

The Alex Cave Series Book 1

Dead Energy.

Chapter 1

PUGET SOUND, WASHINGTON, USA:

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

A brilliant flash of light caught his attention. As he looked around, he saw the outline of a large ship, about four miles away. 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 as he scanned the area through the binoculars. The oil tanker he had been looking at was the only ship in the area. He realized the Coast Guard would probably reach the tanker first, but decided to fire up the internal gas engine in the sailboat and head towards the tanker, thinking that maybe he could be of some assistance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

McBride leapt from his chair, charging across the rolling deck. *My ship’s low on fuel and I don’t have time for this kind of crap*, he thought. “Give me that!” he snapped, and the operator jumped out

of his chair. McBride grabbed the microphone. "Listen, you moron! I'm not in the mood for any more of your games! Now, get off the emergency frequency!"

"This *is* an emergency, damn it!"

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

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

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

"Thirty miles, sir," he said.

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

"There's something happening to the oil! I think it's going to explode!" the voice screamed.

"Can you identify the cause?"

"No! I mean, I don't know. It's just...of bright light. It's ...and ...out ...of ..."

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

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

"She's the only ship in that sector," said the OOD.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With the Coast Guard cruiser on the opposite side from where he had tied off to the tanker, Alex realized the Commander would assume he was part of the crew, and dropped the boarding ladder

over the side. He leaned his forearms across the railing in a nonchalant manner, as he watched the procedure.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I've been down inside the holds."

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

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

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

Alex grinned in reply.

"Just who the hell are you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nothing on record, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The station commander, please," Alex asked.

"Who should I say is calling, sir?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Not right now. Thanks for the help.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Have you performed an autopsy yet?”

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

“I’d like to see the bodies.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Fine. Follow me.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What’s wrong?”

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

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

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

“Like it was cooked?” Alex asked.

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

“Any idea how?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I will."

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

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Chapter 2

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON:

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

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

"You're late again, Woolly!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That’s a relief, Harold thought.

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

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

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

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

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

“About three weeks ago.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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