



The Alex Cave Series.

(Cold Energy part 2)

## Red Energy

Edition 7

Published by James M. Corkill.

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Other books by James M. Corkill

The Alex Cave Series Book 1. Dead Energy.

The Alex Cave Series Book 2. Cold Energy.  
The Alex Cave Series Book 4. Gravity.

## PROLOGUE

Geologist Alex Cave had joined the crew on board a millionaire's research ship, Mystic. The crew consisted of Mike Tanner, the owner, Alex's best friend, Okana (Oh Kaw-nuh), the mini-sub operator, Rita Harrow, the chief engineer, and Joshua and Bett Mason, the ship's electronics genius and helicopter pilot.

Doctor Henry Heinz, a gray-haired scientist from Area 51, and David Conway, a brilliant young physics student from Alex's collage in Montana, had joined the crew in Seward, Alaska.

On one of the islands in the Aleutian chain of Alaska, Alex and his friends discovered a spaceship embedded in the crater of a dormant volcano, and a piece of advanced technology, which was freezing the waters of the Arctic Ocean and the Bering Sea. They managed to shut down the device. Now they are studying the strange craft.

## Chapter 1

### THE ISLAND:

Alex drove the Mystic's motorboat back to the island to check on Henry, David, and Rita, but as he walked across the beach, he could not stop thinking about the mild electrical shock he had received when he had touched a large silver sphere in the cargo hold of the spaceship. For some odd reason, he felt a sense of *Deja'vu*, as though he had previously received the same shock from a similar silver ball.

He continued up the beach to the cave and entered the cargo hold, and slowly held his palms out within an inch of the mirrored surface, hesitant touch it again. *It wasn't too bad the last time*, he thought. When he placed both hands on the surface, he received a strong electrical shock. "Damn!"

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Suddenly, Alex was standing outside the spaceship, completely unaware anything had happened. He stepped into the control room of the alien craft and saw Henry. "Can she fly again, Doc?"

Henry grinned. "This ship is in surprisingly good shape, Alex. I will not know until we replace the three depleted power crystals."

"I'll call Director Donner and have them delivered to the military airport on Adak Island. Bett can go pick them up in the helicopter. I'm sure she wouldn't mind."

Henry shook his head. "This ship is slightly different from the other two. David and I will need time to become familiar with this design if we are to fly it to Nevada."

Henry had a better idea. Lewis Norton was key to alien spaceship operations, having firsthand experience with a similar craft at Area 51. "Have Lewis bring the crystals to Adak. He will be able to determine the flight capability of this ship much faster than David or I can. I would prefer to have him fly us down to Nevada."

David grinned and lightly shook his head. "You know it's going to be difficult convincing Lewis to leave Area 51, Doc. He was pretty shaken up when the spaceship he was flying crashed in the desert."

Alex knew David was correct about Lewis. "All right. I'll go make my call. If the Director of National Security asks, I'm sure Lewis will break down and do it."

When Alex stepped outside of the spaceship, he noticed Okana standing in front of the cave and walked across the beach to join him.

The crunching of gravel from someone walking in his direction drew Okana's attention. "Hey, Alex, what did Henry say about the ship? Can it be salvaged?"

Alex hesitated to answer. *Why does it feel like I've done this before*, he wondered. "Uh, yeah. He thinks it might still work. There's another opening inside the cave I want to check out. It might be a way to get into the lower section of the spaceship. Let's go inside."

When Alex found the opening in the side of the rock wall of the cave, he looked into the spaceship and saw the last of the four devices on the floor. He turned and grinned at Okana. "This must be the cargo hold. The last device is still inside."

After Alex stepped through the opening into the alien craft, he continued across the room and stopped next to a twenty-foot long by one-foot diameter cylinder. "These devices were designed to operate together to clean the atmosphere. Once we retrieve the other devices from the ocean, we can use this ship to let them do what they were intended to do, clean up the mess we've made in our atmosphere."

"Hold on a minute, Alex. Haven't they done enough damage? The one in the water north of here nearly started a new ice age."

"We'll have to learn more about how they work, first."

"Those things are pretty old, Alex. That spaceship has been buried in this volcano for one hundred and eighty million years."

"Henry and David will figure it out."

When Okana noticed a six-foot diameter silver ball on the other side of the room, he moved closer to see his distorted reflection on the mirror surface. "What's this sphere for?"

Alex felt a tingling sensation in his fingertips and looked down at his hands. *What the hell is going on?* He wondered. He looked up at Okana. "What? Oh. I have no idea. This ship is different from the others. I'll have to ask Lewis about it."

When Alex noticed something silver on the other side of the sphere, he placed both hands on the surface to roll it out of the way. Suddenly his left wrist felt as though he had sprained it recently. "Damn!"

"Are you all right, Alex?"

The pain only lasted a fraction of a second, and then Alex looked around with a sense of *Deja'vu*. "I'm not sure."

With the sphere out of the way, Okana noticed something strange on the floor. "I think we've found the ship's crew. One of them, anyway. Take a look." When Alex didn't respond, Okana looked over. Alex appeared to be off in another world. "Alex?"

"What? Oh, right." Alex knelt down next to the mummified remains of a human body wearing a silver, one-piece jumpsuit. "There should have been four people on this ship. I wonder what happened to the other three?"

"It looks human."

"We know they were the first human species to occupy this planet. I'd better call Donner we need a friend of mine in Nevada to come up here with some power crystals. He's the only one qualified to fly this thing down to Area 51."

They stepped back into the cave and walked outside. Alex slid his satellite phone from a coat pocket and entered Donner's number. "We did it, Martin. We found the alien spaceship, but we need some support out here. I'm sure we're not the only ones who know about this island."

“I have the Coast Guard on standby. Give me your GPS location and I’ll call them right away.”

“What about military support?”

“That will take a little more time, but I’ll make the call. The Coast Guard should arrive within the hour. Is Okana with you right now?”

“Yes.”

“Tell him to call home. His father had a fatal heart attack.”

Alex felt a knot in his stomach. *I could swear I already knew he was going to say that*, he thought. “Uh. Right. Thanks.” Alex handed the phone to Okana. “I think you should call home. It’s about your father, and your family needs to get in touch with you. I’m so sorry I dragged you into this mess, Okana. Let me know if there is anything I can do to help.”

Okana entered the number for his family ranch and his mother answered. She explained what had happened and asked him to come home as soon as possible. When he finished talking, Okana wiped away the tears clouding his vision and looked at Alex. “Listen, I ah. I need to get home, but I don’t want to leave you without any backup.”

“I know you’ve always had my back, but Rita can handle herself if we have any trouble. I have David and Mike to help, too. Let’s get back to the Mystic. Bett can take you to the airport in the helicopter.”

Okana hesitated. “That’s not much help, Alex.”

“Director Donner said the Coast Guard should be here soon. I’ll be okay. Let’s go.”

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The long flowing curls of Rita Harrow’s red hair jostled back and forth as she tiptoed up the stairs to the bridge of the Mystic.

The Mystic, a beautiful two hundred foot research vessel, belonged to an independently wealthy individual named Mike Tanner, and she and Okana were hired as mechanical engineers on his ship. She was in charge of the turbine engine, and Okana operated a small submersible submarine.

Rita peered carefully over the last step to make sure no one was on deck. Just as she thought. Most of the crew was on the island checking out the recently discovered spaceship. She hurried up the stairs, grabbed the satellite phone off the control console, and hurried back down.

She knew Alex Cave would be returning to the Mystic soon and she needed a ride back to the island. In order for her plan to work, Alex had to be here on the Mystic while she was on the island with his friend, Doctor Henry Heinz.

She checked her pistol, tucked it into the back of her pants, and tugged her coat down before stepping out onto the stern deck.

\*

Alex and Okana climbed into the motorboat and drove back to the Mystic, where Rita jumped in. “Can I get a ride back, Alex?”

Alex hesitated. For some odd reason he didn’t trust Rita. It was nothing he could explain, really. It was just a simmering hatred in the back of his mind. “Can you wait until Okana leaves?”

Rita held out the sat phone. “Henry needs to talk to someone named Lewis. I told him I’d be right back.”

Alex looked up at Okana, who had climbed out. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

As Alex started the motorboat engine, Okana crossed the deck into the lounge and told Mike about his father. “I hate to impose on you, Mike.”

“You saved this ship and our lives, Okana. It’s the least I can do.” Mike turned to a small woman with short blond hair sitting with him at the table. “Get the helicopter ready, Bett.”

When Bett stood to leave the lounge, Okana held his hand out to Mike. “Thanks. I’ll go down to my cabin and pack my clothes.”

\*

After dropping Rita off on the dock, Alex drove back across to the Mystic. When he stepped onto the stern, he heard the helicopter’s engine start to whine, and went over to Okana. “Let me know if there is anything I can do to help.”

“Thanks, Alex.” Okana gave Alex a quick hug and then climbed into the helicopter with Bett. Once the helicopter took off, Alex climbed the stairs to join Mike on the bridge.

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Rita waited until Alex had climbed onboard the Mystic and then entered a number on the satellite phone. “Cave found the last device, Steve, but you’re not going to believe what else he found. It’s a spaceship. No, I’m not joking. The control for activating the devices is on this alien ship, but you had better hurry. I’m sure he’s called the Director of National Security to arrange for security and support. Here are the GPS coordinates for the island and the device in the Bering Sea.” She gave him the numbers. “No, they don’t suspect me yet, and I plan to keep it that way. I’ll meet you at the facility.”

She knew Henry would not be a problem when the transport helicopter arrived, but David would try to stop her from taking the device. She brought the pistol out from the small of her back and slipped it into her coat pocket.

