "I get stock options for this, don't I boss?" he asked jokingly.

Mike pointed at Okana. "He has a recording we need to see."

Joshua took the flash-drive from Okana and inserted it into the computer on his desk. A fifty-eight-inch flat screen television was mounted to the forward wall, and the picture from the recording appeared on the screen. The brilliant lights from the submarine illuminated the gray-green frozen slab of methane on the ocean floor. The massive oval-shaped slab was roughly three-hundred-feet-long by two-hundred-feet-wide and close to twenty-feet-thick. Oddly, it appeared to be growing upward from a long, large crack in the ocean floor.

Lisa walked over, stood next to the television, and pointed at the slab. "What has me concerned is the green color. It could be some type of algae. Maybe we've found a new species that lives in methane."

"Here it comes," Okana told them. "We saw this on our approach. Keep an eye on the area beyond the methane."

A mass of white bubbles wobbled up beyond the slab and everyone looked at Lisa for an explanation.

Lisa shrugged her shoulders. "I have no idea. At that temperature and pressure, the methane cannot be melting on its own." She held up a small silver tube. "I'll take this sample of methane to my lab for analysis. Maybe the strange color is a new type of organism and the bubbles are a waste product."

Mike followed Lisa out of the lounge and across the walkway, into her laboratory. She sat in front of her worktable and screwed the end of the pressurized stainless steel cylinder into the mass spectrometer. She entered a command into the computer, and moments later, she saw the results.

Mike noticed her puzzled expression. "Is something wrong?"

Lisa looked up and nodded. "There is something wrong with the composition of the methane, Mike. It contains large amounts of carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, fluorocarbons, sulfur dioxide, and several other chemicals that you probably won't recognize."

"So what does it mean?"

"Those elements are only found in the atmosphere, not underwater. I can't explain why they are in the methane."

Mike leaned back against the worktable as he looked at Lisa. "So what do we do?"

"I really don't know. As far as using it for an alternative power source, it's too contaminated to be worth the trouble of retrieving."

"Okay, I can live with that. Still, I'd like to know more about those bubbles. You mentioned it might be a new lifeform."

"I think the bubbles were coming up through the methane and not from behind it."

"I'll talk to Okana about going back down for a closer look. We'll take the remote rover to explore the area. It can maneuver around the methane much faster than the sub can."

"You won't make any money that way, Mike."

Mike nodded agreement. "I don't really care about the money, Lisa. I have more than I could ever spend. I just want to satisfy my curiosity and discover new things. If I can solve some of the world's problems while I'm doing it, that's great. Like you said, maybe it's a new lifeform, and the bubbles are part of its metabolism. If it attracts those chemical elements you mentioned from the atmosphere, maybe it could help clean up our mess."

"I agree. We'll need a sample from a bubble to learn more, and we should do an ultrasound with the new rover unit. The one here on the ship only found the methane for us, but it couldn't penetrate deep enough to tell us how far down it extends. Maybe the rest of the methane in the crack would be worth recovering. Give me a little more time and I'll go back down with Okana."

"No, this time I'm going down. Why should you have all the fun? It's my turn."

Lisa smiled up at Mike. Sometimes the five-foot-seven Mike Tanner reminded her of a fifty-year-old boy. He wasn't what people would consider handsome, but decent looking. "You just want to play with your new toy."

"That's the best part of being the boss, Lisa."

*

Okana checked the gauges inside the submarine one last time, and then looked in the rear view mirror mounted above the clear bubble window that was the nose of the submarine. Mike was sitting directly behind him, with a wide grin and a sparkle in his eyes.

Okana grinned at Mike's childlike enthusiasm. "We're going down, Mystic," he said into his headset.

Mike felt the g-force as Okana engaged the rear thruster and they were finally underway. He was excited about operating the new remote controlled rover; one of three rovers carried on the Mystic. Each was designed by the ship's engineer for a specific purpose. Besides its telephoto lens, this rover was equipped with a miniature version of the new ultrasound unit. It would enable them to look through the slab of methane and determine what was beneath it.

Mike could see Okana's reflection in the mirror. "You never told me what you did after you graduated from college, Okana. That was eight years ago, wasn't it?"

Okana liked Mike, and wished he could tell him he had worked for the CIA, but it was classified. "Let's just say I traveled a lot, Mike. Places you probably never heard of."

Mike knew how tight-lipped Okana was about his past. He had met the thirty eight year old at a beachside bar in San Diego California when they were both smiling at two bikini-clad women who strolled in. Okana had nodded to the women, and before he knew it, they were sitting at a table with the two lovely ladies. He said his name was just Okana, and later Mike learned he had a degree in mechanical engineering and was currently unemployed. When Okana signed the contract to work for him two months ago, he had put the letter 'F' for a first name without an explanation. Mike still didn't know what the *F* stood for.

Twenty minutes later, at a depth of 3,900 feet, the greenish white slab of methane hydride appeared through the front window. Okana maneuvered the sub to a level area and set down on the seafloor. "It's all yours, Mike."

Mike set the joystick control unit in his lap and watched the video display from the rover on a small screen mounted to the back of Okana's chair. He pressed the button to release the latches and maneuvered the rover forward, to the methane.

"We've got a good picture up here, Mike." Lisa's voice told him through his headset.

Lisa and Joshua were sitting in her laboratory, watching the wireless video transmissions from the sub and the rover. The new technology developed for the ultrasound allowed the transmissions to reach the Mystic with no degradation to the signal, so they did not need a long cable.

Mike maneuvered the rover down to the edge of the slab and that's when they noticed a change in color. The slab of methane was divided horizontally by a sixteen-inch thick layer of black material.

"Could you zoom in a little closer, Mike?" Lisa asked.

"Yeah, hang on a second." Mike maneuvered the rover and adjusted the camera lens. "How's that?"

Lisa could see a clear picture of the black line. "That's good. It must have been covered by the algae, so we didn't see it last time."

Above the black line, the green-tinted ice was the mixture of the methane and other gases they had sampled, but below the line, transparent ice disappeared down into the crack in the seabed.

"What do you make of that, Lisa?" Mike asked.

"I'd say the lower ice is made of purified water, but that's impossible. Maneuver over the center of the slab and we'll do an ultrasound."

"Understood." Mike maneuvered the Rover to the center of the slab and slowly brought it down onto the surface. "How's that?"

"Perfect. Here we go, 3, 2, 1, on."

Brilliant blue light flashed in front of the sub for a fraction of a second and Okana blinked furiously, trying to remove the blue dot in his vision, but it seemed burnt into his retinas.

Something slammed into the sub, tossing it around like a toy and bouncing it against the seafloor. Okana struggled to regain control as the sub rolled over and over through the water, away from the methane, but the disorientation made his efforts useless.

The spinning tossed Mike out of his seat and pinned him against the wall of the sub. The turbulent action made him nauseous and he fought desperately to hold it down.

The sub bounced end over end across the sea floor before finally slamming onto the seabed, and then it slid through the muddy sediment for a few seconds before settling on the ocean floor.

* * *

Chapter 4

CHARS HELICOPTER. POLAR ICE SHEET:

“This is ridiculous, Sonja. I can’t stand just sitting here waiting to freeze to death.”

“I’m sorry this happened, Tom.”

“If we had a deck of cards, we’d have something to do.”

Brilliant blue light suddenly flashed inside the ice, and the air was ripped open by a bolt of blue lightning shooting up from behind the helicopter.

Tom felt the helicopter slide on the surface and shoved the throttle forward as he pulled up the collective. The blue light suddenly blinked off as the helicopter climbed into the air, and they both stared out the window as he swung the aircraft away from the ice.

He looked at Sonja and smiled, grateful they were free, and then he turned the helicopter around to see what was going on. They stared out the front window, trying to comprehend what was happening to the ocean.

The water below the wall began to freeze and the ice was spreading across the water at six meters per second. The northern end of the elevated ice sheet began moving south, across the ocean as the water froze and shoved against the original polar ice sheet. Tom gained altitude to watch the expanding ice sheet and noticed that most of the freezing was extending south. He had to continually increase their altitude to see the far southern edge as it continued to expand for nearly fifty kilometers before it abruptly stopped.

The new sheet of ice began to rise out of the ocean, shoving the old, smaller ice sheet higher into the air, like a pyramid of transparent ice, with one massive slab of ice on top of an even larger one. When the new ice sheet stopped rising, Tom rotated the helicopter three-hundred sixty degrees to see the extent of the freezing. The southern end of the Polar Ice Sheet was now one thousand square kilometers larger, extending south, deeper into the Beaufort and East Siberian seas.

Tom looked over at Sonja. “Can you believe that just happened?”

“That is the problem, Tom. Nothing can freeze that volume of ocean so fast.”

“I don’t mean to argue, but something just did.”

“It was not a natural occurrence, Tom. Did you notice the perfect ninety-degree angle of the top edge of the ice? Nothing in nature is that precise.”

