

Action adventure starts as a mystery to survivalist X-file ending.

DEAD ENERGY

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# **DEAD ENERGY**

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ISBN 1-59113-109-X

Published 2002

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2002

# **DEAD ENERGY**

**James M. Corkill**



I wish to thank my friends, Author Hugh B. Cave, for getting me through the learning process, Jan Bencivenga for all the great editing work, and Melanie Bayless Corkill for all her support in insight.



## CHAPTER ONE

1:30 P.M. MARCH 12.

*"MAYDAY! MAYDAY! SOMETHING'S HAPPENING TO THE SHIP!"* a young, hysterical voice crackled from the radio speaker.

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

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

"MAYDAY! MAYDAY! CAN ANYONE HEAR ME, DAMN IT!"

"What should I do, sir?" the radio operator asked nervously, knowing the commander's wrath would fall on the nearest person.

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

"THIS 'IS' AN EMERGENCY, DAMN IT!"

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

"THIS IS THE AMERICRUDE OIL TANKER, SCORPIO. FORTY-NINE DEGREES, FIVE MINUTES SOUTH, AND A HUNDRED TWENTY THREE, FORTY-FIVE WEST. CHRIST, GET US SOME HELP OUT HERE!"

McBride heard terror in the voice. He glanced at the OOD, (Officer of the Deck), who nodded that he had the tanker on radar. "Thirty miles, Sir," he answered.

McBride nodded. "Scorpio, say again your situation?"

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"THERE'S SOMETHING HAPPENING TO THE OIL. I THINK IT'S GOING TO EXPLODE!" the voice screamed.

"Can you identify the cause?"

"NO! I MEAN, I DON'T KNOW. IT'S JUST...OF BRIGHT LIGHT. IT'S...AND...OUT ...OF... "

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

McBride walked to the radarscope and stared at the screen. "She's the only ship in that sector," he said to the OOD, and ran a hand through his gray hair. He shook his head in frustration. "Christ! We'd better go see what's going on. Come left to course 080. All ahead flank speed."

\* \* \*

The wind had died to a whisper, and Alex Cave was lashing down the white nylon sails of his chartered thirty five-foot sailboat. It was the last day of his two-week vacation sailing through the San Juan Islands of Washington State. He paused and took a deep breath of salt air, knowing he wouldn't smell it again for at least a year.

A brilliant flash of sunlight caught his attention. The sun's reflection off something shiny, he thought. As he looked around, he saw the outline of a large ship, about four miles away. Alex stepped down onto the main deck and grabbed his binoculars, focusing them on the ship. An oil tanker, he surmised from its design. Suddenly a panic filled voice crackled from the VHF radio speaker.

"MAYDAY! MAYDAY! SOMETHING'S HAPPENING TO THE SHIP!"

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

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

Thirty-five minutes later the thrumming of the Alder's engines dropped to a low rumble. McBride stared through a set of binoculars at the rust streaked black paint on the side of the behemoth oil tanker, about two hundred yards away.

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Thin streams of black smoke trailed from her exhaust stack, but all forward movement had ceased. The tanker rode high in the water, he noticed. He scanned her entire length through the binoculars, but there was no sign of an explosion, and he couldn't see anyone on deck or up in the bridge.

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

"Take us along side," McBride ordered the OOD. "I don't know what happened here, but I intend to find out."

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

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

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

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

Alex leaned his forearms across the railing in a nonchalant manner and took a deep breath of salty air as he watched the procedure. The Coast Guard cruiser was on the opposite side from where he had tied off to the tanker.

McBride came across in a small launch and ascended the rusty metal rungs welded to the hull near the stern. Two sailors followed him as he stomped across the deck to the stranger and stopped. The stranger straightened from the railing and turned to face him. He was tall, McBride noticed, nearly a foot taller than his own five foot six frame, with a tanned, rugged face, marked by a few small scars. He had wavy hair the color of a raven's wings, and his eyes were the color of a deep blue lake, clear and bright under thick black brows.

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

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

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

The stranger remained against the rail and shrugged indifferently. "If you say so." He let the moment hang, refusing to be intimidated. "The name's Alex Cave, and I haven't broken any laws. I heard the distress call and came to help. There was no explosion, and there's no one on board."

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

"That's spelled, C A V E, Alex P.," the stranger interrupted. "And just for the record, I claim the salvage rights according to maritime law. You're on my ship now, Commander."