\*

On the bridge of the Mystic, Mike Tanner heard the deep thumping of an approaching helicopter. He grabbed the binoculars off the control console and looked in the direction of the sound. When he focused the lenses, he smiled. “The Coast Guard helicopter is coming our way.” He handed the binoculars to Alex.

Alex focused on the orange and white helicopter about half a mile from the island. At least he had some support, although they probably wouldn’t have much firepower. Still, it was better than no support at all until the military arrived.

His smile turned into a frown as he recognized a trail of white smoke streaking through the sky toward the helicopter. “Damn!”

The helicopter was suddenly a massive ball of fire, the flaming, shredded pieces dropping into the ocean, as the concussion from the explosion rattled the windows.

“What just happened, Alex?”

Alex aimed the binoculars in the direction of the trail of smoke. “We’re being invaded, Mike.” He grabbed the microphone for the portable radios. “Are you listening, Rita?”

Outside the spaceship, Rita heard Alex on her portable radio. “I heard an explosion. What just happened?”

“Two large black helicopters just shot down a Coast Guard rescue helicopter, and they’re coming our way.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Tell Henry and David to stay inside the spaceship until we know what’s going on. I’ll be there in a minute. Meet me on the dock.”

Alex clipped the microphone back into its bracket. “I’ll grab the shotguns and meet you on the stern. I’ll take the motorboat to the island while you get the Mystic away from here.”

“That’s a bad plan, Alex. I can help.”

“Thanks, but the Mystic’s too vulnerable.”

Alex grabbed the binoculars and stared out the window for one last look at the approaching helicopters. “You can come back when the helicopters leave.”

“And do what? Collect the bodies?”

Alex turned to Mike and set the binoculars on the console. “I hope not.”

\*

Rita pulled the pistol from her coat pocket and stepped inside the spaceship.

“What’s going on?” David asked. “We heard an explosion.”

“We’re going to have company in a few minutes. Just stay inside and I’ll go find out what’s going on.”

Rita hurried back to the dock on the beach. She could see Alex standing in the motorboat at the stern of the Mystic, collecting shotguns from Mike and placing them on one of the seats. She waited as Alex drove across to the island.

Alex eased the motorboat against the dock. “One of the helicopters is a troop carrier.” He told her. “The other one is for cargo. I brought shotguns for you and David.”

Alex reached down, grabbed one of the shotguns, and held it out to Rita. As he reached down for the other two, he heard the distinct sound of the pump handle inserting a round into the chamber of a shotgun. When he looked up, Rita was aiming it at his chest. “What are you doing, Rita?”

“Throw the shotguns into the water.”

Alex stared at her. “Don’t do this.” He eased his hand down to his jean pocket.

“Don’t even think about it. I know about your pistol. Take it out slowly and toss it into the water.”

Alex knew he didn’t stand a chance. He held her gaze and did as she asked, hearing the pistol splash into the ocean. “Why are you doing this?”

“Get rid of the shotguns.”

Alex reached down, grabbed the barrel of a shotgun, and looked at Rita. He thought about using it as a club, but she shook her head. He tossed them into the water. “Now what?”

“Go back to the Mystic and take it away from the island.” She could see the rage building in Alex’s eyes. “Just do what I say and no one will get hurt.”

Alex moved forward to the steering wheel, but hesitated to sit down. “What do you want?”

“We want the devices.”

“Why? Who are you working for, Rita?”

“Not working *for*, Alex. Working *with*, and you don’t need to know. Just leave and I won’t hurt anyone.”

“Like your friends didn’t hurt anyone in the Coast Guard helicopter a few minutes ago?”

“I had nothing to do with that. Now leave!”

Alex reluctantly drove away from the dock. The deep thumping of the approaching helicopters was getting louder, and he knew if they didn’t leave the area right away, the invaders might capture the Mystic. If that happened, he would not be able to come back and get his friends. A knot formed in his gut. He didn’t trust Rita to keep her word, and his friends might be dead when he returned.

Rita waited on the dock until the Mystic was well on its way away from the island, then went back to the spaceship.

David stood in the entrance of the alien craft, watching Rita walking up the beach. “Where’s Alex?”

“He’ll come back once the helicopters leave. Get back inside, David.”

David hesitated to do as she asked. “I don’t understand. What’s going on?”

“We’re taking the device in the cave. Just do what I say and no one will get hurt.” When David didn’t move, she aimed the shotgun at him, but he just glared back. “I’m not kidding, David.”

David slowly turned and went back inside. He could see the questioning expression from Henry. “Alex isn’t coming. They want one of the devices, so just stay calm and maybe we can find a way out of this.”

David got an idea and slowly walked to the four chairs in the center of the control room. He sat down and waited for Rita’s reaction, but she didn’t pay him any attention. If he could shut down the power and seal them inside this ship, they would be safe from whoever was coming. He knew if the exterior of this alien craft could survive in molten rock for a hundred and eighty million years, a shotgun blast sure as hell would not hurt it.

Rita turned and looked up as a helicopter suddenly appeared over the edge of the crater. Four, thick nylon ropes drop out of the open side door. A moment later, four armed men slid down them to the beach.

David started to reach down to the control pad, but stopped when Rita suddenly looked back inside.

“Come out here, Henry.” She ordered.

Henry’s mouth opened slightly as he looked at David for help. He thought of David as a son.

David lowered his hand toward the control panel to cut the power before Henry made it to the exit. When the deafening roar from the shotgun’s warning blast filled the room, David flinched and jerked his hands away, staring at Rita. “All right! You’ve made your point.” He saw the imploring look in Henry’s eyes. “I’m sorry, Doc.”

Henry’s shoulders sagged as he slowly shuffled across the room and out through the entrance. “What do you want, Rita?”

“Just stand over there, away from the ship, until we’re done.”

\*

Using a pair of binoculars, Alex stared back at the two helicopters hovering over the island, frustrated there was nothing he could do. He watched four men drop down ropes from the first helicopter and disappear into the crater. Then the aircraft moved off to one side of the island to allow the second aircraft, a Sikorsky S-94 cargo helicopter, to move into position. Two thick cables with slings quickly descended. A few moments later, the device from the entrance of the cave was hoisted into the air, swaying below the helicopter as it moved away.

The first helicopter returned and hovered over the crater. A moment later, Alex watched as two people in harnesses on the end of a rope were pulled into the helicopter. For an instant, he thought one of them had gray hair. A moment later, he watched four more people rising out of the crater and recognized Rita’s full head of red hair. “*Damn her!*” he growled, realizing she had taken Henry.

Alex watched as the last four people disappeared inside the aircraft, and then both helicopters swung away from the island and flew away. He lowered the binoculars. “Take us back, Mike.”

Mike brought the Mystic close to the island and set the controls on autopilot. Then he and Alex ran out from the bridge and hurried down the stairs to the motorboat, still tied to the stern.

When Alex looked across at the island, he saw David walking down to the dock. He sighed with relief, jumped into the boat, and motored over to the island.

As the motorboat bumped against the dock, Alex noticed David’s angry expression. “Get in. We’ll wait on the Mystic until help arrives.”

“That bitch Rita took the Doc, Alex.”

Alex stared at David. “I know. Now get in so we can figure out where she took him.”



Alex took them back to the Mystic, where Mike was waiting on the stern. They all walked up the outside stairs to the bridge, and no one spoke for several long moments.

“At least we have the other three devices,” David told them.

Alex gave David a somber look. “I’m more worried about what Rita has planned for the device she *did* get. They may have been designed to clean the atmosphere, but we know how potentially destructive they can be as well. Once we get some support out here, I’m going back to the mainland. The only way to find the Doc is to find out whom Rita is working with. If he comes to any harm, she’ll wish she had never met me.”

David had seen that look in Alex’s eyes once before, when he had talked about the six men who had murdered his wife, Sevi. Alex had killed each one without mercy.

\*

RUSSIA:

“Hit him again!” Boris Kinski ordered.

Sasha Kinski, Boris’s sister, stepped back, lest the spattering blood from the man tied down to a wooden chair would stain her blue blouse.

The swelling around his eyes no longer allowed Brian Stone to see the fist flying through the air, not until it slammed against his face once again.

“Where is Alex Cave’s family?” Boris’s voice echoed around the room.

In a drug-induced haze, Brian thought about the last time he had seen Boris’s smug face. It was just before Alex had sliced a chunk of flesh from his cheek. A dark window began to close around his thoughts, and Brian was grateful when his mind and body drifted into nothingness. His head fell limply against his chest.

“Check if he’s dead.” Boris ordered in nearly perfect English.

Rudolf Kinski took one of his bloodied gloves off and felt the artery on Brian’s neck. “He is dead, Boris. Why are you still trying to kill Cave? You did the Russian way, kill brother for brother. You still have me.”

Boris suddenly leaned in close to Rudolf. “*Look at me!*” he yelled. “I had women begging for my attention until Cave did this to my face. I was the head of the entire Russian Mafia until you recorded me killing those two CIA agents on your damn phone, you idiot! Now I’m a wanted man. If you weren’t my brother, I’d kill you!”

Boris paced in front of Brian’s body. *Why couldn’t Cave have killed Rudolf instead? All he’s good for is causing pain.* He stopped to look up at the tall, attractive brunette standing quietly nearby. “Find out where Cave’s family is located, Sasha. I’ll make him watch them suffer for what he did to me.”

