

# PERFECT PLAN II

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BRETT DIFFLEY



*Perfect Plan II is the continuation of the Davenport series, which brings several topics together in a thrilling, heart-pounding storyline that's not only believable, but also fun to read. Kalib Akmalit has waited a full year, planning and biding his time for avenging his brother's death and the downfall of Corporate Affairs. This trail leads to intrigue and suspense as he attempts to deal with the Davenports and Crude Technologies-the oil spill cleanup giant.*

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# **PERFECT PLAN II**

**Brett Diffley**

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Hardcover ISBN 978-1-63263-538-9

Paperback ISBN 978-1-63263-528-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.  
2014

First Edition

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Perfect Plan

Perfect Plan II

Black Tide (2015)

## Prologue

Jeff Simon paused his 500cc Arctic Cat ATV and stood on its pegs. He focused his binoculars on a small object sitting atop the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, several hundred feet away. From his heightened vantage point, it looked strangely out of place. He stared a moment longer, but a mist-shrouded horizon limited visibility. Thinking it might just be a bird, he shrugged and pulled his yellow slicker tightly around him. He'd find out soon enough.

The powerful machine's exhaust sounded as it lurched forward, its four-by-four traction churning and spitting up the mud. He was near Pump Station Ten, in a remote and rugged region one hundred eighty miles north of Valdez. It was early afternoon, and a continuous drizzle had saturated the ground earlier, worsening the already inhospitable terrain. Twice already he'd had to use the front-mounted wench to circumvent a muddy ravine and a fallen tree. But, he reasoned, it was all part of the job.

Patrolling the pipeline was the mundane part of his work and, combined with the solitude, he knew it wasn't for everyone. Sometimes he'd go weeks without seeing another soul, but he wasn't complaining. He loved the outdoors. He'd spent his entire life in Alaska, growing up on a small homestead bordering the Willamette forest. At age sixty, this was the perfect alternative to retirement.

After graduating from the University of Alaska with an engineering degree, Jeff had been sought after by several oil companies. This eventually landed him in Prudhoe Bay in 1973, making him one of the many engineers to help make the pipeline a reality.

Most days, as he followed the never-ending pipeline, he was left with only solitary thoughts and the occasional wild animal—including bears and wolves—that crossed his path. The animals made him wary of breakdowns but, usually, the predators just glanced at him and moved on. Even so, he remained vigilant, while also carrying a holstered Remington 45-caliber pistol that hung from the handlebar.

Jeff braked again and smiled. Two caribou cows were standing in his path. They stared for a moment with wary eyes then disappeared into the foliage. The sight of them warmed his heart. He never got enough of the peaceful coexistence with nature that came from living in the state nicknamed "The Great Outdoors." He glanced in both directions, careful

not to disturb them further. Caribou usually roamed in groups and, with spring just around the corner, there was the possibility of newborn calves too.

The darkening sky rumbled, and Jeff looked up. The weather was deteriorating rapidly, and the cloud ceiling was dropping. The elevated area would be completely enveloped in two hours, decreasing the visibility to just a few feet. He thought of his warm campfire, still far away, and glanced at his watch. Maybe his luck would hold and he could make it to camp before the worst of the storm arrived.

He moved forward again at a modest pace of ten miles an hour, while continually glancing over his shoulder at the pipeline that rose eighteen feet above his head. Ahead, he saw that little object again, still not moving.

Because of the permafrost, just over half of the eight-hundred-mile pipeline running from Prudhoe Bay to the port in Valdez was above ground. This meant routine visual inspections were necessary to keep up with maintenance and potential problems. Helicopters and planes did a fair portion of the work because of convenience, but the most reliable inspections were done from the ground on ATVs. Jeff was responsible for inspecting just over forty miles of the pipeline, most of which was lined with trees and over uneven ground. This meant slow going, long hours, and inspecting only small portions each day.

When Jeff finally reached the object, he stopped, and gazed up, squinting to keep the rain out of his eyes. A dry tent and a hot cup of coffee would have to wait. He turned the quad off and walked to a nearby maintenance ladder welded to the pipeline's side.