McBride flashed him a vicious look. "Do it!" he ordered the sailor. And to Alex: "How did you get on board?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

The sailor with the portable radio interrupted. "We have the information about the ship, Commander."

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

The sailor spoke into the radio, turned up the volume, and set it on the table. A moment later the voice of Alder's radio operator came through the speaker. "The Scorpio. United States registry. Homeport, Valdez, Alaska. 326,000 ton Universal Class oil tanker. Departed Valdez on March ninth, carrying twelve thousand tons of heavy crude oil. Destination, March Point, Washington State. Seven man crew. That's it, sir."

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

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

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

"I've been down inside the holds."

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

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

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

Alex grinned in reply.

"Just who the hell are you?"

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir. Mr. Cave was born on April 22, 1959, in San Diego California, to Mr. . . ."

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

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

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

"Nothing on record, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

Alex rolled off the bed and grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator. As he drank, he thought about that day. He couldn't quite remember what happened during the following month, but his friends had managed to extract him from the Soviet Union, where he had apparently gone on a killing rampage to get even with the people that had tried to kill him, but only managed to kill his wife. One week after returning to the United States, he had resigned from the CIA. Alex crawled back into bed, but it was over an hour before he finally fell asleep.

Just after sunrise, Alex stepped off his sailboat and walked between the yachts and sailboats tied in the mooring slips of the marina. He couldn't stop pondering the fate of the Scorpio's crew. Suddenly he recalled seeing a flash of bright light on the water, and remembered dismissing it to the sun's reflection off

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a shiny object. But now he realized it had come from the direction of the Scorpio, and wondered if it might be connected.

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

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

Alex set the paper aside while he finished his breakfast, but couldn't stop thinking about the article. The Scorpio was out of Alaska, but she had seven men on board, and only six men were discovered on the mountain. Then again, the crew would be dressed like those men. And the man in coveralls could be the ship's mechanic? That's ridiculous, he thought. How could they end up on a mountain so far away? It's just a coincidence, he thought, but continued pondering the possibility. He decided it was worth a little more investigation, just for his own peace of mind. Alex walked to the pay phone near the door and dialed.

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

"The station commander, please," Alex asked.

"Who should I say is calling, sir?"

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

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

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

"Not yet. We haven't found an oil spill, either."

"Would you happen to have the names of the crew members?"

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

"Not right now. Thanks for the help."

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

The flight took just over an hour, and from there, Alex took a taxi to the Whatcom County Sheriff's Department. At the front desk he spoke to a Deputy. "I might have some information that could be helpful in your investigation of those men found on Mt. Baker."

The Deputy studied Alex for a moment. "Oh? And who are you?"

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

The deputy shook his head again. "I won't give out that kind of information without the Sheriff's approval."

"Fine. Then let me talk to the Sheriff."

The Deputy shook his head. "The Sheriff's a busy man. If you have anything to report, it's your duty to tell me."

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

"Shit!" the Deputy mumbled. "Wait a minute!" he hollered.

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

"Just hang on a minute. I'll see if the Sheriff can spare a few minutes."

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

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

The Sheriff studied Alex for a moment, then nodded. "Come on back to my office."

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

"Alex Cave. Have you heard about the oil tanker the Coast Guard brought in to Port Angeles?"

The Sheriff nodded. "Read about it in the paper. Why?"

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

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

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

The Sheriff nodded and reached into the file basket on his desk, grabbed a folder and scanned through the first few pages. Alex sat up in tense anticipation.

"Only one of the bodies had a wallet," said the Sheriff. "An older man. Had a driver's license."

"Was his name Joseph Bower?"

The look in the sheriff's eyes said he was right, and Alex sighed with relief and leaned back in the chair. "Bower was the skipper of that tanker."

The Sheriff's jaw went slack. "You're shittin me."

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

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

"Have you performed an autopsy yet?"

"They're working on it today. I figure they died of exposure, the way they were dressed."

"I'd like to see the bodies."

The Sheriff stared at him for a moment, still a little skeptical. "I don't have any idea who you are, Mr. Cave. I can't authorize that."

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

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

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

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

The woman smiled. "Do you have an appointment, Mr. . . ?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"First, I'd like to take a look at the bodies."

"Fine. Follow me."

It bothered Alex that he had let Walton assume he worked for the Sheriff's department, but he hadn't lied, and that was something he never did.