Tom noticed the small silhouette of something red and white near the eastern edge of the ice sheet. “I think that’s a ship. We’d better go see if they’re okay.”

Tom applied full power to the engine and the nose of the helicopter dipped down as their speed increased. As they closed the distance, they could see it was a large cargo ship trapped in the surface of the new ice sheet.

Sonja could see small dark outlines moving around on the deck of the cargo freighter and leaned forward in her seat. “They are climbing out of the ship! Call them on the radio, Tom! Hurry. Let them know not to get out of the ship or they will freeze to the ice!”

“The radio doesn’t work, remember?”

“We are a long distance from the GPS unit now, so maybe it will work this time.”

Tom reached down and changed the radio frequency. “This is the CHARS research helicopter, calling the red and white ship trapped in the ice. Come in, please.” No one answered. “I say again, this is the CHARS helicopter calling the red and white ship trapped in the ice.

Please come in.” He looked over at Sonja. “The radio signal must still be jammed. It isn’t working.”

“Can we go faster?”

“We’re already at full speed. Let’s hope they realize what’s happening.”

As they drew near, Sonja and Tom could distinguish several people standing at the ships railing. “We might be too late, Tom.”

Tom pressed the button on his headset. “Calling the ship stranded on the ice. This is CHARS research helicopter approaching your vessel. Please come in.”

“I see you, CHARS. What the hell just happened?”

“Do not step onto the ice. Your feet will freeze to the surface.” Tom waited for a response. “Did you hear me?”

“Yes, but it’s too late. One of my men stepped onto the ice just after it froze around the ship. His boots froze to the surface and, a few moments later, he was frozen solid. The strange part is that once the ice stopped rising into the air, his boots came free and his body toppled over onto the ice sheet and shattered into pieces. My men are bringing his body parts back onboard, right now, and they are starting to thaw. My men don’t seem to be having any problems walking around. I guess once it stops rising, the surface isn’t as cold as when it freezes the water.

“I’m sorry we weren’t able to call you sooner. Can you call for help?”

“We just did, and they’re sending a helicopter to pick us up.”

“Good luck.” He looked over at Sonja. “What’s next?”

“We go back and tell Peter what happened. It will not sound believable over the radio.”

“I sure as hell wouldn’t believe what just happened if I hadn’t seen it.”

“I cannot understand how something like this could be possible.”

Tom swung the helicopter around on a northeast heading, back to Cambridge Bay.

*

CHARS. CAMBRIDGE BAY, NUNAVUT:

Sonja sat across the desk from Peter Hendrix and explained what happened. “Do you know anyone who could explain this, Peter?”

He lightly shook his head. “It’s hard enough just to describe what happened, much less put a label on it. Who would we contact? You’re the leading glaciologist, Sonja.”

She stared across the desk and nodded. “Perhaps, but I do not know how sea water could possibly freeze that fast. That question is for physicists, not glaciologists. Whatever caused this did it twice.”

“I wonder what effect this will have on the atmosphere. Maybe the planet will cool down again.”

Sonja stood and looked down at Hendrix. “It happened too quickly. Nothing good can come from this, Peter. I have a friend in the United States who is well connected to the scientific community. I will explain it to him and see what he says. He would know who to contact. I will call you when I have answers.”

Sonja walked out of the administrative building and across the compound to the research facilities. They included laboratories and living quarters for the research scientists from all parts of the world, now stationed at CHARS. The structures were originally built to study the ice cap, and the accommodations were designed against the cold, but now, because of the global warming and the reduction in the size of the ice sheet, it was very comfortable with the windows opened.

Now, the new ice sheet was beginning to have an effect on the temperature, and Sonja zipped up her lightweight jacket against the sudden chill in the air. *Perhaps Peter is right*, she thought,

but it is happening too quickly. She knew the planet was a living entity and had always reacted violently to sudden changes.

*

BOZEMAN MONTANA:

Alex's cellphone rang and he recognized the ID as Sonja Hanspevin from the CHARS station in Northeast Canada. He had met the attractive blond Icelander at the same conference three months ago, and they had enjoyed drinks at the hotel bar before he flew home the next morning.

"Hi, Sonja. This is a coincidence."

"Hallo, Alex. Good of you to take my call," Sonja replied, then got right down to business. "It seems we have a serious problem with the polar ice sheet."

He loved her accent. "What kind of problem?"

"The elevation and size of the ice sheet have increased dramatically."

Alex stared at the world map on the wall. *What the hell was going on?* He wondered. *Two significant events in the same day?* "How long ago?"

"It happened twice today. 9:00 AM and one hour ago. It is difficult to describe, and I wish I had a recording to show you. The ice is transparent, Alex, and it froze one thousand kilometers of ocean to a depth of one hundred meters in only three minutes."

How could that be possible? Alex thought, and remembered David seeing clear ice in the Arctic Ocean. He stood and paced in front of the map, staring at the polar region north of Canada. "Who have you contacted about this?"

"That is the problem, Alex. I do not know who to contact. I was hoping you would know someone."

Alex thought about it. "I don't know anyone, either, but I'll do what I can. I was trying to remember that man we met at the conference. The one that looked like a hermit."

"I remember him. He had strange looking hair and beard. I saved his information on one of my cards because he was such an interesting character. Here it is. His name is Wesley Patterson, and here is his number."

"Thanks, Sonja. I'll keep you informed on what I discover."

"Thank you, Alex. Bye, love."

Alex entered Patterson's number and was asked to leave a message. "Hello, Mr. Patterson. This is Alex Cave. I would appreciate it if you called me."

He turned off the phone, and a few seconds later, it rang and he recognized Patterson's number. "Hello, Mister Patterson. Thanks for calling me back so soon."

"Hi, Alex. I remember you from the convention in Iceland, but I didn't know you were Robert's son until I got home. I live up the mountain from your Ranch. Don't you work for the government?"

Interesting question, Alex thought. "No, I don't. I'm an instructor at a college in Bozeman, Montana."

"Good. I don't work with the government anymore. What can I do for you?"

"I'm calling about that seismic event in Victoria. I was told it was not an earthquake and I've been asked to find out what happened. I wanted to get your opinion about what might have caused it."

"Any chance you can fly out here to Washington, Alex? There's something you need to see."

Alex looked at his desk calendar. His students were leaving to study the Yellowstone volcano with his friend Jerry Mercer for the rest of the week, and with the state holiday next Monday, he

had seven days until he was due back at the College. "I'll fly out today and give you a call when I reach Sparrow Valley."

"Good. I look forward to it."

Alex made a quick call to the dean of the college to let her know where he was headed, and then made arrangements to fly to Seattle, Washington.

* * *

Chapter 5

THE SUB:

When the blue dot in his vision began to fade, Okana grabbed the steering arm and brought the sub upright. He stared at the rear view mirror, but didn't see his companion. "Mike! Are you injured?"

"I don't think so." Mike pushed away from the wall and dropped into the chair. "Remind me to use my seat belt next time."

"That was interesting." He keyed his headset. "Are you there, Lisa?"

"I'm here. What just happened? All we could see was bright blue light."

Even with the sub's powerful exterior lights, Okana could not see through the roiling cloud of silt, so he engaged the downward thrusters. "Mike and I went for a ride. We need to get back to the ship so I can check for any damage."

"Are you guys okay?"

"We're fine. See you shortly."

As they rose above the silt, they could see white bubbles rising from the billowing gray cloud. Okana looked in the mirror at Mike. "Send the rover to the surface, Mike. Harrison will pick it up in the motorboat."

Mike nodded, entered a command, and the rover climbed up out of the silt and began its return to the ship. He keyed his headset. "I hope you got all that, Lisa."

"We did, but you didn't get a sample of the bubbles."

The mention of bubbles jogged Okana's memory of the first trip. "I didn't see any bubbles when we arrived, Lisa. It must have stopped after we left earlier, but we can see them rising out of the silt again. Something crazy is going on down here. I'll see you on the ship."

*

Joshua waited on the stern, rocking from foot to foot while waiting for the ship's first mate and the deckhand to set the sub into the storage bracket and the ladder against the side of the sub. He looked up as Mike climbed out first and climbed down the ladder.

"I hope that was as good on tape as it was live." Mike inquired.

"It wasn't that great for me, boss. We couldn't really see anything because of the silt."

Okana closed the hatch and climbed down the ladder to join them. "We had better go talk to Lisa. We were hit by a tsunami wave down there, and the ultrasound should not have caused that to happen."

They walked into Lisa's lab and she rewound the recording until she found the moment when the blue light appeared. When she enhanced the image from the ultrasound, she noticed something unexpected and pointed at the picture. "That clear ice under the methane is over a thousand-feet-deep, and it looks like there's something at the bottom. Watch this."

Lisa used the mouse to zoom in, and they could tell it was an oblong object. "That's the best picture I could get from the ultrasound. Whatever it is, it's been down there since the crack first opened."

