

BLACK TIDE



BOOK THREE OF THE DAVENPORT SERIES

**"A ROLLERCOASTER
RIDE FROM
START TO FINISH!"**

BRETT DIFFLEY

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Words from the Author

There's a difference between reading a good action-adventure, and feeling it. If you feel it, you get totally immersed in the story and its characters—feeling the joy and the sorrow. As a writer, this is important not only for the entertainment value, but also in the challenge itself. Can I take the reader away? Make them part of the story? Can I hold their hand and take them on an emotional journey? This is the goal of most books, to varying degrees. Simply put, a good storyline, and its characters are like the layers of an onion, peeling back with each turn of the page. If the book is good, it will lure the reader into wanting more, and therefore continually draw them towards the proverbial center of the onion. This is the definition of a good thriller—and the making of a good rollercoaster ride. To accomplish this requires being graphic. This is how I write.

If you are a first time reader to the Davenport Series, I'm envious of you. It's an action adventure series like no other, leaving you thrilled and entertained with each turn of the page. However, I encourage you to start with book 1—**Perfect Plan**—to understand the dynamics of the evolving storyline, the multiple plotlines, and more importantly the characters, who you will both love and hate. With that being said, each characters backstory, detailed and descriptive in book 1, will be greatly reduced by book 5—**Safe Passage**.

I think a writer needs to evolve with the reader. Plots are rarely one dimensional in real life, so in keeping up and challenging the reader, my stories are generally multifaceted. Now my question to you...Do you stop after peeling that first layer? If not...enjoy the ride!

Chapter 4: Mine 113

High over the Cascade Mountain range, the sun broke clear of the clouds in bright shimmering light, its rays sweeping across the white-capped peaks, turning the dullness of the exposed iron-grey cliffs into flowing opaque reds and yellows, and the snow a dazzling and glittering white.

In the shadows of one rock face, and just below the tree line, stood Mitch Greeger, a mountain of a man with bushy brows and deep-set grey eyes. Over his wide shoulders, he wore a heavy, hooded coat, and, on his feet, thick insulated leather boots specifically designed for mountainous terrain.

Sweat gleamed from his forehead, running down the side of his chiseled and unshaven face as he glared at the growing pile of supplies outside the mine's entrance. He looked haggard and bone-weary. The thin air at this elevation, which hovered around fifteen degrees Fahrenheit, wasn't helping. Not only was it frigidly cold, burning his throat with every excruciating breath, but with the extreme physical exertion, he couldn't get enough of it.

"Almost done," he whispered, bending over and eagerly filling his lungs once again. The sat-phone, hung at his hip, rang.

"Greeger," he answered with a heavy German accent. After listening for a moment his eyes narrowed. "Security is your number one priority. Keep me informed." He cut the connection, clipping the phone back to his belt. The update had been expected, their plans coming together swiftly now. The thought made him almost giddy. To know that after all these decades of searching for the weapon, it had been found, and was now in their possession.

Mitch thought of his employer. Up to now, any proof of the torpedo's existence was about as tangible as smoke through his fingers, a figment from the mind of a man possessed. But through it all, the old man had never wavered in his belief that it was here, close-by, somewhere in these territorial waters. And he'd been right, it had been in their own back yard all along. But, more importantly

for Mitch, his own personal doubts had all but disappeared. For the first time, he knew the weapon—the entity that solidified all their plans—was real and could now actually be seen and touched. And soon, once off the mountain, he looked forward to doing just that.

Below him, Mitch heard the footfalls of men walking through the crusted layer of snow, along with frustrated grunts from lost footing, as they worked their way back up the vertical slope. He cast a wary glance down the tree-engulfed incline toward the dozen men approaching in single file. Looking like a bunch of pack mules, they carried loads both on their backs and in their arms. The effort was demanding, evidenced in their huffing and puffing with each treacherous step, and seen in the labored breath-clouds that formed in front of their faces.

“Almost there, boys,” he said out loud, his voice winded, as he had just dropped his own energy-sapping load at the entrance. “Don’t stop or you won’t get moving again.”

For four days and nights, with little rest, their task had been to get the supplies up the mountainside, one waypoint at a time. It wasn’t easy, and for the hundredth time he thought about the months of preparation required to get them to the abandoned mine—a mine known simply as Mine 113.