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## Chapter 2

### WYOMING:

Henry opened his eyes when he felt a thud from the tire. One of the guards sitting in the back of the cargo truck with him glanced up for a moment, and then looked away. The other guard sitting beside him had his head tilted back against the rear wall, snoring softly. At least the guards had respected his age. Or perhaps Rita had told them to be considerate. They had not even tied his hands. He hadn't seen Rita since the helicopters had landed at a private airport in Yakama Washington.

Henry looked down at the device strapped onto a wooden pallet. *What made her do this?* He wondered. *She appeared to enjoy working for Mike on the research ship. Was it for money?*

Henry felt the truck slow down as it turned a corner and stopped. He could hear men talking outside, but the conversations were muffled. When the truck began moving again, the road felt rough, tossing him from side to side slightly. When it stopped again, one of the guards stood and opened the rear door, allowing the dwindling sunlight to illuminate the interior.

Rita looked at Henry sitting on the bench seat against the far wall. "Sorry for the rough treatment, Henry, but there was only enough room in the cab for two."

Henry remained seated. "I will not help you, Rita."

"Fine. Come with me and I'll take you somewhere for dinner. I even have a place for you to sleep."

Henry felt his stomach rumble when he heard the word dinner. He slowly stood and walked past the device to the rear of the truck. When Rita reached out to help him down, he shrugged her off and climbed out on his own. "I could use something to eat, but I will not change my mind."

Rita knew Henry was tired and didn't push the issue. "That's okay. I'll explain everything in the morning. Follow me."

When Henry walked around the truck, he froze and stared at Rita. "Are we going underground?"

"That's right. It's an old research facility."

Henry felt his heart rate increase. "I do not do well underground, Rita."

"I promise you it's safe, Henry."

Henry turned and stared at the entrance into the facility. It was an arched shaped concrete opening, twenty feet high and fifteen feet across at the bottom, similar to a tunnel entrance on a highway. Imbedded in the concrete above the opening, were the letters C.O.B.R.A. He looked at Rita. "What is COBRA?"

"It stands for Complex Organisms and Biological Research, Alien."

Rita indicated the waiting golf cart with her hand. "Get in Henry. It's a long walk to the facility."

Henry hesitated to climb in. He was not claustrophobic, but he *was* afraid of being buried alive. As a young boy in Germany, he had been trapped for three days in a flimsy old bomb shelter hastily constructed during World War II. He was not anxious to be below ground again.

One of the men put his hand on Henry's shoulder. "I'll make sure you're safe, Doctor Heinz."

Henry turned and looked up at the guard who had been snoring. He had been courteous and respectful on the island, when he had clipped the harness onto him and they were hauled up into the helicopter. "Forgive me, but I do not even know your name, sir."

“Chris Jenkins.” He said. “I’ll be your escort while you’re here, Doctor. I’ll do my best to make you as comfortable as possible.”

Henry turned and reluctantly climbed into the rear seat. Once Rita sat in the front seat, Chris climbed in behind the wheel, stepped on the accelerator pedal, and drove into the entrance. As they continued down a long, level tunnel, Henry felt a knot form in his stomach.

Fluorescent lights flashed by overhead, illuminating the concrete floor and walls curving up to form the arched ceiling. Three hundred yards further, the tunnel ended at a fifty-foot square, steel-framed opening. On the left side of the opening, massive hinges supported a two-foot thick steel door for sealing the facility, which only added to Henry’s anxiety.

They drove through the opening and entered an enormous circular chamber. The ceiling was shaped like a dome, one hundred feet high, and three hundred feet across at the bottom. A grid-work of steel rails with several mechanical hoists hung from the ceiling. An opening in the left wall led to a lounge with a small kitchen for dining and entertainment. Through a door at the rear of the room were the sleeping facilities.

Chris stopped the golf cart just inside the entrance, and the three of them climbed out. He led them into the lounge and indicated the table and chairs. “Why don’t you two take a seat and I’ll fix us something to eat.”

After they sat down, Henry stared at Rita. “Will you at least tell me why you brought the device to this facility?”

“We need a safe place to conduct our experiments. This facility is leased from the government by the DAR Corporation. DAR is short for Demolition And Reconstruction. They contract with the government after any major disaster, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, bombings, just about every major catastrophe here in the states. It’s a billion dollar industry for those who get the contracts.”

“I do not understand. Why do you need the device?”

Rita knew why, but also knew if she told Henry, it would only strengthen his resolve not to cooperate. “All in good time.”

Henry thought about the heavy steel door. “Did you see the movie, *The Andromeda Strain*?”

Rita grinned. “Both versions. And you’re right to make the association. During the beginning of the space program in the sixties, the government was worried about bringing samples back from the moon. They set up this abandoned gold mine as a place to study the material, and in 1970, the facility was sealed. One day a congressional representative convinced the government this place was outdated and a wasted resource, and it should be leased under contract to the highest bidder. The owner of DAR, Steve Preston, underbid his competitors and now has full use of this facility.”

Henry found it odd this facility would be sealed and abandoned without a reason. He was about to bring it to Rita’s attention when Chris walked out from the kitchen and set a platter of sliced club sandwiches on the table.

“It’s the best I could do on short notice,” Chris apologized. “I’m actually a pretty good cook.”

The conversations ceased while they ate. Once finished, Chris took the platter back to the kitchen and returned to the table, but did not sit down. “I’m sure you’re as tired as I am, Doctor. Let me show you to your room. You’ll find an assortment of blue coveralls in the dresser, and I’ll show you where the restrooms are located.”

Henry slid his chair back and stood, as did Rita, and they followed Chris to the back of the lounge into the sleeping quarters.

When he awoke the next morning, Henry searched through the drawers, found the smallest coverall, and carried it down the hall to the showers. When he returned to the lounge, Chris was sitting at a table reading a magazine.

Chris looked up and grinned when Henry entered the room. The coverall he was wearing hung loosely over his small frame, and the pant legs had been rolled up above his shoes. "Good morning, Doctor Heinz. Would you like something to eat?"

Henry continued across the room and sat at the table. "Thank you, Chris. Toast and coffee would be nice."

Chris stood. "I'll try and get you a smaller size coverall while you're eating."

Henry stared after Chris as he walked around the counter. For being so robust in build, around two hundred and fifty pounds and perhaps six foot tall, Chris carried the weight well. When he returned with the toast and coffee, Henry noticed Chris's nose had been broken at one time and never properly reset, and a slight scar ran through his right eyebrow. When Chris set the plate of toast on the table, Henry noticed the scars on his knuckles, as well.

"I'll go look for some different coveralls that might fit you better, Doctor Heinz."

Despite being held captive, Henry appreciated Chris's courteous attitude. "Just Henry will do, Chris. Thank you."

When Chris left the lounge, Henry slid the magazine over and read the title. Better Homes and Gardens was not what he had expected.

A few moments later, Chris returned clutching a pair of light blue coveralls and set them on the table. "These are the smallest size I could find, but they should fit you better than the ones you have on. Mister Preston just arrived. He's anxious to meet you." Chris noticed the magazine was face up in front of Henry, and grinned bashfully. "I like gardening in my spare time."

Henry found Chris to be a curious individual. *Perhaps he is just a man with a job to do and does not bear me any ill will.*

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After parking the golf cart at the entrance, Rita ran over to the helicopter as Steve Preston climbed out. It had been two months since she had left him to start working for Mike Tanner on the Mystic. She threw her arms around his neck, pulling him close. "I've missed you so much."

Preston stared at the entrance. "Missed you, too. Take me inside. I want to see what this alien device looks like."

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When Henry finished his food, he left the lounge to change into a new coverall. When he returned, Chris set the magazine down and stood from the table, and Henry followed him into the massive main chamber.

The device was positioned vertically on a support base with the pointed end up. A triangular outer framework constructed of one inch stainless steel tubing held it in place.

Henry looked across the room, relieved to see the heavy steel door was still open. On the other side of the device, he saw Rita standing in front of an elevated control console. Beside her was a handsome man dressed in a white shirt and black jeans. Apparently, Rita had brought a suitcase, for she was dressed in blue jeans and a light blue sweater.

Rita looked up and noticed Henry and Chris had entered the room. "Come over here and join us, Henry."

Henry walked beside Chris to the console. The man held his hand out to him, but Henry refused to accept it. "I do not appreciate being kidnapped, sir." When the man's eyes showed his hostility, Henry raised his chin defiantly and returned his stare.

Steve Preston did not like the insolent attitude from this little old man. "Frankly, I don't give a shit. Teach us how to control this device and you'll be treated decently. Refuse and I'll strip you naked and put you on display to the outside world. There are thousands of sick people on the internet who would enjoy seeing you humiliated."

Henry's jaw dropped slightly when he realized the man was serious. He had always been very modest. He closed his mouth and gave Preston a nod of acceptance. *I can only hope that Alex is searching for me*, he thought.

Chris stiffened at Preston's threat and placed a reassuring hand on Henry's shoulder. "Just do as he asks, Henry. Everything will be okay. I promise."

When Henry looked up, he saw the sincerity in Chris's eyes. "Thank you, but I will only do what is necessary."

Preston turned to Rita. "Do you really need this old man's help?"

"He knows more about this device than I do."

Preston turned and glared at Henry. "Fine. Just let me know when he's no longer of any use and I'll get rid of him." When he saw the fear in Henry's eyes, he grinned sadistically. "Glad to see you'll give us your full cooperation."

Rita shifted her stance when Henry stared at her, his eyes begging for her help. She looked up at Preston. "I'm sure he won't be a problem."

Preston gave Rita a quick kiss. "I'd better get going." He turned and headed for the golf cart. "Drive me back to the helicopter, Chris."