Okana was more worried about what he felt. "When that blue light appeared, something forced the water to create a pressure wave and it slammed into the sub. We were tossed around

pretty good, so I need to check for damage. Once I make sure the sub's okay, we should go back down and try to figure out what happened.”

* * *

Chapter 6

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON:

Alex stared out the window at the Cascade mountain range as his commercial jet swung around on a final approach to Seattle/Tacoma International Airport. The glaciers on Mount Rainier and Mount Baker looked much smaller due to the greenhouse effect. He lightly shook his head when the pilot announced the temperature in Seattle was eighty-five degrees. It was a comfortable seventy-eight in Montana. He tried to see the San Juan Islands and Victoria, but the elevation of the aircraft was too high to see any discernible features.

After landing, he rented a car and drove north on interstate five. An hour later, he took the off ramp toward Mount Baker and across the Tempest River Valley. The two-lane highway began climbing a gradual grade up the side of the mountain and crossed a large stone bridge over the Tempest River. On the other side of the bridge, the highway continued up over a long rocky ridge line, along the side of the mountain.

When he drove over the top, he looked down into a vast expanse of flat land called Sparrow Valley, once the bottom of a massive lake on the side of Mount Baker.

The State Park was another twenty-miles east of the valley, so Alex pulled over into a picnic area and entered Wesley's number. "I'm here, Mister Patterson."

"I live up past the State Park. There's a little mom and pop grocery store just up the road from the park entrance. I'll meet you there."

"Yes, I remember. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Alex tossed his cellphone onto the passenger seat and drove down into the valley. The two-lane highway followed the left side of the Tempest River, straight across the valley before climbing up the west side of Mount Baker. When he drove past the only grocery store in the valley, he noticed the large white sign on the side of the red brick wall.

This year's high school track and field championship game was against their number one rival, Darrington High School. The games would be hosted by Sparrow Valley High School this year, on Friday, at 4:00 PM. He remembered how fierce the competition had been while he grew up in the valley. At least one hundred visitors would drive up the mountain from Darrington just to see all the sports events, and the Sparrow Valley community went down the mountain when the games were in Darrington.

He drove onto the shoulder of the road, next to a forty-foot-long stone bridge over the river. On the other side of the bridge, the asphalt road continued for two-miles before becoming a dirt road that ended at the Cave Appaloosa Ranch, his boyhood home.

Because of the deaths of his brother and sister in law, Ken and Doreen Cave, Alex would never consider going home again were it not for his nephew and niece, now living with his father, Robert, on the ranch.

Alex knew the strange circumstances of their deaths could have been his past catching up to him. While working for the CIA in Holland, the Russian mafia had tried to kill him and his wife, Sevi, but only succeeded in killing her. He remembered the loss of his true love drove him to madness and he had gone on a killing spree against those responsible. That was three years ago, but the Russian mafia had never forgotten about him. Alex suspected they took their vengeance out on his family. The police reported it as an accident, but Robert knew about his past and

suspected Alex was the reason they were killed. Robert would never forgive him for their deaths, so Alex did not even try to mend things between them.

He drove back onto the road, and twenty minutes later, he drove into the parking area in front of the old grocery store. The two orange gas pumps and the neon signs in the windows were just as he remembered. The dark green Humvee parked outside had a tall suspension package and eighteen-inch-wide tires.

Alex climbed out of his car and went into the store. The pleasant aroma of bread, spices, and coffee had permeated the wood walls over the past sixty years. A big man standing next to the old wooden counter turned to look at him.

Wesley Patterson's long, shaggy brown hair protruded beneath a sweat-stained cowboy hat, just as he remembered from the seminar in Iceland. He could barely see Patterson's grin behind the thick beard as he walked up and extended his hand. "It's nice to see you again, Mr. Patterson."

Patterson's handshake was firm. "Wesley will do," he said in a slow, deep voice.

A slender, silver-haired woman came around the counter and looked up at Alex. "I haven't seen you in twenty years, Alex."

It took a moment before he recognized the storeowner, then he smiled down at Carry Sorenson. "It's nice to see you again, Mrs. Sorenson."

Carry remembered the last time she had seen Alex. He had stopped at the store to buy a six-pack of beer on his way up to the reservoir to go fishing with his brother and father. He had a few new scars on his tanned, ruggedly handsome face since then, but his shiny black hair and thick dark eyebrows were what she remembered most. The difference was in his deep blue eyes. They expressed a sense of sorrow, unlike the sparkle of enthusiasm when he was a young man.

"Doing just fine, Alex. The last I heard, you live in Montana. What brings you out this way?"

"I came to see Wesley."

Carry looked up at Patterson. "I didn't know you knew Alex."

"We only met briefly three months ago, when I went to Iceland. Let's go to my place, Alex. There's something I want to show you."

"Is it very far? I still need to find a place to stay for the night."

Carry stared up at Alex. "Aren't you going to stay at your father's place?"

Alex shook his head. "I'm not welcome anymore. Not since my brother died."

Carry nodded. "We heard. I'm sorry, Alex."

"I have a guest room you can stay in, if you like?" Wesley offered. "Once I show you what I've discovered, you won't want to leave right away."

"I accept."

Alex followed Wesley out of the grocery store. They climbed into their vehicles and Alex followed the Hummer up a dirt road behind the store. The single lane road wound its way up the mountain, through a thick forest of evergreens, and Alex took a deep breath of pine-scented air through the open window. Twenty minutes later, Alex followed Wesley into the large green meadow, with a small lake and a modest cabin covered with cedar shake siding and matching barn a short distance from the edge of the lake. They parked in a graveled area next to the cabin.

Wesley climbed out of his Hummer and tossed his hat through the open window onto the seat, while Alex climbed out of his rental car and looked around.

The Cabin was high up the mountain. The temperature was slightly cooler, and tall fir trees enclosed three sides of the meadow, leaving a gap through which he could see the Pacific Ocean.

"What I want to show you is in the barn." Wesley said to get Alex's attention.

Alex walked beside Wesley, to the rear side of the barn. Wesley unlocked the door and Alex followed him inside.

Alex abruptly stopped and looked around. Straight ahead, an array of modern electronic equipment was mounted in a metal frame, six-inches from the rear wall. Behind the rack of electronics, a bundle of cables went up to the open wood beams across the ceiling, where four satellite dishes were aimed in different directions, through a section of clear glass panels in the roof.

In the large open space on his left was a two-wheeled, galvanized trailer with a fourteen-foot aluminum boat with a gas outboard motor, but what drew his attention was the two-person yellow snow cat with black rubber tracks sitting on a four-wheeled galvanized tilt trailer.

Wesley had continued over to the beat up desk and sat in a brown leather swivel chair, while Alex sat on a wooden chair next to the end of the desk. Wesley entered several commands on a computer keyboard, and the picture on the television was from a video camera focused on a seismographic sensor arm, drawing a black line from top to bottom on the screen. A digital clock was displayed on the upper left corner of the screen, next to a straight black line indicating no abnormal seismic activity.

“You’ll find this interesting, Alex. I’m going to rewind back to when that second event happened earlier today.” Wesley entered a command and the time on the digital clock stopped thirty seconds before the time when the seismic event occurred. “Watch what happens.”

Alex stared at the TV and waited as the clock ticked past the time of the event.

Wesley hit pause. “Notice anything unusual?”

Alex studied the readout. “No, it looks like nothing happened.”

“That’s right. Now watch this.”

Wesley moved the mouse pointer to a small area just past the seismometer needle and zoomed in. Now magnified, Alex could see a gap in the line. He looked over at Wesley. “What the hell happened?”

Wesley leaned back in his chair and frowned at Alex. “It didn’t vibrate like an earthquake, Alex. The damn needle just jumped off the paper for an instant.”

Alex leaned back in his chair, surprised by the magnitude of what he just saw. “Any idea what could have caused that needle to jump?”

Wesley slowly shook his head. “Nothing I can prove, but I have a theory. If part of the North American tectonic plate rose up temporarily, that would allow the Pacific plate to move underneath it at the Cascadia fault line. The movement would not have been a jarring motion, like an earthquake when the pressure was released. More like suddenly sliding a thin spatula under a large rock. It wouldn’t cause a major earthquake, but it could change the elevation and shake things up pretty good.”

“It shook things up, all right. Even so, it would take an enormous amount of energy to force a fault line to expand.”

“I agree. Something might have occurred beneath the mantel. My idea about what could have caused it to rise like that is a possibility, but it’s only a theory.”

They felt a small thud in the concrete floor and stared at the television when they heard a quiet beeping tone. Wesley quickly typed another command into the computer. The television picture now showed two different seismograph pictures side by side, each with a wavy black line above the seismic needles.

“What’s going on, Wesley?”