After surveying the purchased property more than a decade ago, the first job had been to clear a seldom-used Forest Service road—the only accessible point for miles. For their purposes, the single-lane dirt track wouldn’t reach the heights they needed, but at least it would give them partial access for their trucks.

He slowly shook his head with the thought of the one-ton covered cube-vans he’d been forced to use. When first presented with the idea, he didn’t think it was even possible. The gradients were treacherously steep, the switchbacks radical, and the higher it went the worse it got. Originally excavated to gain access into the upper elevations for logging and mining, the narrow road had been engineered to carry powerful, short-wheel-based all-terrain tractors, not trucks, and certainly not trucks designed for the highway.

The only other option had been helicopters, which they’d later used to sling in reinforcing beams for the interior of the mine shaft.

But supplies—versus cedar beams—required a much more delicate approach when it came to the possibility of loads sliding several hundred feet back down the mountainside. Another mitigating factor—and never a good thing when working in close proximity to the cliffs—had been the severe and unpredictable downdrafts.

So, after months of research, they finally committed to the road, and getting it ready for travel. The problem was that the narrow path hadn't been used in decades. It was in terrible shape, and blocked in several places by fallen debris and a deteriorating cliff-face. Adding to the difficulty had been their need for secrecy and not draw any undue attention to themselves. This meant no excavating equipment.

To do the labor-intensive job, Mitch had handpicked an expedition team of thirty hardened men. Men who he knew would never quit and would follow orders to the letter. Then they went to work, cutting back the overgrowth, clearing fallen logs, and also the shale-landslides that had blocked the route over time. It had taken a full year to complete, and once the timbers in the mineshaft were refitted, the area had been abandoned again. This time, though, it was routinely serviced twice a year—the maintenance in preparation for the single purpose of when the weapon was found.

Now it had been, and here he was, halfway up the side of a mountain again, this time to finalize plans that had been in the making for more than fifty years—a plan originally set in motion even earlier, during World War II. “The black torpedo,” he mumbled. It was like a riddle to him, an aberration where answers were few and far between. When they did come, they were only fragmented truths.

So what were these truths? Long ago this weapon—a mystery weapon—had been developed by scientists to supposedly revolutionize all future wars. It hadn't, and, as yet, little was known of it or its deadly capabilities. How was this even possible for a weapon of this magnitude? It boggled the imagination. Then came its disappearance, and a lifetime later, its reemergence, floating in a patch of seaweed approximately one hundred and twenty nautical miles from the point where it had supposedly been fired.

Without knowing what was real and what wasn't, his work had been a perplexing proposition up to this point, but that was about to

change. He finally knew answers *were* actually coming. Scientists had built it, and now, at this very moment, new scientists were dismantling it; a dissection process to find the truth. But what secrets would they find, he wondered, and would all the sacrifice to obtain them be worthy?

He had to believe it was. At least, that's what they were counting on, because within hours of hearing a mysterious torpedo had been found in the Puget Sound, he was en route to a seldom-used warehouse in north Seattle. Inside were seven dust-covered trucks. Started once a month to remain in good running order, they were lined up side-by-side at the center of the spacious building. Also inside, and stacked in heaps against a far wall, were piles of provisions that would make any prepper salivate.

Mitch had quickly organized the twenty men with him, and the loading of the trucks commenced immediately. None of these items were random. Each had been carefully selected in accordance with both space and survival. Only when all the gear had been checked off his list, and the trucks were full to the rear doors, did they begin their rigorous trek toward the mountains.

Late that night and four hours later, Mitch had been informed the torpedo had been appropriated by his men. It was very good news, and, at the time, only reaffirmed the importance of the work ahead.

By then, they'd arrived at the base of the mountain and had already begun the dangerous chore of driving the heavily laden one-ton trucks up the treacherously steep and snow-covered gradient—a job they found to be no less taxing than clearing the road itself. And if the drivers needed any reminder as to why they were paid such vast sums of money, they had only to look past the hood—either up at the looming rock cliff-face, or down at the sheer drop-offs that followed each and every cutback. But the road was only part of the problem.