Another shiver rolled through him as he stood below the ladder. The hooded North Face jacket kept him dry, but the lack of movement in forty-five degree temperatures didn't help. He told himself the exercise would do him good, but his optimism soon gave way to groans from working muscles that had been sitting too long. Of course being slightly overweight didn't help either. He put a hand on his protruding belly. Long gone was the well-muscled physique of youth, replaced by the portly shape of an old man with a grey receding hair line. Soon even this limited physicality would be too much. "But that's not today," he said with a smirk.

After reaching the top, he bent over for a second to get his breath, then backtracked toward the anomaly. The broad pipe afforded him good footing, but his fear of heights forced him to take each step with care. He glanced down to his right. This section of pipe was approximately twenty feet above the ground, and wet. If he fell, there was no help for at least

thirty-miles. More disconcerting were the inhabitants who did live here—many with large teeth.

“Slow and steady, old man,” he mumbled, extending his arms like an Olympic gymnast. When he finally stopped, he was staring at a four-inch pipe crudely attached to the pipe he was standing on.

What the hell?

He followed the small pipe with his eyes. It ran along the crest for several feet then made a ninety-degree turn away from the main pipe, and another ninety-degree downward.

Jeff knelt to follow the smaller pipe’s path, but it made yet another ninety-degree turn and disappeared into a patch of thick foliage. His mind spun with questions. The area east of the big pipe opened up just past a screen of trees. He shielded his eyes from the rain. A large pond stood in the distance, and he knew beyond that was a small creek leading to the Copper River. He wiped his face with an equally wet hand. What was going on? There was no reason for this to be here.

Jeff moved back to where the small pipe was attached and crouched for a better look. The scorched weld marks on the steel looked fresh. There was also a manual shutoff valve in the “off” position, but even this was attached by an inferior weld that oozed oil down one side like a loosely stitched wound. He touched the black goo with a gloved finger. This obviously wasn’t engineered. It was a catastrophe in the making.

He looked in both directions along the long line of pipe, but nothing else seemed out of place. He stared at the apparatus a moment, lost in thought. The splice must have been made during the recent three-day shutdown for prearranged maintenance, which was a mandatory pump inspection. It was the only time the pipe’s pressure would have been minimal. At any other time, the many safety protocols would have immediately kicked in to prevent a large spill.

Jeff made his way back down the ladder and looked up, studying the scene carefully. This was one of the few pipe sections that ran under overhead trees, which meant the breached line could’ve gone unnoticed for weeks—if not months—by air. But why was it done? If the valve was opened, the next pump station would immediately pick up any pressure decrease.

The pipeline had eleven pumping stations, but, due to pump upgrades to improve performance, only four needed to be operated. Each station was equipped with sophisticated electronics designed to lessen the possibility of a spill. If a leak occurred, the resulting sudden loss of pressure would

register at an Anchorage monitoring station. The pumps would automatically shut down, and then the controller could use any combination of seventy-one gate valves to limit the spill even further.

Jeff followed the pipe through the thick vegetation for the better part of an hour until it disappeared below the surface of a small pond. Several ducks quacked and jumped to flight when he parted the reeds to get a better look. He stared across the flat, clear water, and felt relief. There was no sign of a spill. He looked down near his feet. The only indications of people were the pipe, and boot prints left on the muddy bank.

Jeff studied the pipe where it disappeared under the lake. What was its purpose? Who could have done it? Terrorists? But...out here? He found the idea of terrorism hard to believe and dismissed the idea. Maybe a disgruntled local had done it. But why? Why would someone go to all that trouble for several hundred gallons of oil? Or several thousand for that matter? Safety protocols guaranteed that any amount would be detected.