“The one on the left is from my mountain, Baker, and the one on the right is from Mount Rainier. These are readings from my own sensors. They’re more sensitive than the ones the government uses. I can activate them remotely when I need to, so I don’t drain the batteries. I turned them on after that first seismic event in Victoria. The problem is that those smaller events should not have affected my volcanos. That’s the basis for my theory.”

“How can you tell the difference?”

“Because that’s what my sensors do best. Back in 1980, the one I had at Mount Saint Helens indicated the eruption would happen in three days. I told those damn USGS people, and they wouldn’t listen to me. I was right, so to hell with them. I do my own research now.”

“Are you saying we’re going to have an eruption?”

“No. At least not right away. If they continue, it will definitely increase the possibility. Especially if they begin getting greater in magnitude. Whatever is causing this has to be sub-tectonic and there isn’t much we can do about it. I’ll have to keep an eye on the activity. Hopefully, there won’t be another seismic event.”

“We have to figure out why this is happening, Wesley. If it only happened one time, I’d say it was odd at best. Two times is a different matter. That indicates it could happen again.”

Wesley swung his chair around and stood. “Not much more we can do right now. I set the alarm to beep at the cabin if anything happens, so let’s go inside and you can fix us some dinner.”

“Sounds good. Don’t you cook?”

“Not if someone else can do it.”

They walked out of the barn and Alex stopped long enough to grab his bag from the trunk, and then followed Wesley into the cabin.

* * *

Chapter 7

THE MYSTIC:

Lisa looked up from the computer when she saw a reflection on the screen. She spun her chair around and frowned up at Okana standing in the doorway to her lab. “None of this makes any sense, Okana. I can’t figure out how that could be pure ice below the methane.”

Okana leaned against the doorframe. “The ice is a problem, all right, but I’m more concerned about what hit us in the sub.” He could see her frustration. “Dinner’s ready. Let’s get something to eat.”

Lisa stood and Okana follow her across the walkway. When they entered the lounge, the aroma of hot spices filled the air. They saw the rest of the crew walking past the kitchen serving counter, so they continued across the room to join the others filling their plates.

Lisa looked up at the ship’s mechanic, a red-haired woman named Rita Harrow. She had an engineering degree like Okana, and had been flirting with him for the past two months. She was nice looking, and about five-foot-ten. With Rita around, Lisa knew she did not stand a chance of hooking up with Okana.

Okana stood beside the first mate, Sam Harrison, a crusty old seaman with a face made of leather from being on the water most of his life. “Smells like you’re kind of food, Sam. Hot and spicy.”

Harrison smiled and exposed his yellowed teeth. “The hotter the better, since my taste buds ain’t what they use to be.”

Joshua stepped back to let Lisa get close to the counter, and then looked at the pile of food on the plate of the ship’s deckhand, Leroy Bartram, a skinny twenty-four year old kid with remnants of a bad case of acne. Bartram did the routine maintenance and cleanup, and any small tasks needed on the ship.

As each filled their plate and grabbed silverware, they walked to a four-foot by fifteen-foot, dark brown table. Once everyone was seated and well into their meal, Lisa decided to tell everyone her idea.

“I think we caused that disturbance in the methane when we fired the ultrasound. We need to drill down through the ice to find out what that object is at the bottom of the crack. The ultrasound can’t get past it, so I think it’s a metal object reflecting our signal back to us.”

Okana looked up from his meal. “I don’t think we should do anything, for the moment. If Lisa’s right and we caused this, I don’t think we should try anything else until we have more information. I’m going to call an old friend of mine about it. He’s a geology teacher.”

Mike brushed his white paper napkin across his lips and set it on the table as he looked at the group. “I agree with Okana. We should check this out before we try anything drastic. In the meantime, I’m going to have the *Discovery* leave port and start heading in our direction. I’m not saying that we’re going to drill down into the ice just yet, but since I’m paying for it anyway, I want to have her nearby, just in case.”

Harrison reached over the table, grabbed the dish containing the spicy red sauce, and poured some over his chicken and pasta. “I was up on the bridge when that happened down below. I saw something on the surface of the water a short distance from the ship.”

“Can you describe it?” Okana asked.

“It only lasted a fraction of a second and I was lucky to be looking in the right direction. It was just a large circle of neon blue light on the surface of the water, about thirty-feet in diameter. I could tell it was shining up from below.”

“The blue light is what we saw from inside the sub.” Okana told him. “I was wondering if it could be seen on the surface.”

“It would look pretty at night.” Harrison added.

Okana stood and picked up his plate and utensils. “I’m going outside to make my call.”

Okana set his dishes in a plastic tub on the kitchen counter and left the room. He turned left, down the walkway and out onto the stern of the ship. He leaned against the large white post near the back edge of the deck and stared down into the clear water.

He could tell Mike was more shaken up about being tossed around in the sub than he was showing. *I was a little unnerved myself*, he thought. The energy released by that object during the ultrasound test seemed unreal. *Where could something like that have come from?*

He took a deep breath to enjoy the scent of the ocean, but even this far out at sea, the odor of sulfur was discernible in the air. He slid his phone from his front pocket and dialed the number for his friend and a recording told him to leave a message. “Hey, Alex. It’s Okana. I need information about a seismic disturbance, so give me a call.”

He slid the phone back into his pocket and stared out across the water. The sun was slowly descending over the horizon, creating a light show of orange, yellow, and purple on the bottom of the clouds. When he turned and walked across the deck, a knot formed in his stomach at the magnitude of what they discovered. Whatever was under the ice had been down there for a very long time and the degree of engineering needed to create such a powerful device was not even possible yet. At least not on this planet.

* * *

Chapter 8

TUESDAY, 8:00 AM, MOUNT BAKER, THE CABIN:

Alex walked out of the bedroom and down the short hallway to the living area of the cabin. The interior was nicely done in horizontal white pine boards, with a thick matching mantel above the gas log fireplace. He followed the aroma of fresh coffee into the kitchen and saw Wesley sitting at the small oval table, intently studying something on his laptop computer, in front of the bay window. The spacious kitchen was also done in white pine for the walls and cabinets.

Wesley glanced up when Alex walked in. "The cups are in the cabinet above the coffee, Alex."

Alex walked to the coffee maker on the granite counter and filled a white ceramic mug, then sat at the table. "What's going on?"

"I just found this on the internet. FEMA is setting up operations in Anacortes, near the ferry dock and the marina. They're having logistical problems getting rescue workers and emergency supplies to the islands. The only way to get there is by boat or aircraft."

"Why is this happening, Wesley? A natural seismic event would not be so precise where it caused the damage."

"According to the USGS website, they didn't notice the needle jump off the paper."

Alex sipped his coffee and stared through the window. "I'll call the USGS representative in Seattle and let her know about the jump. She's the one who asked for my help."

"Would that be Sharon Aniston?"

"That's right. Do you know her?"

"She was the only one who believed my warning about Saint Helens."

Alex stood and felt his empty pocket. "I must have left my cellphone in the car."

When Alex stepped outside, the cool morning air was laden with the aroma of evergreens. *This is a paradise compared to the lowlands*, he thought. He looked through the car window, saw the phone on the passenger seat, and opened the door to get it. When he slammed the door closed, three beautiful Canadian geese floating on the lake began honking as he walked into the cabin.

The instant he sat down, the phone beeped and he entered a code to play the voice message. He stared out the window and sipped his coffee while he listened. The message was from his friend in California and he heard the urgency in Okana's voice. *Did the disturbance reach that far south?* He wondered.

He entered the number and Okana answered on the fourth ring. "Hey, buddy. I got your message. What's going on?"

"It's been a long time, Alex. Did you hear of any unusual seismic activity in the Pacific Northwest yesterday?"

"Yes, twice. The first one did severe damage to Victoria, Canada, and the second one hit the San Juan Islands. Why do you ask?"

"I think I know what caused it."

Alex turned on the speaker and set the phone on the table. "I'm with a friend. Did it originate in California?"

"Not that I'm aware of. What happened on the mainland?"

“I wasn’t here, but I’ve been told they didn’t register like major earthquakes. We’re still trying to figure out what could have caused them. Where are you?”

“I’m on research vessel, sixty-miles off the coast of Vancouver Island. We were searching for methane hydride and found some on the ocean floor. During our test, we activated something deep in a fissure, under the methane, and it created a tsunami on the ocean floor. The object appears to be some kind of metal reflecting the signal back to the ultrasound unit.”

Alex and Wesley looked at each other. “It wasn’t a tsunami that caused the destruction,” Alex told Okana. “It was a seismic event.” The line was silent for a moment. “Okana?”

“I’m here, Alex. We had no idea that happened.”

“Whatever you do, don’t activate that thing again.”

“Now that I know what it did, I’ll make sure we don’t. My boss has a drilling rig on its way to meet us. We think that’s the only way to determine what’s at the bottom of that crack.”

“Would you have room for me on the ship?”

“I think so. I’ll check with my boss and call you back.”

“Thanks. I look forward to seeing you again.”