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

"I've been waiting for the results of the fingerprints to come back from the FBI," Walton told him as they passed through a stainless steel double door and entered a large refrigerated room. There were a dozen smaller stainless steel doors along one wall.

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

"Mr. Walton, it's critical that we verify if he was alive or dead when he first reached the snow."

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

"Did you notice any bruises or abrasions when you examined the bodies?" Alex asked while Walton pulled a small, roll-around table near the body, stretched on a pair of surgical gloves, and inserted a needle into Bower's arm.

"A few," Walton replied as he inserted a small glass tube to draw a sample. "Nothing that . . . Hmm." He removed the empty tube and inserted a new one. The tubes were vacuum-sealed, and when punctured, would suck the blood out, but nothing was drawn from Bower's arm. "What the heck?"

"What's wrong?"

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

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

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

"Like it was cooked?" Alex asked.

Walton shook his head. "No. All the moisture has evaporated, but there's no sign that it was caused by heat."

"Any idea how?"

Walton shook his head as he thought about it. "Not a clue. I've never seen this before."

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

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Alex glanced at his watch. 2:00 P.M. local time, 5:00 P.M. in Washington, D.C. "Can I use your phone?" he asked.

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

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

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

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

"Listen, Alex. This might be more than just a coincidence. I've just learned of another tanker that ran aground in Brownsville Texas. It was also empty and abandoned."

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

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

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

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

"I will."

Alex called SEA-TAC, (Seattle Tacoma), International Airport and booked the next flight to Houston, which wouldn't leave Seattle until 2:00 the next morning. With so much time to kill, he decided to rent a car and drive to Seattle, get a room and take a walk through Pioneer square and take the tour of the underground city.

\* \* \*

## CHAPTER TWO

MARCH 13.

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

My God! What's happening to the tankers? Alex thought as the circumstances of the first tanker incident ran through his mind. Six men dead with no explanation as to how or why? He sincerely hoped the crew from this tanker had escaped whatever had taken the lives of the Scorpio's crew.

The jet touched down and taxied to the terminal. It was only 7:30 A.M., but the outside temperature was in the upper seventies, with a promise of climbing higher. Alex grabbed his tote bag and walked directly to the men's room and changed into light blue shorts, white polo shirt, and white tennis shoes. His next stop was the car rental desk, where he received the keys to a black Ford Thunderbird and a map of the city.

Alex drove south along a two-lane road that paralleled the coast. The air smelled of salt water and seaweed. As he drew near the tanker, he saw several police vehicles and several television news vans parked on the black asphalt driveway of what was probably a two-million-dollar, two-story home. The exterior was white stucco, with gray storm shutters and a red tiled roof. He showed his identification to a police officer that was keeping the general public at bay and drove past the barcade. He parked next to a police vehicle and walked around the side of the house, emerging on the soft white sand, about one hundred feet from the water. The tanker was another one hundred and fifty feet from shore, as if trying to make it to the small wooden boat dock in front of the house. Bold blue letters across the black bow stated the ship belonged to the WESTGULF Corporation.

Alex saw two men standing on the shore a few feet past the television reporters and their camera crews. He showed his identification to another police officer, who allowed him past the reporters. One of the two men near the shore was short, dressed in a tan police uniform and matching cowboy hat. The other

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was tall, but exceedingly overweight, dressed in dark blue shorts and matching lightweight shirt. They turned and watched him approach across the sand.

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

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

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

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

"What about the crew?" Alex asked hopefully.

"There were eight, but there's no sign of them. They must have abandoned ship out in the gulf."

Alex looked at the sheriff. "Did the residents in the area see anything unusual?"

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

"Did the tanker radio in that they had problems?"

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

"I'd like to ask them some questions later," Alex told him. The sheriff nodded assent. Alex turned to Hendrick. "Have you been down in the cargo hold?"

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

"I'd like to go on board," Alex told him.

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

They tied off to the boarding ladder welded to the stern. Alex was the first to climb, followed by the sheriff. Both of them thought Hendrick might not make it to the top of the ladder, and when he finally crawled onto the deck, Hendrick spent several minutes catching his breath. Alex spent the time walking

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around the open deck, and noticed that all the inspection hatches were open. Fifteen minutes later, Hendrick led him and the sheriff into the crew quarters.

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

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

Hendrick nodded as he studied the capsules. "Doesn't make sense, does it?"