Along with dropping temperatures, the increased elevation also brought deeper snow.

This led to traction problems halfway up the mountainside when one truck's duellies began spinning wildly. First it was only one side, but that quickly changed as the forward impetus was lost and ice

formed under the whirling treads. Then gravity and slippage won out over weight and traction, drawing the vehicle into a backward slide. Disaster seemed imminent, but before fishtailing over the edge, it struck the front bumper of the next truck in line, which halted the perilous slide.

Two hours later, after chaining up under the illumination of headlights, Mitch and the men continued on their way, and not long after that followed the road into a turnaround made just big enough to accommodate all the trucks. This would be the first of many waypoints, and the end of the line for the vehicles, taking no less than nine hours of intense driving to get there.

As the sun broke clear of the horizon on that first morning, they'd unloaded, organized, and stacked all the supplies. Once finished, and now plagued with exhaustion, they used the protected cargo areas to get some much-needed sleep. But the real work had begun two hours later when the twenty-one grim-faced men began the long ascent, with each man carrying as much as he could, toward the next waypoint, which was a plateau two miles up and beyond a vertical slope that was so imposing even the use of mules was out of the question. Once there, they'd dropped their burdens, and headed back to the trucks for the next load. Back and forth they went, until all the supplies had been moved. Then it was on to the next waypoint, and then the next, until late the previous night they'd arrived at the base of the cliff near the mine's entrance.

No, not an easy task at all, Mitch thought, straightening his aching back, and feeling the pain in his tortured muscles with even the slightest movement.

He gazed through the side of the forest and past the drooping snow-laden tree branches. From his elevated position, he could see down into the green-covered valley where there was no snow, and where fir trees grew as far as the eyes could see. Highway 2 stood out in the distance, appearing as a jagged tree line that zigzagged along the valley floor like a wicked scar on a rolling skin of green. This was the two-lane highway that bisected the northern and southern Cascades, and connected the western cities, such as Seattle, to the eastern ones, such as Leavenworth and Wenatchee. Further

south were even more mountaintops, looming high, these cloaked in a sheer veil of fog that stood out against the clearing blue sky.

Mitch turned his attention back to the pile where stacks of wooden crates—row upon row—had been placed neatly on a huge green tarp. Piled on these crates were various forms of outdoor equipment, such as generators, lighting, tools and ropes. In another mound off to the side were thirty five-gallon gas cans, and stacked on those were military-style duffle bags, bulging with even more gear.

Mitch stepped over to the nearest wooden crates. They were stacked three high with ropes on each end for easier carrying. A light dusting of snow had settled on the top one; the ice crystals glittering diamond-like as a column of sunlight—drifting lazily across the pile—shone through the canopy above. He brushed it off with a gloved hand. The stencil on the yellow planks read “Canned Goods.”

Six men, just then, appeared from the mine’s entrance, each dressed in all-weather hiking gear, faces covered in sweat. Fatigue had taken a toll on them. Zombie-like, their sunken eyes were distant and glazed over, and their weariness apparent in their sluggish gait. Functioning in only the familiarity of routine, they approached the pile. Without a word, each picked up the next load and returned through the mine’s entryway, their fading footfalls lightly echoing out of the darkness.

Mitch remained staring at the entrance. Representing a bleak unknown future, the opening was tall as a man, and round—its black interior highlighted against the vertical rock face like the opening of an ominous throat, dark and threatening.

Seems fitting, Mitch thought with apprehension.

Inside, he could just make out the old rail line, used long ago to bring the coal carts up from the earthly depths. Finding one in working condition had been a boon—a pleasant surprise that had lightened the workload considerably. He cocked his head. Pushed by his men, and en route to the last waypoint, the squeaking wheels of the loaded steel cart grew distant as it headed once again into the bowels of the mountain.

Calculating the time it would take for the round trip down the horizontal shaft, Mitch stole one more glance at the remaining piles.

“Almost done,” he repeated thankfully, “should be completed by nightfall.” Then they would head back down the mountain, and only return when the time was right and the plan set in motion. Once that happened, life would be much different than it was now—the living harder, the threat of dying easier, and each separated only by a mere thread or, in this case, the supplies in the mine shaft. Mitch nodded with satisfaction and, picking up a wooden crate, he turned once more toward the entrance.