Once Chris and Preston drove down the tunnel, Henry looked at Rita as he waved his hand at the device. "I do not know as much as you think I do. You have seen how unpredictable they can be. The repercussions of your experiments could have devastating effects. Please stop this before it is too late."

Rita grinned and shook her head. "Sorry, Henry. I think you know more than you're telling me. Just help me get it right and nothing bad will happen."

Henry sighed and headed for the lounge. *She will be the death of us all*, he thought.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 3

### THE ISLAND IN THE BERING SEA:

As they made their approach to the island in a small white helicopter, David Conway and Lewis Norton stared down through the windows. Below them, a Navy destroyer was holding station five miles from shore.

The crew and Commander of the destroyer had not been told why they were guarding the island. They were not even allowed to go ashore. All operations were being coordinated from the Naval Air Station on Adak Island in the Aleutian chain. Only two government people knew about the spaceship. The Director of National Security, and the President of the United States.

Lewis had arrived on Adak Island late that afternoon from Nevada, and David had arrived with Bett Mason in the helicopter to pick him up. Clutched tightly in Lewis's lap was a small cardboard box containing the three power crystals needed to supplement the one currently powering the alien ship.

When Lewis looked down at the exposed section of the spaceship inside the crater, his fingers involuntarily tightened on the cardboard box, crushing the sides. This ship was identical to the two that had crashed in the Nevada desert a year ago during the Dead Energy operation. Unfortunately, he had been inside one of them at the time.

Bett Mason looked over at David in the passenger seat. "You boys think that thing can fly?"

"We'll know for sure in a few minutes." David answered. "You might want to take off when we get inside. If that ship *does* break free, it will probably shatter the surrounding rock."

"I'll stand by just off shore in case it doesn't work and you need a ride back to Adak."

Once the helicopter set down on the gravel beach inside the crater, David and Lewis climbed out and continued across to the entrance into the spaceship. When Lewis hesitated to step inside, David turned to look at him. Lewis had always maintained a no-nonsense behavior, reminding David of Mister Spock from the *Star Trek* movies. "What's the matter?"

Lewis thought about the last time he had entered a similar spaceship with his brother. His brother had died because of his injuries when it had crashed. He too had suffered a broken arm. Now he would be flying this ship, if they could make it operational.

Lewis took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "I will be fine, David."

David gave Lewis a moment to gather his resolve. It had taken a personal request from Director Donner to convince Lewis to come to the island. Now that Henry had been kidnapped, Lewis was the only living person who had actually operated a spaceship similar to this one, and was their only hope of flying this one to Nevada.

Lewis stepped forward and continued into the ship. The interior was the same as the one that had crashed, so he knew how to operate the various controls.

David took the box from Lewis and carried it to the elevated power distribution console. He grinned and looked at Lewis. "Are you ready to fly us out of here?"

Lewis sat down in one of the padded chairs. "You may insert the crystals, David."

David retrieved the three, one-dollar size crystals from the box. As he inserted them into the corresponding slots in the console, they immediately began radiating neon blue light identical to the

one that was already in the fourth slot. “We have full power, Lewis. Start turning things on so we can see if this thing is still working.”

Lewis studied the illuminated touch pads on the control console in front of him. When all the indicator lights showed the ship was fully functional, he leaned back in the chair and sighed, but it was not with relief. It was the realization he might actually have to fly this ship. “All systems appear to be functioning, David.”

David stepped down onto the main floor of the control room and stood in front of Lewis. “All right! Start the engine and let’s see what happens.”

Lewis leaned forward and tapped a series of pads. One of the colored lights changed from red to blue. “The engine is on, David. All indications are normal.”

David frowned when everything remained silent. He looked around the interior. “Are you sure? I don’t hear any engine noise.”

“This is an advanced piece of ancient technology, not an automobile. I assure you the engine is operating correctly.”

David grinned with excitement and sat in one of the other three chairs. “All right! See if it can break loose from the rock on its own. If not, we’ll have to bring in the demolition specialists.”

“As you wish.”

When Lewis tapped another series of pads, the ship began to shake as the rock holding it in place began to fracture. The ship suddenly lurched up, as if sensing freedom from its one hundred and eighty million year volcanic prison.

“You did it, Lewis! It still works. I can’t believe it. After all these years it still works. All right. Set us back down.”

Lewis realized he had been holding his breath and released a long, slow sigh. “Very well. Here we go.”

Under Lewis’s control, the alien craft gently touched back down inside the crater, but settled at a slight angle on top of the shattered chunks of rock.

David stood and ran to the exit from the ship, clutching a portable radio. Once outside, he turned and stared inside at Lewis. “See if the cloaking system still works.”

Lewis tapped a series of pads and stared out at David. “It appears to be damaged.”

“I guess we’ll need to wait until nightfall to fly it out of here. We can’t risk being seen on our way to Nevada.”

David turned and pressed the talk button as he waved up at the helicopter hovering off to the side of the crater. “It works, Bett. We’ll wait here until it’s dark before we leave. Thanks for your help.”

Bett turned the helicopter in the direction of Adak Island as she spoke into her headset. “Good luck, boys.”

\*

NEVADA:

The combined excitement of everyone outside hanger five was nearly palpable. The newly acquired alien ship would be arriving in a few moments, and the entire base was in a shroud of darkness to keep prying cameras from recording the event. Without the cloaking system, the mirrored surface of the spaceship would reflect the smallest amount of artificial light.

Two parallel rows of red lights on the concrete tarmac slowly increased in intensity, marking the approach to the entrance of the hanger. The reflection of the red lights slowly moved along the mirrored bottom of the spaceship as it silently entered through the opening in the hanger doors. Once

inside the hanger, the red lights blinked off as the large steel doors slowly moved toward each other to seal the entrance.

When the quiet thud from the doors signaled the hanger was sealed, the lights mounted to the ceiling burst into brilliant white light to illuminate the interior of the hanger, and the silver, hockey puck shaped alien ship on the concrete floor.

Now that the ship was no longer buried in the volcano, Lewis and David could no longer just step out of the control room. They had noticed the steps going down from inside the control room, but until the rock was removed, they didn't know there was an outside entrance at the bottom. The stairs had simply ended at the living quarters below the control room.

David leapt out of his chair and grinned at Lewis. "That was an amazing ride. We didn't have a single problem getting here. I knew you could do it."

Lewis pressed one of the illuminated pads on the control panel. The ceiling fluttered for a second before it became transparent, allowing the overhead hanger lights to fill the room. A moment later, several scientists and engineers came up the stairs into the control room. Most of them had worked on the two crashed spaceships, and David and Lewis only needed to show them the separate small panel that controlled the devices. A few minutes later, they both left the control room in the hands of the competent technicians.

When Lewis began walking toward the rear door in the hanger, David grabbed his arm. "I forgot about the sphere. Do you know its purpose on this spaceship?"

"I do not. This is the first time I have seen one. I doubt it would have anything to do with the operation of this craft."

"Too bad these people had to leave this planet. We could have learned a lot from them."

Lewis's eyebrow went up. "We are the second race of humans to evolve on this planet. If they had not left, we would not be here."

David grinned and shook his head. "That's true. It was because of a volcanic eruption, wasn't it?"

"Did you not read the information we retrieved from the first two spaceships? A super eruption, to be exact. All life on this planet had to start evolving again."

"Oh well. I sure would like to have met one of them. Listen, I'm starving. Let's get something to eat."

\* \* \*



## Chapter 4

FRIDAY. ONE WEEK LATER. COBRA:

Henry sat hunched over at the table, poking at his scrambled eggs with a fork. There must have been a very important reason COBRA had been shut down in 1970. He had worked for the government doing secret research for over fifty years. In all that time, he had never heard of a project being so abruptly shut down. The fact the facility had also been sealed only added to his concern.

He looked across the table at Chris. "Do you know anything about what happened in this facility?"

Chris shook his head. "Preston keeps everything on a need to know basis. Rita might know more about what they did here."

"I have already asked her. She does not know."

"Would you like to see the actual COBRA laboratory?"

Henry sat up straight. "Yes. Perhaps if I could see what type of equipment they were using, it would give me a better understanding of what happened."

They stood and Henry followed Chris out of the lounge. As they crossed the main room to the elevator, Henry looked across at Rita. She glanced up from the control console, but ignored them. He had not been much help anyway. Rita had a better understanding of resonate frequencies than he did.

When the door opened and they stepped inside the cab, Henry noticed that all four numbers on the control panel pointed down. As the floor seemed to drop beneath his feet, he tried to control his growing anxiety. When the door opened on the third floor, he released a deep sigh.

When they stepped out, the overhead fluorescent lighting came on automatically, fluttering for a few seconds indicating they had not been turned on for a very long time. The laboratory was a single large room with several workstations.

Henry walked around tables trying to picture in his mind what they were doing down here. The tables were still covered with a variety of research equipment, microscopes, and plastic enclosures with rubber gloves inside. Against one wall, empty cages were stacked three high. At least he *thought* they were empty. When he stepped closer, he recognized the skeletal remains of monkeys.

When Henry realized they had suddenly abandoned the lab, he gave Chris a troubled expression. "This is not a good sign."

"Why is that?"

"They left in a hurry. Something may have gone wrong with their experiments on the moon samples." He gave Chris an imploring stare. "If I could contact my associates we may be able to learn exactly what happened here and why they sealed it closed."

Chris stared at Henry for a long moment. Now he too was concerned, but he did not want to lose his job. "I wish I could help you, Henry. I really do."

"I understand, Chris."

Chris glanced at the elevator door. "We're not supposed to be down here. We should go back up to the test area before Rita notices we're gone."