Alex turned off the phone and looked across the table at Wesley. “Do you remember Sonja from the conference in Iceland?”

Wesley grinned. “The sexy blond woman? Of course.”

“She called me yesterday about a sudden increase in the size of the Polar Ice Sheet above Canada. It happened at the same time as the seismic activity down here. I don’t see how they could be connected, but nothing about this makes any sense anyway.”

“I agree. At least your friend on the ship knows what’s causing the seismic activity. I’m glad it’s not in the hands of some crackpot terrorist.” He noticed Alex grin. “Or should I be worried?”

“I trust my friend, but I don’t know the other people on that ship.” His phone rang, and he recognized Okana’s number and answered. “Should I rent a boat to meet you?”

“A boat? Where are you?”

“On Mount Baker, in Washington.”

“I thought you were in Montana. Hang on a second.”

Alex could hear voices in the background.

“My boss wants to know where to send the helicopter.”

“Pick me up at the Mount Vernon airport, so I can drop off my rental car. What time?”

“Is an hour okay?”

Alex hesitated, wondering if he should stop at his father’s ranch first to explain what was going on to his nephew and niece. *No, not yet*, he decided. “An hour is fine. See you on the ship.”

Alex turned off the phone and slid it into his front pocket as he stood to get his bag. “I’ll let you know what I find out.”

“What about Sharon Aniston?”

“That’s right. It was your discovery. Would you mind calling her for me?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Alex retrieved his bag and Wesley followed him out to the car. “I’ll call you once I know what’s going on.” They shook hands and Alex climbed in and drove away.

*

Alex drove down the mountain, to the small Mount Vernon airport, and parked in front of the main building. He grabbed his small suitcase from the trunk and walked inside to the ticketing

and rental area of the small air terminal, and handed the keys and the rental agreement to a young woman standing behind the counter.

A slender black man set a magazine down, stood from a chair in the waiting area, and moved over to the counter. "Are you Alex Cave?"

"That's right."

"I'm Carl Gregory, your pilot."

Alex shook his hand. "Are you a commercial pilot?"

"No, I work for Mike Tanner, on the Discovery."

Alex signed a piece of paper for the car rental girl and grabbed his suitcase. "Ready when you are."

Carl held the door open, and Alex walked with him to a white helicopter with DISCOVERY painted in light blue letters on the side. When Carl took his suitcase and set it in a storage compartment, Alex climbed into the co-pilot's seat, closed the door, and then put on the headset.

Carl climbed in, started the engine, and contacted flight control for clearance to take off. When he received approval, he took the helicopter into the air and headed west, to meet up with the Mystic.

"Could you take me over the San Juan islands and Victoria so I can see the damage? A few of my friends live on Orcas Island."

"No problem. It's on our way."

Five minutes later, Carl dropped to a lower altitude and Alex stared out the window at the destruction to the islands. A large resort on Orcas Island lay in ruin. Its hotel accommodations, built onto the steep hillside above the resort, were now a pile of rubble clogging the harbor. Bodies were being stacked on what remained of the docks and pleasure boats had been tossed onto the shore like toys. On another island, million dollar mansions were now rubble in the cold water at the bottom of steep hillsides and smaller resorts had collapsed buildings and torn up docking facilities.

Victoria was no longer the beautiful city he had visited years ago, and would probably never be the same again. *Whatever is at the bottom of the fault line must be very powerful*, he thought.

Thirty minutes later, they approached a beautiful white ship, alone on the vast Pacific Ocean. "Is that the Discovery?"

"No, that's the Mystic, Mike's personal research ship. Isn't she a beauty? The Discovery will join her later this morning."

Alex admired the Mystic's graceful design and recognized it from a boating magazine. It was a tri-hull, designed and built by a company in Australia. When it was underway, the center hull was held above the water by the two outside pontoons. The front ends of the pontoons were curved vertical wedges, designed to slice through the waves instead of going over them. The bow swept up and back over tinted viewing windows on the main deck, and continued up to the bridge. Large tinted windows ran along both sides of the main deck, with smaller windows for the lower deck spaced evenly along the sides of the ship, six-feet above the water line and the pontoons.

They approached from the stern and he saw a large white post for the hoist mounted in the center of the deck, three-feet forward of the back edge of the ship. On the left side of the deck, tucked inside the protective exterior wall, a fifteen-foot white submarine was cradled in blue curved steel support brackets. On the right side, another set of brackets held a sixteen-foot, white fiberglass motorboat with a blue canvas top. In each outside wall, closed hatches for getting on and off the ship were just forward of the support brackets for the sub and motorboat.

Straight ahead was the main body of the ship, with windowed double doors in the rear bulkhead. Above the doors was a viewing deck behind the bridge. It continued around the two sides to form a three-hundred sixty degree, U-shaped lookout deck spanning the width of the ship.

As they made the final approach, the white post of the hoist magically dropped down, flush with the deck. Carl gently set the helicopter down on the stern between the sub and the motorboat and left the engine running.

“You’re not staying?” Alex asked.

“No, I’m going back to Discovery. That’s where I work. Good luck, Mister Cave.”

“Thanks for the ride.”

Alex climbed out and grabbed his bag. Okana stepped out from the double doors and smiled as Alex walked over. Okana motioned Alex through the doors, and once they were safely out of the way from the down wash of the rotor blades, the helicopter took off and soared back toward the mainland.

Alex dropped his bag and gave his friend a quick hug, and then stepped back and smiled. “It’s great to see you again, Okana.”

Alex heard a noise outside and turned around to the door windows to watch the white post rise up from the deck. “That’s a neat trick.”

“I know. It pushes a sealed rubber sock under the ship. We only lower it for the helicopter. We don’t leave it down when we’re underway, because it creates too much drag. Let’s go meet the rest of the crew. We have coffee waiting, and we’ll show you what we’ve discovered.”

“Sounds good.”

Alex grabbed his bag and followed Okana into the lounge. He set his bag down to shake hands as Okana introduced him to Mike Tanner, Joshua Mason, and Lisa Harding.

Lisa felt her heart rate increase as she shook Alex’s hand. When Okana said he was an old friend and a geology teacher, she had imagined a frumpy old bald man with horn-rimmed glasses, not the tall, good-looking man who just shook her hand.

Okana indicated the table. “Let’s take a seat and we’ll show you the recordings.”

Alex sat at the corner of table and poured coffee from the thermos. Okana, Mike, and Lisa sat around him at the table, and Joshua sat at a desk near a window.

Okana unrolled a map and pointed to the area beneath the ship. “This is the location where we found the methane.”

Alex studied the map for a moment, and then looked around at the group. “That’s the Cascadia fault line. It starts north of Vancouver Island and follows the coastline down, to northern California.”

Lisa looked over at Joshua. “Play the recording, please.”

Joshua nodded and pressed play, and across the room, the television screen showed the video recording from the rover. After a few moments of darkness, the slab of methane hydride was illuminated by the sub’s brilliant lights.

Alex turned to look at Lisa. “I thought methane hydride was white.”

“You’re right, but that’s not pure methane. It’s a mixture of chemical compounds found in our atmosphere. They shouldn’t even be down there.”

Alex looked back to the television as the picture from the rover was circling the slab, and then the lens focused on the black material.

“Pause that, Josh.” In her excitement, Lisa reached over and put her hand on Alex’s forearm. “Something happened between the formation of the methane and that black material. After what

happened yesterday, I didn't want to send the rover down to get a sample until we learn what's at the bottom of the ice. Please continue, Josh."

The picture from the Rover tilted down above the methane, and they could see the discolorations creating a spiraled green band, getting smaller towards the middle. The rover stopped, and the view from the camera was magnified until the rover was on the surface of the methane. Three seconds later, the picture suddenly changed to blinding blue light for a fraction of a second, and then the picture showed silt billowing up from the seafloor, casting everything in dirty gray darkness.

Okana looked over at Alex. "That's when Mike and I were tossed around in the sub. The view from the camera doesn't do it justice, Alex. What Mike and I saw from inside the sub was a translucent neon blue light, shooting up through the water from the crack in the sea floor. A pressure wave slammed into the sub at the same time, and I lost control. Our first mate saw a neon blue circle of light on the surface, near the ship. He wondered what it would look like at night. I wondered what it would look like from outer space."

Lisa realized her hand was still holding Alex's arm and she quickly pulled it away. When he turned and smiled, her heart began to race. She gave him a quick, embarrassed smile, and then looked back at the television. "Ah, could you put on the picture from the ultrasound please?"

The television showed several still pictures of the dark cylindrical object, deep beneath the ice.

"That's the best picture I have," Lisa told him. "The only way to get a better look is to drill and send an optical cable down into the ice."

Alex looked at the faces around the table. "I hope all of you realize the magnitude of what you've discovered. Whatever it is also disturbed the Mount Baker and Rainer volcanos. We're worried that, besides the destruction it's already caused, if these events continue, there could be a major eruption." Alex decided not to mention the incident at the polar ice cap, leaned back in his chair, and looked over at Okana. "You mentioned that you know what caused this to happen."