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

Hendrick chuckled. "No thanks."

Sheriff Jackson shook his head. "I'll take your word on what you find down there."

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

"What the hell?" Hendrick managed to say.

"I've seen enough," Alex told them. "Let's go back."

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

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

"So you've told me. They're searching the gulf. I want to search the desert."

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

"The government asks for my help once in awhile."

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

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

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

"No problem. I have a cell phone in the boat."

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

"Which direction," asked the middle-aged pilot wearing dark blue shorts as part of his uniform.

"Inland, about a hundred miles," Alex instructed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"One more thing, Sheriff," Alex hollered.

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

"I'm going to stay around until they find the bodies, and I'd like to interview the couple that were rescued from the gulf this morning. Could you set it up?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm Alex Cave, Mr. Sorenson."

"Howdy," Sorenson replied in a decisive Texas drawl as he extended his hand. "Ya'll come on in and I'll fix us a drank."

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

"Thanks. Built it thray years ago. Trod to keep it small, now that the young'uns are gone."

Small? Alex thought. The house must be at least six thousand square feet.

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

Sorenson walked to a well stocked, beautiful glass bar. "Whatcha gonna hav, Mr. Cave?"

"Whiskey on the rocks, please."

Sorenson chuckled. "A man afta ma own heart. Hate ta ruin good sourmash by dalutin it down." He brought the drinks over and indicated for Alex to sit in a high-backed, white leather recliner, one of two that matched a massive curved sofa. Sorenson sat in the other, facing Alex, and raised his glass. "To the

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Gypsy," he toasted and took a sip. "That's the name of ma boat," he explained. "Fifty-two foot Chris Craft. Damn fine boat. Hated to see her end thata way."

"Mind telling me how it happened, Mr. Sorenson? I mean it's a pretty big body of water out there and it seems strange that you and the tanker collided."

A look of bewilderment spread across Sorenson's face. "Damndest thing I ever seen. Me and the Missus were coming back from a trip to Louisiana. She was below nappin, and I was havin a drank on deck. Had the autopilot set so's I could get out and stretch. Anyhow, I seen this bright light in the sky. Thought it was the mast of a boat or somethin. I ran back into the bridge to check the radar scope, but the whole screen was acting up. Couldn't make out nothin. Ma boat started turning so I looked at the compass, and it was spinnin crazy like. When I looked back out the winda, I could see the tanker outlined in a sparkly rainbow. Strangest thing I ever saw. I ran down to wake the Missus so's she could see it too, but had a hell of a time waken her. She'd tipped quite a few on the way back. By the time I got her up on deck, that tanker was damn near on us. I ran back into the bridge and tried to turn away, but the damn auto pilot wouldn't release and we seemed to be gainun speed like we was a couplea magnets suckin at each utha. We was headed straight at the tanker. I ran back out and grabbed a coupla life jackets from under the seat, but we didn't have time to put'em on. I just shoved the Missus overboard and jumped in myself, and told the Missus to swim like hell. Scared the livin shit outa me. That tanker didn't slow down a bit. Just kept on plowin through the water like we wasn't even there. Damn lucky we didn't get sucked into the propellers. Anyhow, when the tanker had passed by, I saw the bottom of the Gypsy floatin on the other side, and me and the Missus swam over and climbed on. Seemed like we was sittin there forever before a helicopter came by. I waved like hell, but it didn't stop. I was so damn mad I coulda chewed horseshoes. Next thing I know, this shrimp boat comes along and picks us up."

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

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

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

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

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

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Sorenson's eyebrows moved closer together. "Damn strange. It was like the tanker was in a halo or somthin, only it was full of colors. Kinda sparkely like. By the time me and the Missus got back on deck it was gone."

The telephone rang and Sorenson answered it. "It's for you," he told Alex and handed him the portable phone.

"Hello?" Alex said into the phone.

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

"Where are the bodies now?"

"The General Hospital in Austin."

"I'm on my way."

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

"Thanks," Alex told him and hung up. He looked at Sorenson. "Anything else you can remember?"

Sorenson shook his head. "Not really. Me and the Missus just sat on the hull and stared at the moon until we were rescued. A real pretty moon that night, too. A full moon, and brighter than usual."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There should have been eight bodies, Sheriff. Did you search the area?"