"She knows we are down here. I think she does not care as long as I cannot contact the outside world."

“Do you want to stay down here?”

Henry looked around one last time. “No. There is nothing more to learn down here.”

When he turned and stepped back into the elevator, Henry noticed there was still one more floor below this one. Apparently, it could only be accessed by a key in the control panel.

When they stepped out of the elevator on the main floor, Rita was still standing over the control console. She either didn't notice their arrival, or didn't care. As they continued across the room, Henry stopped next to the device. He had a deep sense of apprehension about this test, but knew to argue the point again would be useless.

Rita looked up when she noticed Henry. “You're just in time. I'm ready to try the first combination of resonate frequencies. You two might want to move away from the device.”

Henry and Chris turned and continued across the room. Henry saw the glee of excitement in Rita's eyes, as she held her finger over the activation button.

Rita turned and grinned down at Henry. “Are you ready?”

“Do not do this, Rita.”

Rita shook her head. “Here we go. Three, two, one, now.”

Henry held his breath as he stared at the device. The seconds on the digital clock clicked past three, and then four, five, six, but nothing happened. He released a long sigh of relief when the device remained inactive.

Suddenly the concrete floor sent a vibration into the soles of their shoes. It only lasted for a fraction of a second and stopped. When they did not see any change to the device, they looked at each other with curious expressions.

“What just happened?” Chris asked.

Rita shook her head and studied the information on the digital display. “Nothing happened, the test is a bust. We'll need to try it again with a different combination of frequencies.”

Henry shook his fist as he glared at Rita. “You are wrong! You felt the movement in the floor. Something did happen, but it was not what you expected. You must stop this experiment until we understand why this facility was shut down. We have no idea what they were doing here. The fact that this facility was sealed demands our further investigation. You must not proceed with your experiments!”

When Rita turned back to the console, Henry let his shoulders slump. “I can help you, Rita. I could contact Director Donner and have the records of this COBRA project sent by courier.”

Rita gave him a stern look. “Absolutely not, Henry. No one can know our location until I determine it's necessary. I'll use my contacts to find out what happened here. Is that clear?”

Henry lowered his head. *Something terrible will result from her impatience*, he thought.

Chris noticed Henry's depression. He decided a walk outside might help him. “Listen, Henry. Mister Preston should be arriving shortly. I'll need to pick him up at the entrance anyway, so let's go for a ride.”

Henry looked at Rita, but she ignored him so he followed Chris over to the golf cart.

With Henry in the passenger seat, Chris drove along the tunnel where he parked just inside the entrance. When they climbed out and walked outside, Henry abruptly stopped to look around. It had been nearly dark when he had arrived, but now he was impressed by what he saw. The setting could have been from a state park. Not a single vehicle was parked outside. The open area in front of the entrance was a half-moon shaped parking area, about one-hundred-feet across, ending at a forest of thick trunked evergreens.

Henry slid his shoe across the surface of what appeared to be dirt, but was actually a hard surface covered with tan-colored epoxy paint. Blotches of charcoal grey and green paint were scattered randomly in every direction to complete a camouflaged tapestry. His depression deepened when he realized from the air it would appear to be a clearing in the forest, and no one would suspect he would be here.

Chris noticed Henry's shoulders sag. "There's a bench over near the trees if you want to sit for a while."

Henry walked over to the bench under the tree limbs. When he sat down, Henry stirred the pine needles with the toe of his shoe for a moment before looking over at Chris. "Do you know what their intentions are if they can control the device?"

Chris shook his head. "No. I'm just one of the guards. I just do what they say."

"There are more guards at this facility?"

"Yeah, but they just take care of the entry gate and patrol the grounds. They live off base. I live here and take care of the internal security, although there usually isn't much for me to do. I needed something to occupy my time so I started taking cooking lessons online. Henry felt a glimmer of hope. If he could separate himself from Chris, he might be able to get a message to Donner over the internet. First, he needed to gather more information about the security at this facility. "How many guards do they have here?"

Chris stared at Henry for a moment. "I hope you're not planning an escape. I like you, Henry, but I can't allow you to leave. I have a job to do. Besides, this place is shaped like a horseshoe. The surrounding rock is over three hundred feet high and nearly vertical. There is no way to hike up to the rim. The only way out is through the narrow entrance where the guards are stationed, or by helicopter."

Henry looked at the ground and stirred the pine needles again. His thoughts were interrupted by the deep thumping sound of an approaching helicopter.

Chris heard it too. "We need to go back inside the entrance, Henry. I'm sure that's Mister Preston and we'll get blown away by the downdraft."

Henry and Chris hurried across to the entrance and stopped just inside. They waited while a dull gray, two-person helicopter swooped in low above the treetops and touched down lightly on the painted surface. Once the rotors began to slow down, Chris walked out to greet Preston, but Henry refused to be friendly and stayed inside.

When Preston climbed out of the helicopter, Chris was waiting. "I heard about the tremor. Is Rita making any headway?"

"Kind of, I guess. She'll have to tell you about it."

Preston grinned sadistically when he saw Henry. "Feeling any better old man?"

Henry glared at Preston's smug face. "I would feel better if you told me what you intend to do with that device."

Preston was impressed by the old man's obstinacy. "All right. I plan to create a series of storms along the east coast. Nothing too dramatic. I'll have my men and equipment staged nearby so I can underbid my competitors for the cleanup contract. I can make millions."

Henry stared at Preston for a long moment. "You are a mad man. You cannot control the weather!

"I can if you and Rita figure out the correct set of frequencies. I'm going to use them no matter what, so it's up to you and Rita to get it right. If the devices don't work as advertised, they could do more damage than I intend. It will be your fault, old man."

“What about all the people whose lives you will impact by the destruction? Possibly their deaths, as well?”

“It happens all the time anyway, so why not take advantage of it by knowing when and where?”

“This will be different. You will be the cause, not a natural event. It will be your fault, not mine.”

“Then you had better get it right if you want to minimize the damage.” He turned to Chris. “Take me inside. I want to talk to Rita about the tremor.”

Henry climbed into the rear seat while Preston sat up front next to Chris. Once the cart was driving down the tunnel, Henry leaned forward in his seat. “Tell me, Preston. Do you know why this facility was sealed in 1970?”

Preston turned his head to look at Henry. “Not exactly. I heard a rumor the funding was cut off because of an accident. This used to be a mine, so it wouldn’t surprise me if they had a cave-in.”

Henry leaned back. *That cannot be the reason, he thought. It is too simple. That massive door is meant to keep something sealed inside.*

When Chris parked near the entrance to the main room, they climbed out and strolled across to Rita standing next to the control console.

Rita turned around and leaned back against the console as she watched their approach.

When Henry and Chris stopped, Preston continued until he was face to face with Rita, and then gently cupped his hand under her chin to draw her lips to his.

When they parted, Rita smiled and released a deep sigh of pleasure. She looked into his soft brown eyes before wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling his body close to hers. “I’ve missed you,” she whispered in his ear.

Preston looked over Rita’s shoulder at the device. “Did you figure out how to control that piece of alien technology?”

Rita let go of Preston and waved her hand toward the device. “I know why I’m having so much difficulty getting it to work. We need at least two devices to interact in order to create the vortex needed to induce a change in weather patterns.”

Preston turned to face Rita. “We have the one from the Bering Sea. I can have it brought here, if you like.”

“I don’t know if it will do us any good. The power supply in that one is nearly depleted.” She looked at Henry. “They must use the same crystals as the spaceship. Wouldn’t you agree, Henry?”

Henry crossed his arms. “I do not know. I have never seen one until now.”

Rita knew he was right. “I’ll need to open one up to find out for sure, but I would rather use the depleted one in case something goes wrong.”

“I’ll set it up. What about the tremor? Do you think it’s safe to stay here?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about. We’re only one hundred and eighty miles from Yellowstone National Park and they have earthquakes all the time. That’s probably what we felt here.”

Preston grinned. “Great. How about a demonstration? You said it began to work the last time. Show me what it does.”

“All right. Watch this.”

Henry wanted to protest, but knew it would be pointless. He could only stand by and see what would happen.

When Rita pressed the button, the device began to shimmer. A small whirlwind formed above the tip, and then everything electronic stopped working. When the whirlwind ceased spinning, a low-pitched rumble echoed around the room. The floor shuddered for an instant, and then everything was quiet and still.

Preston stared at Rita. "What the hell was that? Did you do that?"

"No. I don't know why that happened."

Preston put his hands on his hips as the devil's grin spread across his face. "I could make a lot of money cleaning up after just one earthquake. You must have caused it. Try it again."

"No, Rita!" Henry shouted. He stepped in front of Preston and glared up at him. "Are you insane? Do you not realize we are underground? This entire facility could collapse on us!"

"Okay, I get your point. We'll take it outside next time." He looked at Rita. "If you can make this device create an earthquake whenever you want to, I'll double the money I promised you."

Rita stared back at Preston and shook her head. "It can't be the device, Steve. It's above ground. That earthquake came from deep beneath us. It was probably another earthquake at Yellowstone."

"If you say so, but why did it happen when you turned on the device?"

"I don't know, but I shouldn't try it again until I figure it out."

"Okay. I'll arrange to have the other device brought to this location." He turned to look at Chris. "Take me back to the helicopter."

Rita stared after Preston as he walked away without kissing her goodbye. *Why is he being so cold? She wondered. Did I do something wrong?*

Henry waited until Chris drove Preston out of the facility before giving Rita a pleading expression. "You must stop these experiments. It is not a coincidence. These seismic events happen when you activate that device. There must be something in this facility reacting to those specific frequencies." He waited for a reply, but Rita just stared at him. "Damn it, Rita! They sealed this facility for a reason! Please let me call Donner and find out why?"