"It happened when we fired our experimental ultrasound system. I'm sure that's what triggered whatever happened."

"So you used it twice and this happened each time?"

Mike spoke for the first time. "No, that was the only time we did the experiment, right Lisa?"

"That's right."

Alex wondered what was going on. "We had two events yesterday. The first was around nine AM, the other about five PM."

Okana grinned and shook his head. "You're right, Alex. We did do it twice. At nine yesterday morning we got our first detection of the methane from the ultrasound unit, here on the ship."

Alex noticed Lisa's puzzled expression. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm not really sure. We used a very powerful, wide beam frequency of our new ultrasound to locate the methane, but I didn't think the sound waves were strong enough to penetrate the methane and reach what's at the bottom of the ice."

Now Alex wondered if there was a connection with the polar ice cap. "Could the sound waves from your ultrasound reach the Arctic?"

Lisa wondered where this was leading. "Sure. It's the same way whales communicate. With the power our new transducer puts out, the sound waves could have reached the arctic."

Alex leaned back and sighed deeply. "Yesterday, I received a call from my friend at the CHARS station near the Arctic Ocean. It seems the water south of the polar ice sheet was

suddenly frozen into transparent ice that rose out of the ocean. I'm not sure what to make of all this. At least you stopped using the ultrasound, so we won't have another seismic event."

"The ice under the black material is transparent, too, Alex." Lisa told him. "The only thing left is my idea to drill down through the methane. Once we find out what that thing is at the bottom of the crack, we'll have a better idea what's happening."

Mike stood from the table. "I say we should do it. If we don't use the ultrasound, we shouldn't have any problems."

Alex glanced around and everyone was staring at him for a yes or no. He nodded up at Mike. "You've got my vote. I'd like to know what's down there."

"All right. I'll tell Discovery to get started."

* * *

Chapter 9

SEATTLE FEDERAL BUILDING. USGS HEADQUARTERS:

Patrick Chandler lightly tapped his knuckles on the window of Sharon's office and waited until she looked up from reading the morning reports. "You're not going to believe this. Patterson's on line three, and will only talk to you."

Sharon waved Patrick into the room and pressed the button for the phone speaker. "Hello, Wesley."

"Was that Chandler who answered?"

"Yes. He's listening to us."

"Tell him to leave."

Sharon looked up at Chandler's stunned expression. "Can I ask why?"

"Mount Saint Helens."

"That was a long time ago, Wesley. He admitted to his mistake. Haven't you ever made a wrong decision?"

"Not when people's lives are at stake. That's the only reason I'm calling."

Chandler leaned across the desk to the phone. "Okay, I made a wrong decision. I'm sorry."

"Fine. Just shut up and listen. There is a research ship conducting an experiment sixty-miles west of Vancouver Island, and they might know what happened. I'm working with Alex Cave, and he's on it right now." He explained about the seismometer jumping off the paper and his theory about the tectonic plate movement. "Baker and Rainier are showing some activity because of those events, Sharon."

Chandler shook his head at Sharon and leaned across the desk. "That's impossible, Patterson. Nothing can create that much force and we didn't detect any activity on the mountains. This Cave person, what's his background and why should we trust him?"

"Good bye, Sharon."

Sharon turned off the phone and stared up at Chandler. "You're an idiot, Patrick. I called Mister Cave and asked for his help. You said it yourself. You don't have any idea why these seismic events are so precise and do so much damage for their size."

"I know, but you can't believe a crazy theory like that could really be possible, do you?"

"Unless you can give me a better explanation, I'm not going to dismiss his idea. I just hope he calls me back after Mister Cave returns from the ship."

*

MYSTIC:

Okana stood from the table. "This might take a while, Alex. Let's go out on deck and reminisce."

Alex stood and followed Okana out of the lounge and along the walkway to the stern, and they stopped next to the hoist and stared out across the water. The cool breeze off the water felt nice compared the heat on the mainland.

"Sorry to hear about your brother and his wife, Alex. Donner let me read the file."

"I just hope it's over. My nephew and niece are staying at my father's place. The ranch is registered under my mom's maiden name, Parker, so hopefully the Russians don't know anything about it."

"Anything I can do to help?"

Alex slowly shook his head. "After what I did in Russia, I've lost all my connections. Donner promised to let me know if anything comes up."

"I still have contacts in the agency. I'll check around."

"You've always had my back, Okana. If there is anything I can do for you, just let me know."

"You could tell me what really happened during the Dead Energy operation."

Suddenly Alex thought about what Menno Simons had told him that night in the Nevada desert and looked at Okana. "I just had the craziest idea you could ever imagine. How long until you start drilling?"

"I don't know. I'm new here. Mike hired me two months ago."

"What do you know about the crew?"

"I did some checking and Mike seems to be all right. He doesn't care about money. He just likes the research his wealth gives him. Lisa comes from a modest background and doesn't have a criminal record. Joshua spent some time in therapy for temper management, but other than a few bar scuffles, he's never been in much trouble. Our first mate is just an old sea dog, and from what little records exist, he's spent most of his life on ships traveling the world. I couldn't find anything wrong with the deckhand's background, but our Captain has me a little worried. His background is too clean. Someone has created it for him. So what's this crazy idea of yours?"

Before he could answer, Alex noticed the tall woman dressed in faded blue jean shorts and a tight fitting white tank top walking in their direction. Her damp red hair hung in natural curls to just above her shoulders.

Okana turned to see what Alex was looking at. "That's our mechanic, Rita Harrow."

Rita had just finished a shower and returned to the lounge, and heard Lisa talking about their new guest. She smiled warmly and reached out to shake his hand. "I'm Rita Harrow, Mr. Cave."

Alex accepted. "Just Alex, will do."

"I understand you study rocks," she said jokingly.

"Don't let her fool you, Alex. She has a Master's degree in electronics and mechanical engineering. She's also our mechanic."

"I must say, Ms. Harrow. You're the prettiest grease monkey I've ever seen."

The trio smiled and turned in unison when they heard footsteps coming their way. Lisa, Mike, and Dieter were walking in their direction.

When Lisa saw Rita standing with the men, she positioned herself next to Alex so Rita understood her intentions.

Mike did the introduction. "This is our Captain, John Dieter."

Alex held out his hand, but Dieter hesitated before accepting and he could sense that Dieter was not happy to have him on the ship.

Mike noticed Dieter's reaction and wondered why, but let it drop. "The Discovery will be in position to send down the drill head in three hours. Once Celeas anchors the drill head above the methane, I'm going to send down our experimental high-pressure steam drill. It's similar to an ice core drill, but we send steam down to melt the ice for an optical lens. We'll be able to see the picture from the Discovery in Lisa's laboratory."

"Who's Celeas?" Alex asked.

"She's our robotic workaholic on the Discovery," Rita told him. "It's an unmanned prototype I designed for underwater research. She is similar to the rovers I designed here, on the mystic, but she is much larger and more powerful. We can attach a variety of tools for working deep underwater, and she's remotely controlled from the ship, using the new technology developed for the ultrasound system, so she doesn't need a long control cable."

Alex walked over to the white submarine in the brackets on the left side of the stern. Two mechanical arms were folded back along its length and four high intensity lights were attached to the front, above the clear bubble shaped window. "What's this one do?"

Okana followed him. "This is my baby. She can hold two people and we use it for observation and investigation to collect samples. Mike and I were in her when we were tossed along the ocean floor." He looked over at Mike. "Mind if I take Alex down with me to watch the drilling?" Mike gave him a nod.

"Not at all. He should find it interesting."

Okana looked at Alex and grinned. "You're going to enjoy this. We'll wait until Celeas is done setting the drill head in place, and then we'll go down to watch."

"I missed breakfast. Do you have a snack machine?"

"I can make you something from the kitchen," Lisa offered.

Alex gave her a nod, then followed her across the deck and into the ship.

Rita put her hand on Okana's shoulder. "I think she has a crush on your friend."

Dieter stared at Cave's back until he disappeared into the ship, and then looked at Okana. "Your friend sounds like an educated man. What is his profession?"

Okana could sense that Dieter was not happy about Alex joining the crew and was searching for information. "He teaches geology at a college."

Dieter locked stares with Okana. He was the Captain on this ship and Okana was just another new employee who needed to be under his command. The moment dragged on, but Okana did not even blink. He decided to find out more about this geology teacher from his contact on the mainland. He turned and walked across the deck to the stairs, and up to the bridge.

Mike thought this might happen. From the little time he had spent with Okana in San Diego, he was a man that would not be intimidated. He noticed Okana still staring at Dieter's back. "Well, Okana. In a little while we'll be able to see what that mysterious object is at the bottom of the ice."