Chapter 19: The Dead of Night

Running blindly through the darkness, Ron pitched forward again, this time over an unseen fallen log. He landed heavily, with a grunt, his cheek bouncing off the forest floor.

Don't stop, he told himself, *the pain is irrelevant*. He scrambled up, rising again on tortured, bare and bleeding feet. *There is no time*. He stumbled on, limping badly, and spitting pine needles from his mouth. Somewhere behind him, in the distance, they were coming for him.

A thick branch stung his cheek as he broke clear of the tree line into a small clearing. Blinking rapidly, he wiped his watering eyes with a trembling hand. The lifesaving sprint from his house had bought him precious time, but now what? He was physically spent, bone-weary, the t-shirt he wore saturated in sweat and mud, and his pajama bottoms—clinging heavily to his skin—only accented his shaking knees.

Feeling dizzy, he finally bent over to rest, sucking greedily at the damp, woody air. His heart felt as if he'd just run a marathon and threatened to burst. Bile crept into the back of his throat, the acidic taste courting the debilitating urge to throw up. Adding to his discomfort, he kept reflexively licking his lips, the salt augmenting his dry mouth and ravenous thirst. *Focus!* he thought, throwing his pain and nausea aside. Were they still following? He had to assume they were.

His every move so far had been based on his familiarity with the neighborhood—or in this case, the surrounding woods. However, it all looked so different in the dead of the night; worse yet, his eyes were starting to play tricks on him as he tried to penetrate the gloom. Was that a darker shadow in the shadows? Did it move? It was difficult to tell, and his imagination wasn't helping. In utter darkness, the personality of the forest had changed; the whispering winds became sibilant, ghostly, like the hiss of a serpent's breath, and the

gentle trees—mere shadows inside more shadows—seemed stark and foreboding.

A sound came from the darkness behind him, making him turn. For a moment, he held his breath, hearing only the sound of his rapidly beating heart as he searched for signs of movement. There! A beam from a flashlight, still distant, but charging fast.

Trying not to panic, he filled his lungs again and wiped the beaded sweat off his brow. Still bent over, it suddenly occurred to him that his attention had been forward and up instead of down. The ground was mostly flat now, the trees farther apart. Stooping, he ran a hand over wet grass, and suddenly he realized he was in the park, his throbbing feet too abused to feel the long blades between his toes. But now what? With the lake in front of him, and men with automatic weapons behind him, his options were limited.

He looked to his right. Somewhere in the darkness was the boat ramp and the only access road to the park. But that would take him back past his pursuers. He cursed out loud. Why hadn't he grabbed his pistol before leaving the house? But the question was only rhetorical, with little value. He knew practicality had dictated the moment, and he'd been lucky to even make it this far. He stole another glance at his pursuers. They were getting closer now, their movements not only seen but carried in the soft breeze as they worked through the underbrush. He limped forward again, the pain in his chest subsiding. They hadn't seen him yet but that would soon change when he ran out of real estate.

Just as he made it to the lake, the moon broke free of the clouds, casting bright and shimmering light across the rippling surface. Undecided about what to do next, he stepped into the numbingly cold water, stopping at his ankles. He felt like a trapped animal, and his eyes flicked back and forth, looking for an avenue of escape—any avenue of escape. In the moonlight, he could now see the boat ramp to his right and, more importantly, the tall chain-link fence beyond it. If he was to escape, it wasn't going to be that way. To his left wasn't much better. There, past two picnic tables, the park was open and would leave him fully exposed. And even if he made it to the other side, he would still have to deal with yet another fence. Panic

enveloped him and, with it, more spectral shadows began to move, growing with each imaginative thought, looming and formidable.

The snap of a twig behind him sounded seismic above the gentle rustling of trees.

He stole another glance over his shoulder. Two men were now in the park, running hard in his direction. One yelled, and stopped, followed by a muzzle flash and a bullet that whizzed by Ron's ear. The panic he'd just felt gave way to terror. Wading frantically up to his knees, he quickly dove under the frigid water just as they unleashed a full volley.