Rita stared at Henry. She had never heard him swear until now. She *did* realize it wasn't a coincidence. She also knew Donner would order Special Forces to storm this facility the moment he found out. She would be arrested for kidnapping, if not shot. "I can't let you call him, Henry. I'll wait until I get another device before I try it again. That's all I can do for now."

Henry shook his head, turned, and began walking across the room to the lounge.

Rita leaned back on the console. She had not received any information about this facility from her contacts. She chewed on her lower lip and crossed her arms. *What the hell were they doing in here?*

\* \* \*

## Chapter 5

### YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK:

Cynthia Barlow sat on a wooden bench in front of the Old Faithful Geyser, waiting for the next scheduled eruption. Her eight-year old daughter, Sissy, looked at her Mickey Mouse wristwatch then up at her mom. “Did somebody forget to turn it on today?”

Cynthia smiled at Sissy’s remark and held her hand. “That’s not how it works. It’s an act of nature.”

“Then how come it’s so late?”

Cynthia looked up when the mixed conversations from the crowd suddenly ceased. “It’s starting right now. Look.”

When Sissy looked at the geyser, small columns of water sporadically soared ten feet into the air, and then crashed down on the calcium-covered rock. “I don’t see why this is so interesting.”

“Just keep watching. It gets bigger in a few moments.”

Sissy flinched when the next eruption of steaming water crashed on to the concrete only one-hundred and fifty-feet in front of her. “Is it supposed to do that?”

“Yes it is. That’s why the benches are way over here.”

When the geyser went back down to only a few feet tall, Sissy looked up at her mother. “It was a little scary, but I wouldn’t come all the way here just to see it.”

Cynthia felt the bench shake as a deep rumble filled the air. The geyser roared out of the ground, climbing higher and higher into the air as if it would never stop.

Screaming voices erupted from the crowd, as boiling water crashed down onto the startled spectators. Everyone ran for shelter, pushing and shoving each other out of the way in a desperate attempt to escape the scalding deluge.

Cynthia grabbed Sissy’s hand, yanking her off the bench as she jumped up and began running toward the hotel. She forced her way through the crowd of panicked people into the hotel lobby. When she reached the fireplace in the center of the room, she dropped to her knees and held Sissy at arm’s length, “Are you hurt? Did you get burnt?”

“I’m okay. What happened? Why did it do that?”

“I don’t know, darling. It wasn’t supposed to.”

Screams echoed in the massive room as injured people shoved their way into the lobby. Cynthia wrapped her arms around Sissy, clutching her tightly against her chest as she stood and moved to one side of the room. She felt Sissy’s tears slipping down the side of her neck. Her own vision began to blur watching parents trying to comfort their wailing children.

\*

Myra Epton, the Director of the lodging in the park, was not prepared for the number of burn victims staggering into the Old Faithful Hotel. The ambulance service in the park was limited, and the overwhelmed medical staff consisted of one doctor and four nurses. She had called the small towns outside the park for assistance, but they would not arrive for another thirty minutes. Thankfully, the geyser had stopped a few moments after the colossal eruption.

She watched the hotel employees carrying tubs of ice and stacks of white cotton towels into the reception area. Other employees were handing dripping wet towels to those caught in the rain of super-heated water. As she listened to the screams of the injured children, she fought hard to maintain a calm composure, but her sense of helplessness to ease their suffering threatened to shatter her false facade.

\*

When the USGS Representative, Jerry Mercer, arrived at the hotel from the Mammoth Station, he walked across the lobby to Myra. She had been the Director of the park hotels for twelve years, but now she looked overwhelmed by the sight in the lobby. He noticed the tears welling up in Myra's eyes. He too was struggling to keep his emotions in check. "Is there anything I can do to help, Myra?"

Myra turned and looked at Jerry as she wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Why did this happen, Jerry? Should I evacuate all the accommodations in this area of the park?"

"We don't know why this happened, Myra. We didn't notice any unusual seismic activity here in the park. We're also checking the outlying areas for unusual activity, but for the moment we don't know what caused the geyser to erupt like that."

"I'm sending any injured tourists who can drive to the hospital in West Yellowstone. I'll try to make the rest as comfortable as possible until the ambulances arrive from the outlying towns. I just hope Old Faithful doesn't erupt again. We're not set up to handle this type of incident."

"I saw the maintenance crew outside roping off the area around the geyser. If it happens again, no one will get hurt. Everything else is far enough away. I'll keep you informed on what we discover."

"Thanks, Jerry."

\*

When Jerry walked into the Yellowstone Seismic Information Center, he saw his two fellow geophysics experts, Paul Sterling and Vivian Kerns, studying the data on the computers. Technically, he was their supervisor, but they were more like a family. They turned in their chairs to look at him. "How are we doing with finding the reason for the event at Old Faithful?" He asked.

Vivian shook her head. "Nothing about it makes any sense, Jerry."

Paul stood and indicated the large wall-mounted video screen showing the twelve GPS stations in the park. "The only unit indicating any movement is the one amber light flashing at the Old Faithful station. The elevation increased by point-five inches, but once the event was over, it returned to its previous elevation. It's like the ground under the geyser burped."

Jerry studied the screen. "It's not that I doubt you, Paul, but are you sure the unit is functioning correctly? I mean, that's not possible."

"I'm positive it actually occurred."

"I agree with Paul's findings," said Vivian. "This could be very bad, Jerry. It means something is happening deep in the caldera."

"When is our next opportunity for an INSAR image?" (Interferometric Synthetic Aperture Radar.)

"We won't have access to the satellite for another two weeks." Paul answered. "What the hell is going on?"

Jerry slowly shook his head. "I have no idea."

Paul frowned. "We're supposed to be the experts, but right now I feel like a freshman geology student."

The mention of geology students caused Jerry to think about his friend, Alex Cave. He seemed to have an uncanny ability for discovering the cause of unusual seismic events. "I have a friend who

might be able to help us. Let's just hope that's the end of it. I guess between now and then we just keep working on finding the reason."

\*

MONTANA STATE COLLEGE, BOZEMAN:

When the last senior geophysics student stopped at his desk, Alex knew what she wanted. She was quite a bit older than his other students were, and had made her intentions clear since the first semester.

"It's Friday, Alex. Join me for a drink?"

He found her attractive and very outgoing, but when he was close to her, something just did not feel right. No connection, as it was. After their third date, he realized he was not totally over the loss of his wife, even though deep down he knew he should be. "I was just leaving for Wyoming."

She leaned over the desk and smiled. "I'll take a rain check. Have a good trip."

"Thanks."

When she smiled and left the room, Alex locked his desk drawers and grabbed his briefcase. Since he had arrived home from Alaska nearly a week ago, he had been anxiously awaiting information about Henry. So far not even Director Donner had been able to find him.

Alex was still baffled as to why his wrist had suddenly felt sprained. *Was the sphere just cargo like the devices?* He wondered. *Did it function as part of the spaceship? Did it have some sort of electrical charge?*

His phone vibrated in the front pocket of his jeans. Alex set his briefcase on the desk hoping the call would be information about the Doc, but the caller ID was his friend in Yellowstone National Park, Jerry Mercer. "Hi, Jerry."

"I hope I'm not interrupting, Alex."

Alex grinned when he heard Jerry's baritone voice. Jerry was only five foot tall. "I was just on my way out. What's going on?"

"We're getting some strange activity from the Yellowstone caldera. We're not sure what to make of it, and I wondered if you could lend us your expertise. Any chance you could come to my office at the Mammoth Station?"

Alex hesitated to reply. Okana had asked him to come to his hometown for his father's funeral tomorrow afternoon. A detour through the park would add three hours to his four hour drive this evening. "There's someplace I need to be tomorrow and I was just getting ready to leave. Can it wait until I get back?"

Jerry explained what happened with Old Faithful earlier today. "We can't figure out the cause, Alex. I could really use your expertise."

Alex knew the Yellowstone super volcano erupts about every seven hundred and fifty thousand years, and was already past due for another major eruption. These incidents might be an indication it was becoming active again. "I'll detour through the park on my way. I'll be there in an hour."

"That would be great, Alex. I'll be waiting."

Alex slipped the phone into his coat pocket, grabbed his briefcase again, and locked the door behind him on his way to the parking lot. His suitcase was already sitting on the back seat, so he climbed into his SUV and drove south toward Yellowstone.

\*

Sasha Kinski, alias Mary Smith on her fake passport, grabbed the small set of binoculars from the dash of her rented gray sedan when Alex walked out the door of the college building. She waited until he climbed into his SUV before turning on her hand held GPS receiver. She noted the current



location of the tracker under Alex's vehicle, waited until Alex drove out of the parking lot, and then checked the GPS again to make sure it was functioning correctly. Once satisfied, she grabbed her phone and entered a number. "Cave is not going home, Boris." She said with a slight Russian accent. "He is headed south on highway eighty-nine. That is the road to their Yellowstone National Park."

"I have a lock on his signal, but I don't think his family lives in a National Park. I'll track him from here. He'll lead us to his family eventually. Stop at Cave's house and pick my idiot brother and head back here to the safe house."

\*

#### YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK. MAMMOTH STATION:

When Jerry saw Alex walk through the door, he stood from behind his desk and walked around to greet him. "Glad you could make it."

Alex reached down to shake the little man's hand. "You got my attention when you said that you don't know what's happening. You're the guru for this park."