"Yep. All we found were the seven, and not a single sign of how they got there. No footprints, no tire tracks, nothing. Beats the hell outa me."

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"Have you identified the bodies?"

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

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

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

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

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

Alex nodded, "If this man regains consciousness, I'd appreciate it if you would leave a message at this number." Bowdy nodded and Alex gave him the number for the answering machine at his home in Montana.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Tilman pulled a dirty rag from his back pocket, lifted his hat and wiped the tattered cloth across his bald head. "Nothin that can't wait. What's on your mind?" he asked curtly as he set his hat back on his head and stared at Alex.

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

Tilman stared at him quizzically. "You don't look like no law man. Not dressed in them duds."

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

Tilman's leather face looked as though it would crack when he smiled. "Montana," he said wistfully. "I always wanted to move to Montana. Seen pictures of it when I was a boy. Gawd amighty that's pretty country." Tilman took on a far away look as he stared into the distance for a moment, then looked back at Alex. "A teacher you say? I have a lot of respect for teachers. Never made it past the tenth grade, myself. Lied about my age and joined the Army when I was sixteen. Anyhow, why's a teacher interested in those men?"

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

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

"Do you remember his exact words?"

Tilman rubbed his jaw as he thought about it. "Seems to me he said something like, 'STAY AWAY FROM THE LIGHT. I HAVE TO HIDE.' He musta been delirious."

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

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

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

Tilman smiled. "You keep on a teachin, ya hear?"

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

"I just remembered somethin," Tilman told him. "Come to think of it, he did say somethin about a ship. He said, 'DON'T LET THE SHIP TAKE ME.'"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"None? Isn't that unusual?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You can use that phone," Conroy told him.

Alex dialed and was transferred to Jackson's office.

"I got a preliminary autopsy report, Mr. Cave," said Jackson. "The coroner's baffled. It seems the blood in all the bodies of the crew has been dehydrated."

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

It was nearly dark when Alex returned to his hotel room. He tried calling Martin Donner, but received the recorded voice from the answering machine, so left the phone number where he was staying. He ordered dinner from room service, and while he waited, sat at the desk and wrote down the details he'd

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discovered so far, churning them over and over in his mind, trying and come up with some logical conclusion, but an answer eluded him.

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

". . . EXXON VALDEZ INCIDENT. THIS IS THE WAY IT LOOKED AFTER THE SPILL," the female announcer was saying as the picture changed to show work crews in yellow rubber coats and pants cleaning up the thick, slimy crude oil along the rocky shoreline. The picture changed again, and a dotted line ran down a map of Alaska. "THE PIPELINE WAS COMPLETED IN 1974, USING STATE OF THE ART TECHNOLOGY, AND IT IS SUPPOSED TO BE IMPOSSIBLE FOR A RUPTURE TO OCCUR. IN A STATEMENT RELEASED AN HOUR AGO, AUTHORITIES SAID THEY DON'T THINK THE PIPELINE IS RUPTURED, BUT THEY REFUSED TO SPECULATE ON WHY THE OIL FROM PRUDHOE BAY HAS FAILED TO REACH IT'S DESTINATION IN VALDEZ. THEY HAVE SHUT DOWN THE PUMPING STATIONS, AND CREWS HAVE BEEN DISPATCHED TO CHECK EVERY FOOT OF THE PIPELINE FOR ANY SIGN OF LEAKAGE. SOME SECTIONS CAN'T BE SEARCHED BECAUSE OF THE SEVERE SNOWSTORM THAT HAS MOVED OVER THE AREA. OUR METEOROLOGIST, MIKE BANNER WILL EXPLAIN WHAT'S GOING ON."

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

"Alex, it's Martin Donner," he told him, urgency in his voice. "We have a major problem in Alaska."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Okay. Stay on top of it. Call me day or night if you find out anything."

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

"Okay, I'll see to it."

"Thanks, Martin." Alex hung up and called the airport. The next connecting flight to Alaska was in three hours, and he booked a seat. He called his home in Montana and pressed the digits to retrieve any messages on his answering machine. His friend, Judy, had left a message saying his dog was fine, and that she would feed him while he was gone. There were no other messages, so Alex hung up and dressed in warmer clothes. He packed his tote bag, grabbed his notes from the desk and shoved them inside, then checked out of the hotel and drove to the airport.

\* \* \*

Action adventure starts as a mystery to survivalist X-file ending.

DEAD ENERGY

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