The surface erupted, and several bullets shot past, leaving their menacing white, bubbly trails just ahead of him. He scooped at the water desperately, trying to get out of the shallows, but one of his kicking feet inadvertently broke the surface. Another furious burst pelted the water; the thundering sound carried to the depths as more underwater missiles breached the surface. He twisted to his right to misalign their shots, but it was too late. His back suddenly arched from a sledgehammer-like impact, and his mouth flew open in an underwater scream.

Waking abruptly, Ron sat up in bed, his heart racing, and his t-shirt drenched in sweat. Blinking away the nightmare cobwebs, his eyes rapidly surveyed his darkened bedroom. Relieved it had only been a bad dream, he looked at the clock before flopping his head theatrically back onto the pillow. It read 3:33 AM.

For the next few minutes, he tried halfheartedly to get back to sleep, but it was no use. Wide awake now, he sighed heavily and rolled out of bed. As long as he was up, he thought he might as well quench his sudden powerful thirst.

Standing, he pulled up his sagging pajama bottoms and then discarded his wet shirt in the nearby hamper. He found a fresh t-shirt in the top drawer of the dresser, and put it on. Then he stepped through the open double doors, stopping on the landing. It overlooked the den, which was softly illuminated by a green nightlight. He took a moment to stretch, followed by a groan as his body made a cornucopia of pleasurable popping sounds.

Cocking his head, he smirked. The only other sound was the soft ticking of a *cuckoo clock* hung on the wall below—a thought-provoking name that never failed to warm his heart, considering it had been a parting gift from his ex-wife.

He followed the polished oak handrail to the left, toward the stairs. As he descended, his larger-than-life shadow was cast on the beige-painted wall to his left. On it hung the only two pictures in the entire house. They represented defining moments in his life, and were strategically placed where he could look at them often. One was an enlarged photo of him in full dress uniform shaking hands with President Bush at Boston Harbor—a christening ceremony taken in front of a Hamilton Class Cutter. It was a proud moment in the young admiral’s career, given the sleek new three-hundred-foot vessel was the first to be commissioned in more than twenty-two years, with three more to follow in the next decade. He paused briefly at the second enlargement. It had been taken recently, in black and white, and that of his grandson in a Seahawks’ jumper. In it, the two-year-old’s beaming smile was captured—his essence—along with a sparkle in his wondrous eyes. “Perfection,” he mumbled as he continued to the base of the stairs.

Once there, he found his slippers where he’d left them the night before. Slipping them on, he stepped around the corner into the spacious kitchen. As he entered, ghostly shadows moved across the vaulted ceiling and along the polished marble floor; the refracted stove lighting glinting off the royal-amber tiles of the island countertop. He moved to the refrigerator. Standing in the open doorway, he finished the last of an open container of milk. It was cold and refreshing, and he savored each gulp, swirling it in his mouth before swallowing.

Satisfied, he closed the door and threw the empty carton into the trash. He was about to head back upstairs when an outside noise penetrated the silence. He paused a moment, his senses still on high alert from the nightmare. After a moment, he padded past the kitchen island to the glass-paneled french doors, which overlooked the backyard and the northern boot of Lake Sawyer.

He'd bought the two-story waterfront home only last year. It made sense considering he split most his time between here and Texas anyway. And, besides, he'd told himself at the time, it was not only a great deal and afforded him less travel time; but appeased his sailor instincts as well.

It was too dark to see anything outside. Ron cursed as he tried the outside light switch, knowing full well the bulb had been out for weeks. Cupping his hands to eliminate any interior reflections, he peered through the glass. Beyond the stone patio, it was dark all the way to the water. The only other lighting shimmered across the lake's surface from the backyard of a neighbor's house in the distance.

His face relaxed into a smile. Across the refracted light, he spotted the rippling water from a flock of geese—their guttural chirps now clearly heard as they swam past the dock. “Old fool...”

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a wide-shouldered man appeared on the other side of the glass. A stocking mask was pulled over his head, and hooked in the belt of his dark clothing was a 9mm pistol.

Ron's eyes flared in disbelief, and he instinctively reared back from the startling figure, backpedaling into the island countertop and shattering the silence by knocking over one of the oak barstools.