Jerry grinned shyly. "You give me too much credit, Alex. Here's what we know so far." He indicated the wall monitor. "These twelve GPS stations give us real time information about the different elevations of the park. What happened at Old Faithful was the only seismic event in the entire park. It's almost as if it was man-made. Any idea how that's even possible?"

Alex studied the monitor thoughtfully. Certainly, it was an unusual event. With the focus in one area, it was completely outside of the usual *modus operandi*. Definitely not normal. He debated what to say when he turned back to Jerry. "I can't imagine anyone having the ability to cause the event, much less that they would be doing it on purpose."

"I've heard stories about you Alex. I'm not sure how much of it is true, but we have a mutual friend who thinks very highly of you. Wesley Patterson. According to him, something caused his volcanoes to become active two weeks ago. When I pressed him for an explanation, he said it would be up to you to explain what happened. So what happened, Alex?"

"I know what you're thinking, Jerry, but the cause of the incident with Wesley's volcanoes is *not* what's causing the problem here in the park, at least as far as I can see." Alex regarded his friend and thought a moment. The Cold Energy operation was classified and not related to the incident at Old Faithful, but now he was curious. "Tell you what. Send me the data you have collected thus far and I'll try to correlate it with our other experiences. If there's any kind of a link I'll let you know, but I wouldn't get my hopes up."

Jerry's shoulder's sagged. "At least now you know what's going on. Thanks for stopping by."

Alex accepted the handshake. "Call me if anything changes."

Jerry stared after Alex when he turned and walked out the door. He knew Alex was holding something back. He leaned back against the desk and crossed his arms. *If what Patterson told me is not related, then what in hell caused the event at Old Faithful?*

He stared across the room at the wall monitor. The amber light from the GPS unit near the Old Faithful station was steady. Thankfully, the geyser was still quiet. He grabbed his car keys off the desk on his way to the door.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 6

### STILLWATER WYOMING:

Just north of Mason Wyoming, Alex turned east onto a two lane road. He kept thinking about what happened at Yellowstone. For the Old Faithful geyser to erupt with such force meant something major had occurred deep beneath the park, but why would it erupt so forcefully without any warning?

The headlights illuminated a large green and white sign. WELCOMED TO STILLWATER, WYOMING. POPULATION 550. It was nearly midnight, but thankfully, Okana had reserved him a room. Four miles farther, he parked in front of the motel office.

A bell chimed as he walked through the swinging glass door. There was no one behind the counter, but he heard a television in the background. A moment later, a Native American man walked out from an adjoining room. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm Alex Cave, and I have a reservation."

The man walked over to an assortment of keys hanging from hooks beneath an elk's head mounted on the wall. "Okana said you would be showing up this afternoon. I did not think it would be this late." He held a key out above the registration form. "You need not bother with that, Alex."

Alex accepted the key. "Thanks."

He left the office, grabbed his small suitcase from the back seat of his SUV, and opened the motel room door. He flipped on the light switch as he walked into the modest room. He was dead tired, so he just tossed the suitcase onto the dresser and set the alarm clock for 8:00 AM. Once undressed, he threw back the bed cover and collapsed onto the bed.

It seemed his head had just hit the pillow when the blaring music of a country song erupted from the alarm clock. After a shower, Alex dressed and left his suitcase on the dresser, knowing he'd be staying at least another night. He locked the door behind him and walked down to the office.

As Alex walked inside, a woman with strands of gray in her long dark hair immediately walked up to the counter from the other room. She was an attractive Native American woman. "Good morning, Alex." She said in a pleasant voice. "Is your room okay?"

Alex smiled. "Yes, thank you. Is there a restaurant in town?"

"Yes, Arty's. It's the only one for a hundred miles. Go right at the four way stop and it will take you through town. It's just down the street from the municipal building. The light in his sign's not working, but you can't miss it."

"Thanks. What do I owe you for the room?"

"Not a thing. My nephew considers you part of our family. I'll see you at Ahiga's memorial service this afternoon."

Alex's eyebrow went up. "Ahiga? I thought his name was Richard?"

"Ahiga is his Indian name. It means he laughs. Okana means wolf, so his Indian name is Laughing Wolf"

"I see. Okay, I'll see you at the service. Thanks."

Alex climbed into his SUV and backed out of the parking lot, and then drove down the highway toward Stillwater. When he turned right at the stop sign as instructed, he thought he had been

transported back in time. On the right side of the street, a row of two-story red brick buildings was connected by a covered wooden walkway. One shop had an old barber's pole out front, another had a large wooden scissors and a sewing thimble hanging out over the street. Farther down on his left, thick slabs of gray stone steps led up to the matching two-story Stillwater Municipal Building.

When Alex saw the sign for Arty's restaurant, he pulled into the parking lot near the front door. The smell of bacon and a hint of coffee drifted through his open window. When he climbed out of the SUV, he took a moment to enjoy the magenta colored sunrise over the wide-open desert before he entered.

A small bell chimed when he opened the swinging glass door, and he smiled. It seemed everyone had bells on their doors. When he walked inside it could have been a scene from an old western movie. Moveable round wooden tables and chairs and a long wooden counter reminded him of a saloon. He found a vacant table and sat down. A moment later, a robust man with a slightly bulbous nose walked up to take his order.

"Good morning, Alex. I'm Arty. What can I get ya?"

"What? How did you know who I am?"

"It's a small town and people like to gossip."

Alex grinned. He liked the small town atmosphere, just like the small town where he grew up. "I'll start with coffee. Bacon and eggs over easy would be nice."

"Will do. Back shortly."

Alex stood to look at the memorabilia and pictures on the wall next to the counter. An old bronze framed photograph depicted an era of horse drawn wagons and saddled horses tied to a hitching rail. Another picture showed the construction of the County Municipal building. The year 1823 had been chiseled into a tall gray stone obelisk at the bottom of the steps. Another photo was looking down the main street at two vintage narrow tired automobiles trying to get out of the muddy road. Across from the municipal building were the row of old red brick stores he had passed earlier. The sign above the nearest store proclaimed the assayer's office was proudly owned by Wilber T. Patrick since 1807. Other photographs depicted the harsh conditions for the miners and the gray mountains surrounding a mine entrance. Apparently, Stillwater was born as a boomtown, which refused to die when the ore played out. The pictures said a lot about the people in this community. He walked back to his table and sat down.

Arty walked up and set his breakfast on the table. "Here you go, Alex."

"Thanks."

"That earthquake yesterday sure shook up a lot of people around here. In fact, as far as I can remember there has never been an earthquake here in Stillwater."

Alex sat up. *This can't be just a coincidence*, he thought. "What time did it occur?"

"Right around two. I think it has something to do with what's going on at the old gold mine. One day this big company from out west took it over and nobody's been allowed to get close to it anymore. A friend of mine said they're doing secret research for the government and they shoot trespassers."

Alex suppressed a grin. "I'll keep that in mind. Thanks."

Alex looked up when the bell on the door chimed. A stinky man in a dark blue sheriff's uniform entered. The sheriff looked around for a moment before walking up to his table.

"You must be Alex Cave. I'm Bruce Roswell, the county sheriff. Mind if I join you?"

Alex indicated an empty chair. "Not at all, Sheriff."

Bruce slid the chair out and sat down across from Alex. "I understand you're a geophysicist."

“That’s right.”

Arty walked up with a cup of coffee and set it in front of Bruce, but did not walk away.

“Yesterday there was a cave-in at the caverns. The State Park office is closed until Monday, and I was wondering if you could stop by and tell us if it’s safe to let the tourists to go down inside?”

Now Alex’s curiosity was aroused. Could the earthquake and the collapse of the caverns be connected the incident in Yellowstone? No, they couldn’t be connected, because Yellowstone is two hundred miles northwest of this town. Still, it was worth considering the possibility. “I’ll check it out after the funeral service, Sheriff.”

“I’d appreciate it. You’ll drive past it on the way to the Okana ranch.”

“Who should I talk to at the caverns?”

“Philip Grady. I’ll tell him you’ll be stopping by. He’s the Park Ranger, though it’s not much of a park.”

“Arty was just telling me about the old gold mine. Do you know what’s going on there?”

Bruce gave Alex a grim expression. “It used to be a government research facility. It was leased to the DAR Corporation three years ago, but it wasn’t reopened until a few weeks ago. They have their own security force. I’ve run into a couple of them. I’m an ex-Marine and I’ll tell you what, those guys aren’t rent-a-cops. They’re mercenaries.”

“What’s DAR stand for?”

“Demolition And Reconstruction. They do a lot of contract work for the Federal and State Governments after major disasters.”

“I wonder why they would need a research facility.”

“I couldn’t say. Maybe they’re going to mine the micro-gold.” Bruce stood. “Thanks for the help, Mister Cave.”

Alex gave Bruce a nod and watched him leave the restaurant.

Arty sat down across from Alex. “That’s great you’re going to find out what happened. I still think it has something to do with the old gold mine. They’re a shifty bunch. The ones who stopped in here for dinner a while ago looked very mean. Listen, ah, if you wouldn’t mind, this is a small town and I’m sort of the local news center. Could you let me know what you find out?”

Alex grinned. “Sure thing, Arty. I’ll stop by on my way back.” Arty’s expression was of a kid with a secret when he walked away.

The breakfast was great and he left a nice tip for Arty before he walked to the counter to pay for the meal. A sweet looking little gray-haired woman was standing behind the antique push button cash register. He held out a twenty-dollar bill for the breakfast, but she just smiled.

“Thank you Alex, but breakfast is on Arty and me. I’m his wife, Rose.”

“Thanks. This is a great place you have here. It reminds me of an old saloon.”