By the time Jeff returned to the quad, he was panting from the exertion, and darkness was setting in. He sat for a moment to catch his breath then had another thought. What if the pipe wasn't designed to let oil out, but to bring water in? His heart raced. That might also explain why the smaller pipe was mounted at the peak of the pipeline—the principle being the same as filling a glass. Jeff sighed heavily and dismissed the idea. The pump required to offset the pipe's pressure would have to be substantial, and there was no sign of a pump.

He had to report this immediately. Cell phone coverage in this area was nonexistent, so he'd have to wait until he got back to camp. He started the quad and continued on, with added haste, but remaining vigilant for anything else out of the ordinary.

The rain began coming down in sheets, hampering his visibility. After a half mile, he entered a large veld and was able to increase his speed. Suddenly, he jammed his foot down on the brake, and the quad skidded sideways to a halt. A man was standing on another vertical support ladder along the pipeline. The rain must have concealed Jeff's approach because he looked just as surprised as the retired engineer did.

Jeff turned the engine off. "Hey! What are you doing?" He pointed at the pipeline. "This is private property!"

The man remained frozen. He was dressed in dark camouflage clothing and held something above his head that Jeff couldn't quite make out.



Jeff jumped off the quad and took several steps forward. Then he noticed the sidearm on the man's belt and what he was placing on the pipe underside. He stopped, and his eyes grew wide. The brick sized item was wrapped in duct tape with attached wires, leaving him with little doubt this was an explosive device. He stepped back, suddenly realizing his vulnerability, but it was too late. Another man, hard-faced, with a scar through his brow and deep-set eyes, had quietly come up from behind and stood between him and the quad. This man was dressed like the other, but also wore a hooded poncho. Jeff's eyes quickly went to the machine gun strapped across his broad chest and then to his stone-cold eyes.

"Going somewhere?" the man said with a Middle Eastern accent, as his lips curled into a malevolent smile.

His intent was clear.

Jeff tried to step back, but the man grabbed his coat and pulled him close. Their faces were only inches apart, and Jeff's fear rose with every panicked breath. "Listen, I don't want trouble..." His voice was suddenly shaky.

The man said nothing, but his mocking smile did little to mask his merciless expression.

Jeff felt a sudden movement from under the poncho, followed by a burning sensation from a knife thrust into his midsection. The force was so violent it would have lifted him off the ground if the assailant hadn't held him firmly in place. He screamed from both shock and pain, his mind trying to comprehend what was happening.

As the long blade continued upward, his body went rigid, and he rose to his tiptoes. He tried deftly to grab the knife and stop any further movement but the attacker's hand was slick with blood. His blood! The two men locked gazes. Jeff's eyes bulged and his face radiated fear, while his assailant showed only an amused determination. The man moved the knife upward, game-like, in small intervals, as if teasingly restraining himself from taking the killing thrust.

"What do you think of that, American?" he whispered in a tormenting tone, sending another tiny surge into Jeff's impaled body.

Jeff's rational mind was still trying to understand what was happening, as he felt each new incursion of the blade. His body convulsed when the next jab pierced the bottom of his lung. The pain was unbelievable, and now he couldn't breathe. Tiny bloody bubbles formed on each side of his mouth and he emitted a strange gurgling sound. He was drowning, and more blood flowed from his mouth with every excruciating gasp for air.

When his legs finally buckled, the man followed him to the ground and casually sat on top of him.

The attacker pulled the knife free and spoke rapidly to the man on the ladder. Jeff didn't understand the language but that became a moot point when the man slowly gripped the knife with two hands and rested the tip on his chest.

No! Jeff wanted to scream, but only a hideous gurgling sound came out. Then the man slowly leaned forward, using his weight to drive the blade downward. Jeff frantically tried to move, but couldn't. The knife pierced his skin, slid through his ribs, and finally penetrated his heart. Only the bloody hands and the knife's hilt remained visible.

Jeff's body arched and became rigid for several seconds before his muscles gradually relaxed, and all pain disappeared. Even the terror of death had disappeared, replaced by a peaceful, hypnotic tranquility. Then it regressed like a blackening photo as the last seconds of life lingered in his brain. His only passing thought was, why?



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