Okana looked down at Mike and gave him a nod. "What's up with Dieter?"

"He thinks he's in charge. Don't worry about it. Let's find out what's in the ice."

An hour later, Alex followed Okana up the ladder, to the top of the sub, and they climbed down inside. Alex closed the hatch, sat in the seat behind Okana, and fastened his seat belt. Five minutes later, they were in the water.

Alex felt the rear thruster pushing the sub forward, and for the moment, there was nothing to see as they followed the flexible, six-inch diameter, orange hose for the optical drill down to the ocean floor.

*

CHARS:

The increased size of the ice sheet was affecting the weather patterns in northern Canada and eastern Siberia, and speculation about the ice sheet had spread quickly throughout the facility. Everyone was contacting their various countries, asking for assistance to figure out how something of this magnitude could be possible. So far, no one had a plausible explanation, although several physicists were grandstanding their egos with wild conjecture.

Sonja and Tom had left the facility nearly an hour ago in order to fly to the southern end of the ice sheet to collect a sample of the strange clear ice, and could see the pyramid in the distance.

Tom glanced over at Sonja. "Is it my imagination, or has that pyramid moved farther south?"

Sonja stared into the distance at the ice pyramid, and the angle of the sun was shining down through the ice like a prism. She noticed a dark area, deep beneath the surface, and directly below the top of the pyramid, but as they drew closer to the top, the angle changed and the dark area was gone. "What is our current GPS location compared to the last time we were here?"

Tom looked down at the instrument panel. "I was right. The pyramid is over three-hundred-miles farther south than the last time we were here. It must be moving when the ice on the northern end expands and forces it further south."

Tom continued flying south and they flew past the red and white cargo ship locked in the ice, and it appeared to be deserted.

Sonja nodded through the front window. "Once the ice stopped rising out of the ocean, those people on the cargo ship did not freeze to the surface, so we should be okay to land without getting stuck again."

Tom hoped Sonja was right as he cautiously set down on the southern edge of the ice sheet and brought the engine speed down to idle. When she reached for the door handle, he reached over and placed his hand on her arm. "Be careful, just to be sure."

Sonja opened the door and felt the freezing wind flowing across the ice sheet. She cautiously touched the ice with the tip of her shoe, quickly pulled it back, and smiled at Tom. "I will be fine."

She stepped down onto the runner of the helicopter and across the ice, to the edge, and looked down. The wall of ice dropped straight down into the ocean, two-hundred-feet below. She stepped back, pulled a plastic jar from her pocket, and removed the lid, then knelt down to use the lid to scrape some of the ice into the jar. The plastic lid just slid along the surface without leaving a scratch on the ice.

She stood, walked back to the helicopter, and leaned in past the open door. "The ice is exceptionally hard, Tom. I need a knife."

Tom climbed out and opened one of the storage doors. He dug around in a small plastic toolbox and found a small hammer. He knelt down and banged it against the surface, but it bounced up without leaving a mark. "What the hell *is* this stuff, Sonja?"

"Try it again."

Tom raised the hammer above his head and slammed it down onto the surface.

* * *

Chapter 10

THE SUB:

“Nice job you have, Okana. What’s up with you and Rita?”

“Just friends, for now. It’s not a good idea to have a relationship with someone you work with. Especially when living on this ship so much.” He glanced up at the rear view mirror and saw the sad expression in Alex’s eyes. “I’m sorry, Alex.”

“That’s okay. And you’re right. Sevi would be alive and on some photographic assignment right now if we hadn’t fallen in love.”

“I’m just glad it was me who managed to extract you from Russia. Our orders were to stop you, period. Some of our people would have shot you on sight.”

“In that case, I’m glad, too.” He glanced around the inside, at the exterior walls, and the coating appeared to be glazed on, not painted. “How deep does this thing go?”

“It’s rated at six-thousand-feet, but I sure as hell don’t want to test it.”

“I don’t recognize this material on the walls. Some new metal alloy?”

“No, the pressure hull is ceramic.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Welcome to the New World, my friend.”

Alex grinned and lightly shook his head. “Great. I’m diving to the bottom of the ocean in a clay pot.”

Okana looked at Alex’s reflection in the mirror. “We’re coming up on the drill head. Take a look.”

Alex leaned forward and around Okana’s chair to stare through the front window. The lights illuminated a two-foot thick, by six-foot-diameter stainless steel disk on top of the massive slab of methane. Four separate one-inch steel cables were attached to the outside of the disk, and looked like long black spider legs disappearing into the darkness. The orange tube was attached to the hole in the middle of the heavy steel disc, and he noticed it swaying with the current, flattened in some areas. “Is the tube supposed to be flat?”

“The tube is just a guide for the steam drill and fiber optic cable. It’s full of sea water, so the pressure is equal to the outside, so the tube won’t collapse under the pressure.”

They heard a voice in their headphones. “Okana, this is Lisa. How do you read?”

“Loud and clear. How’s the picture?”

“Your camera is good. I can see the transmission from the fiber optic lens, so we’re ready to start melting the ice. Are you sure you want to stay down there? You won’t be able to see the pictures from the lens.”

Okana looked in the mirror at Alex. “I’d like to stay down until I’m sure the drill head and optical lens are working properly, Alex.”

“I’m fine. This is exciting compared to my usual work day.”

“We’ll stay for a while, to make sure everything goes as planned, Lisa.”

“Okay. We’re starting the steam now.”

From their point of view in the sub, the only noticeable changes were the white bubbles wobbling up out of the methane. The bright white light from the optical cable was reflecting through the methane ice like a prism, putting on a light show on the outside edges, similar to the illuminated end of a glass rod.

“Hey guys. What does it look like down there?” Lisa asked.

“Everything looks okay.” Okana answered.

“I’m starting to go through that dark material.”

Alex and Okana noticed the light in the ice begin to flicker and then tumbling red bubbles boiled out from the methane around the drill head. It lasted several minutes before the red bubble stopped and the white bubbles reappeared.

“It just punched through and the ice is so clear I can see the object down at the bottom. It’s a long cylinder, but I’ll need to go deeper to determine the size. It appears to be gray in color. Probably some type of metal.”

Alex covered his headset microphone with his hand and leaned forward, close to Okana’s ear. “Remember that crazy idea I told you about? It may not be so crazy after all.”

Okana glanced over his shoulder. “Okay, I’m waiting. Tell me about it.”

Blinding blue light suddenly flashed in front of the submarine for a fraction of a second, both men blinking furiously to clear their vision.

When the pressure wave slammed into the sub, the front window became vertical before flipping upside down. The seat belts dug painfully into their waists, keeping them from smashing into the ceiling. The sub flipped end over end above the seafloor as the wave carried them away from the drill head.

Okana struggled to regain control, but the thrusters could not overcome the power of the wave and the sub kept tumbling.

Alex grabbed the back of Okana’s seat with both hands as he was hurled forward against the back of Okana’s chair. The sub hit the ground and his shoulder slammed against the wall. The sub began tumbling in every direction, and Alex was tossed from side to side, with only the seatbelt to keep him from being tossed out of the chair.

The front window suddenly slammed down onto the seabed and the lights blinked. Alex’s head bounced off the video screen on the back of Okana’s chair, and then the sub slowly leaned over onto its side in a billowing cloud of silt.

*

THE CABIN:

Wesley was watching the news reports and footage from the rescue efforts in the islands when he felt his recliner rise up and down a fraction of an inch. Suddenly the alarm for the seismometers in the barn began beeping. “Oh, crap!”

He leapt out of the chair, ran through the kitchen and out the back door, and across to the barn. He yanked the door open and ran to his desk, and remained standing as he used the mouse to zoom in on the readout from the seismograph. The needle had jumped off the paper again, but this time the gap was nearly one quarter-inch-long. He heard two separate beeps and changed the picture to *his* sensors from Mt. Baker and Mt. Rainier. The lines on the readouts started as small wavy lines, which increased to two-inches-wide before tapering back to zero. “Oh, crap,” he whispered.

He reached into his pocket and grabbed his phone to call Alex, and after four rings, he was asked to leave a message. “This is Wesley. We just had a major event. Call me.”

*

POLAR ICE SHEET:

Brilliant blue light suddenly filled the ice as a bolt of blue lightning shot up from the top of the pyramid, a thunderous crack echoing across the ice. The ice beneath their feet suddenly heaved up, tossing Sonja into the air and driving Tom down against the surface.

Sonja slammed down onto the ice as the surface shifted in all directions, rolling her toward the edge. “*Tom!*” she yelled as her legs slid over the edge. She clawed at the ice with the tips of her gloves in a futile attempt to stop sliding over the edge. “*Help me!*” She screamed.

Tom tried to stand to run over, but the movement tossed him back down. He rolled onto his hands and knees, desperate to grab one of her hands as she slid farther over the edge. Her face was a mask of terror, her eyes wide, and her mouth open in a silent scream.