Completely dressed in black, it was easy to see how Ron had missed him. Even now, just beyond the glass, his form remained obscure—chameleon-like—against the backdrop of night. Not only had it allowed the man to approach without being seen, but it had also allowed him to move in very close—an advantage not lost on Ron Maywether, who remained motionless like a rabbit before the wolves.

The man leaned in, inches from the glass. That's when Ron noticed the eyes, dark and malevolent, defiantly staring at him. Then the doorknob shook rapidly. Realizing it was locked, the intruder put a shoulder into the door. When it didn't budge, another camouflaged man—dressed similarly in dark clothing, a face mask, and a pistol in the waistband—appeared by his side.

The second man wasted little time, raising a slapjack over his shoulder and swinging the weighted leather weapon at the door. An

explosion of glass filled the night. The abrupt sound not only had the nearby geese bursting into flight—their frantic calls and flapping wings clearly heard through the broken pane—but left the kitchen floor showered in reflective shards of glass that glistened like thousands of tiny crystals across the marbled tiles.

Ron's shock passed quickly with the breaking of the glass. Using the brief moment it took for the two assailants to break through what was left of the door, the admiral spun from the room, crossed the glass-covered floor, and charged toward the upstairs bedroom. Footfalls of crunching glass and frantic voices soon followed. Ron was almost across the upper landing when the two men came around the corner at the base of the stairs. Without hesitation, they raised their pistols simultaneously and fired, just as Ron ducked into the safety of the master bedroom.

Coming in rapid succession, the deafening sound from their semi-automatics reverberated throughout the interior. First a banister along the landing exploded, followed by the splintering of wood near the door frame. Two more holes appeared in the nearby wall, exposing the white sheetrock beneath, and creating a wispy cloud that hung in the air.

The close-quartered sound made Ron's ears ring, and two of the bullets narrowly missed him as they passed through the wall, exploding into an antique captain's mirror that hung above the large king bed. Without slowing, he took two quick steps and dove onto the bed toward the far nightstand. But in his panicked state, he'd misjudged the trajectory—much less his momentum, which bounced him high and past the nightstand. A loud bang followed, when he slammed sideways into the closet doors, ripping them from the upper rails; the landing punctuated by the twin doors toppling slowly toward the bed like two dead men in an old western.

As Ron lay crumpled against the back wall of the closet, he groaned in pain. The sudden physicality only underscored the fact he wasn't a young man anymore. Upon impacting the floor, the air had been driven from his lungs, followed by a popping sound in his chest and more unpleasant sounds from his shoulder. By the time his stunned body finally came to a halt, he was shaken and desperately

struggling to breathe. For a fleeting second, he was tempted to just lie there, but that wasn't an option. If he did, he was dead.

Hastened footfalls on the stairs confirmed those thoughts, and had Ron rolling to his hands and knees and scrambling up the tilted closet doors now resting on the side of the bed.

The nightstand was close now, and knowing only heartbeats would separate life from death, he hooked two fingers into the handle and reefed the drawer clear, sending the smaller contents scattering down the wood doors and across the polished oak floor. In one fluid motion, he pulled out his fully-loaded Colt .45 pistol, released the safety, and fired just as the first intruder entered. The hastily pointed shot wasn't pretty, but that quickly became a moot point. The violent impact of the hollow-tipped round stopped the attacker in his tracks, lifting him off his feet, and then propelled him backward over the railing. Wary of the new threat, the next man came more cautiously, but the outcome was much the same.

With Ron now holding a weapon of his own, the balance had shifted. No longer was he just reacting or running for his life. On the contrary, he was ready—pissed-off ready—and holding the weapon firmly in two hands when the next intruder peeked around the corner. Without delay, Ron fired four consecutive and evenly spaced shots into the wall behind which the intruder was hiding. With each pull of the trigger, the large-bore pistol bucked in his hands, and with each ear-splitting report another three-inch hole magically appeared in the wall. But of the four shots fired, only two were needed. The first, being a miss, took out half the door frame in an explosion of wood before lodging near the intruder's head. But the second—slightly lower, in anticipation of the intruder ducking—passed cleanly through the sheetrock and struck the unsuspecting attacker as he stepped back. The admiral heard the sound of the banister breaking away, followed by a scream that was abruptly cut off when the intruder hit the marble floor below.