He drove his foot against the runner and shoved with all his might, sliding across the ice and curling his fingers over Sonja’s gloved hand as she slipped over the edge.

“*Nooooo!*” He roared, dug his fingertips into her glove, and pulled back with all his strength, but he began to slide across the ice with her. He felt his foot hit the crossbar on the runner, so he curled his ankle around the bar, but their weight and motion threatened to tear his foot away.

“*Aaaaahhhh!*” he screamed against the pain, but kept his foot around the bar.

Sonja could see the agony on Tom’s face. She gritted her teeth around the glove of her free hand and ripped it away, then swung her arm around with all her strength and grabbed his coat sleeve, struggling to keep from falling two-hundred-feet into the freezing ocean.

The motion abruptly ceased and Sonja dragged herself over Tom’s shoulder, back onto the surface. She scrambled onto her knees, shoving her shoes against the slick surface, trying to gain traction away from the edge. She released Tom’s coat and pushed herself up off the ice.

Tom released his foot and rolled onto his back, staring up at the sky while trying to catch his breath.

Sonja dropped down on her knees beside him, taking deep gulps of air and trying to calm her frazzled nerves. “Are you all right?” she asked between deep breaths.

Tom stayed on the ice and nodded vigorously. “Yeah. I’m okay. And You?”

Sonja held his hand. “Yes. Thank you.”

She remained kneeling next to Tom and stared out across the new ice sheet below, but the end of the new ice sheet was difficult to distinguish from the sky on the horizon.

Tom noticed her staring into the distance, her mouth slightly open. “What is it?” She pointed south, and Tom rolled onto his knees and followed her gaze. “That’s something you don’t see every day.”

Sonja looked at Tom and then started to laugh now that her adrenaline level returned to normal.

Tom sat up and began to laugh with her, and after a few moments, he stood and grabbed her hand to help her up. “Let’s get out of here. Remind me not to use a hammer next time.”

Sonja nodded, turned to get into the helicopter, and noticed her jar and lid on the ice. She bent down to pick them up, but stopped and turned to look at Tom and pointed at the helicopter’s runner. “Look.”

Tom looked down at the small mound of ice crystals scrapped from the surface when the helicopter had slid on the ice, and then he looked up and gave her a puzzled expression. “Did I do that?”

“I don’t know.” She knelt down, scrapped the ice into the jar, closed the lid, and then stood. “You are right. We should leave.”

Tom walked around the helicopter and climbed into the pilot seat, and once Sonja was seated, he took off and pointed the helicopter toward the CHARS facility.

* * *

Chapter 11

CAVE RANCH, SPARROW VALLEY:

Robert Cave heard the thumping of small feet running across the wooden back porch just before the kitchen screen door slammed shut and Kristy Cave ran into the living room.

“I felt an earthquake, grandpa!” Kristy said with the excited enthusiasm of a ten-year-old girl.

Robert smiled at her tousled blonde hair and the smudge of dirt on her face. “It was just a minor tremor, sweetie. Nothing to worry about.”

Kristy flopped onto the light brown couch and frowned at the dirt under her fingernails. “That didn’t feel like a tremor and the horses are acting weird, too. We should call Uncle Alex. He knows all about this stuff. How come he never comes around anymore? Is it because you hate him?”

Robert sighed deeply. “I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

Kristy stood, walked over to his brown recliner, and put her arms around his neck. She loved the way he smelled and the feel of the stubble on his cheek, but when his salt and pepper hair tickled her nose, she let go to look into his dark blue eyes. “I love you, grandpa. That counts for something, right?”

Robert gave her a hug. “It sure does. I love you, too.”

Robert frowned when he heard the roar of a motorcycle coming up the driveway. His eighteen-year-old grandson, Derek, was in turmoil over the loss of his parents and being torn from his friends in the city to live with his grandfather on a ranch only made it worse. Robert was having difficulty balancing guidance and discipline with sympathy when he dealt with Derek’s belligerent attitude.

“Derek’s home!” Kristy yelled as she ran across the living room and across the kitchen, letting the screen door slam shut behind her. She leapt over the two porch steps onto the ground, and ran to Derek as he stopped the motorcycle in front of the large covered porch. She adored her big brother, but he had changed since their parents were killed. He seemed angry with grandpa all the time and she didn’t understand why.

“Did you feel that, Derek?” she yelled over the noise of the engine.

Derek shut the engine off and smiled at his little sister while he removed his helmet. “Feel what?”

“I don’t know for sure. Grandpa said it was a tremor, but I think it was an earthquake.”

“I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Didn’t you feel the ground move?”

“No, I was trying to figure out where all the back roads go.”

Kristy grinned at him. “Who were you with?”

“I was alone. I always ride alone. Except with you, anyway.”

“Yeah, right. I saw the way Jessica Parker looked at you in the mall.”

He smiled and shook his head. “You see too much for your own good.”

“I told grandpa we should call Uncle Alex. He knows about this stuff.”

Derek frowned as he hung his helmet on the handlebars and set the kickstand. He was having a hard time deciding how he felt about his uncle. He had not seen him since the funeral in

Arizona, and that was under stressful conditions. Robert would not even talk to Alex anymore, but wouldn't tell him why.

He swung his leg off the motorcycle, walked with Kristy up the two creaking steps, and into the shade of the back porch. They sat down on a well-worn wooden porch swing hanging from rusty chains and Derek gave them a push. "What did grandpa say?"

"It just made him sad. He still blames Uncle Alex for mom and dad getting killed."

"I know. The cops said it was an accident, so I'm not sure what to believe. Robert won't even talk to me about it."

"If we call Uncle Alex and ask him about the earthquake, he might come out and visit and we could ask him ourselves."

He looked over at Kristy and grinned. "Why are you getting so excited about an earthquake? In fact, how do you know what an earthquake feels like? We didn't have any in Arizona."

"I just know what they're supposed to be like. The ground shakes and everything falls down. Only this one fell up."

Derek laughed and leaned back in the swing. "How can something fall up?"

"The ground pushed me up, like when I'm in an elevator."

Derek stopped smiling and sat up. If Kristy was right, something was very wrong. "When did it happen?"

"I felt it just before you got here."

"Did you explain that to Robert?"

"He said it's just a tremor."

Derek stood and grabbed Kristy's hand. "I think we'd better explain it to him. If you're right, we should call Alex right away." He followed Christie through the screen door and let it slam behind him.

Robert frowned and pushed himself out of the recliner. He was getting tired of the kids constantly letting the screen door slam shut. Just because they had lived in the city was no excuse for not obeying his rules. He turned toward the kitchen and stared at his grandkids. "What did I tell you about that screen door?"

Derek and Kristy stopped and looked at each other, realizing they had forgotten about the door in their excitement. "Sorry, grandpa," they said simultaneously.

"Kristy just told me about the earthquake. I really think we should call Alex, grandpa. Something isn't right about what Kristy told me. You must've felt it, too?"

Robert waved off the idea and turned back to the TV. "It was just a tremor. I'm not going to call Alex about it." He plopped down into the recliner. "He's a busy man and we should leave him alone."

Derek walked around the recliner to look at him. "You may not want to talk to him, but I do. This is very important and you shouldn't let your hatred make you blind about the danger."

"Fine!" Robert growled. "You talk to him. His number is in the address book on the kitchen counter."

Derek turned, stomped into the kitchen, grabbed the address book and cordless phone off the counter, and then stomped out onto the back porch.

Kristy ran across the kitchen, barely managing to grab the edge of the screen door before it slammed shut. She let out a soft sigh and walked outside. Derek was sitting in the porch swing, looking through the address book, and she stood in front of him and leaned back against the wooden handrail. She could tell by his scowl and his bunched together eyebrows that he was mad at grandpa. They didn't get along like they did before the accident.

Derek handed the address book to Kristy. “The old man’s a dinosaur. No cellphone and no computer. Read the number for me so I can dial.”

Kristy looked at the page for C’s and saw the names of their parents in her grandmother’s writing. They said she had some bad cancer when she passed away two years ago. Now things were different here on the ranch without her. “Here it is. Ask him to come out here, Derek.”

Derek punched in the numbers and put the phone against his ear. “He’s in Montana, Kristy. He can’t just stop everything he’s doing and come out here. I just hope he knows about this.”

Derek let the phone ring several times and was told to leave a message. “Alex, this is Derek. The ground is doing some weird things out here, so could you give me a call? I’m at grandpa’s house.” He pressed the end button and looked at Kristy. “He’s not at home. I don’t know what the time difference is, so maybe he’s still teaching.”

“He’ll come out to see us. You’ll see.”

Derek stood and handed the phone to Kristy. “Don’t get your hopes up, Kristy.” He walked down the steps and grabbed his helmet from the handlebars. “I’m going for a ride. There’s nothing to do here anyway.”

Kristy sat on the porch swing and watched Derek drive away. “He’ll come and see us,” she whispered. “I know he will.”

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