“That’s right. It used to be a saloon before Arty and I took over for my father some forty odd years ago. We had to upgrade the plumbing and electricity, but everything else is pretty much the same as when my grandfather first built it in 1826. He and his two older brothers were the first Patrick’s to immigrate to this area.”

“Your husband seems like a nice fellow.”

“Arty’s a sweetheart, but you’ll have to give him a little leeway when he tells you about something. There’s no end to his imagination.”

Alex glanced over and saw Arty laughing with some customers. “I’ll do that, and thanks for the meal.”

Alex walked out the door, climbed into his SUV, and drove down Main Street.

On his way back to the four-way stop, Alex slowed down as he drove past the municipal building. The architecture had an early western style, and the large blocks of cut gray stone used for the exterior gave it the look of permanence in an ever-changing world.

As he continued down Main Street, he noticed a small housing development behind the brick buildings. *What a nice place to grow up*, he thought. It reminded him of his own small town in Washington State. Perhaps that's why he and Okana get along so well. They had worked together on secret missions for the CIA and always had each other's backs, as if brothers. He turned right at the stop sign and headed toward the Okana ranch.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 7

### YELLOWSTONE:

The night had passed slowly for Jerry as the gruesome scene from the hotel lobby replayed itself repeatedly in his mind. The nagging thought that the incident at Old Faithful might be a prelude for a major event was like an annoying itch that he couldn't scratch.

It seemed he had just fallen asleep when the phone on the nightstand rang. He glanced at the clock and the display showed 8:15 AM. "Damn," he mumbled as he snatched the phone next to the clock. He recognized the caller ID. "I'm here, Myra."

"Something is terribly wrong, Jerry. When I came downstairs this morning one of the maintenance workers said Old Faithful isn't erupting."

Jerry bolted upright in bed. "I'll be there as fast as I can. I'm going to close the park, Myra. Start evacuating your employees, contact the other contractors, and have them do the same with their personnel. I'll have the park rangers assist with evacuating the campgrounds."

"Are you sure this is really necessary, Jerry? I'll need authorization before I can implement a complete evacuation."

Jerry sighed and swung his legs off the bed, realizing Myra was right. He didn't have the authority to order an evacuation. *Am I just being overly paranoid?* He wondered.

"Are you still there, Jerry?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, Myra. You're right. I'll call you once I know more about what's going on."

He called Vivian and Paul and told them what happened at Old Faithful, and asked them to meet him at the office.

\*

When Jerry walked into the seismic center, Vivian looked up from her computer monitor. "Anything new?" he asked.

Vivian swung her chair around to face him. "Old Faithful still hasn't erupted, but there isn't any seismic activity in the park."

"I'm getting a bad feeling about all this Vivian. Old faithful has never failed to erupt on schedule. I'll call the Director of the National Park Service in Washington and let her know what's going on. If it were up to me, I'd start evacuating the park."

"It's still early on the east coast, Jerry, and it's Saturday. She won't be at her office today."

Jerry knew Vivian was right. It was just a gut feeling, but something was going on in the park. He decided if things got worse, he would do what was necessary on his own. *I am the supervisor, after all.*

His phone rang. "Hi, Paul."

"I'm here at the lake in Grant Village. We have a bunch of dead trout floating on the surface."

"I'm on my way."

Jerry told Vivian about the newest event. "I'll call you from the lake."

\*

When Jerry arrived at the Grant Village, Paul was standing on the dock and surrounded by a small crowd of tourists holding fishing poles. Dozens of fish lay belly up along the shoreline after being pushed across the surface by a light breeze.

When Paul saw Jerry, he made his way past the tourists and along the dock to join him at the shoreline. "I've already packed a few specimens on ice for the biology specialists. Damndest thing I've ever seen."

Jerry's phone rang and he saw Vivian's ID. "I'm here."

"One of the Rangers just called. The alkali pools at West Thumb Geyser Basin are overflowing faster than normal."

"Tell him I'm on my way." Jerry gave Paul a troubling stare as he told him what happened. "I need to get over there, Paul. Could you take a water sample from this area for me?"

"I'll take care of it. Call me when you know anything."

"I will. I'll meet you back at the station."

\* \* \*

## Chapter 8

### STILLWATER:

Alex drove for nearly an hour before he saw the sign, STILLWATER CAVERNS. NEXT RIGHT. According to his GPS, it was also the road to the Okana ranch. In the distance on the left were the nearly vertical gray mountains he had seen in the pictures. He was curious why such an unusual formation would rise up in the middle of the desert. He turned right and parked on the shoulder to retrieve his maps from the back of the SUV. According his survey map, the mountain range was the result of an ancient volcanic eruption. *That makes sense*, he thought. *The volcano would have brought gold and other minerals to the surface, but why would the government turn it into a research facility?*

He put away the maps, climbed back into the SUV, and drove east across the desert. The temperature was climbing with the sunrise, so he rolled the windows down, and was greeted with the sweet smell of sage. Thirty minutes later, he saw the turn off for the cavern visitor center. The clock on the radio showed nine-fifteen, and the funeral service was not until noon. He grabbed his phone and pressed the speed dial for Okana.

“Hey, Alex. I heard you made it in pretty late last night.”

“I had to make an unexpected stop on the way. I told the sheriff I’d check on a cave-in at the caverns on the way back from the funeral. I’m at the sign for the entrance right now, and I wondered if you would mind if I stopped here first?”

“No problem. We’re still trying to get organized. Take your time.”

“All right. I’ll see you when I’m finished.”

When Alex arrived at the visitor center, the parking lot was nearly deserted. He parked near the front entrance and grabbed a flashlight from the back of the SUV before entering.

In the middle of the large circular room was a raised, glass-covered display of some kind. Alex walked over for a closer look. Under the glass was a three-dimensional representation of the tunnels and adjoining caverns below. The displays on the walls gave a photographic history of the caverns and their discovery during the mining boom of the eighteen hundreds.

There was no one at the front desk, so Alex walked into the gift shop. A young girl was sitting behind the counter filing her fingernails. He grabbed a tourist map of the caverns and cleared his throat to get her attention. She glanced up and continued filing her nails.

“What can I do for ya, Mister?”

Alex noticed her nametag. “Hi, Sarah. I’m looking for Mister Grady.”

“He’s not giving any tours today. The only reason we’re open is because Philip is nice enough to let me get my forty hours of work in this week. I can barely get by on what they pay me to work here.”

A moment later, a short young man in a dark green park service uniform walked into the gift shop.

“You must be Mister Cave. The sheriff said you’d be stopping by after the funeral. I’m Philip Grady, but everybody just calls me Philip. I was surprised to hear there was a geologist in Stillwater.



I don't think the damage is too dangerous, but it's nice to get a second opinion. We've never had an earthquake before. Follow me and I'll take you to the cave-in."

They walked around a corner to the elevator and Philip inserted a key in the panel. The door opened and they stepped inside.

"This elevator was installed in 1957, and then in 1964 they began paving the walkways."

When they reached the bottom seven hundred feet below, Alex followed Philip down a concrete walkway. "They found this tunnel four years ago. It's amazingly straight for something natural. It goes all the way to a new cavern, but it's a one mile walk to get there."

Philip did not stop talking as they continued along the tunnel. He began explaining the different rock formations as if he had forgotten Alex was a geologist. The tunnel slopped downhill at a shallow angle and it took fifteen minutes to reach the end, where a large waiting area had been cut out of the limestone rock. The overhead lights were off, but a few battery powered emergency lights illuminated the walkway.

When they reached the end, Alex opened the tourist map and used his flashlight to show it to Philip. "Where are we exactly?"

Philip looked at the map and pointed to a spot. "Right about here. The cave-in occurred just around the corner at the bottom of the steps."

Alex grabbed his pen and made a few notes on the map. "How deep are we?"

"Just under eight hundred feet. Carlsbad Caverns are only sixty feet deeper than us," Philip proclaimed proudly.

Alex grinned and noted the depth on his map before they continued. The ghostly white beams from their flashlights danced around the tunnel, and the air had a familiar musty damp odor. The steps continued down, ending at an arched opening, ten-foot high, and eight-feet wide.

When Philip cautiously stepped through the opening, Alex followed him into a large oblong cavern. He estimated the size of the cavern to be roughly seventy feet across, two hundred feet long, and over eighty feet high. The floor was covered with pieces of stalactites broken loose from the ceiling. As they slowly walked down the center, Alex pointed his flashlight up to study the damage.

"This isn't too bad," he informed Philip. "The damage is mostly superficial."

On their return, Alex studied the sides of the chamber. "It looks like the worst of the cave-in is over, but I'm worried about these new fractures in the sides of the rock. There must be an aquifer nearby or the water wouldn't be trickling out from the cracks so fast. You might have a problem with flooding down in these lower sections, so you should keep an eye on this area. You might want to have the engineers install a pumping system."

"I'll let my boss know on Monday. Are you ready to head back?"

Alex looked around the cavern one last time. "I've seen enough. Let's go."

When they returned to the visitor center, Alex indicated the diorama of the caverns and walked over to look at it with Philip. "What's the scale of this model?"

"If I remember right, it's five hundred to one."

Alex used the spread between the tip of his thumb and the tip of his little finger to estimate the distance from the cave-in to the outside edge of the diorama. When he looked up, Philip must have seen the concerned look in his eyes.

"Is there something wrong with the display, Mister Cave?"

"I'm not really sure. It's just that we're only four miles from the mine the sheriff told me about."

"Do you think they caused the earthquake?"

"I can't imagine how."

“You’re the expert. Thanks for checking this out for me.”

“You’re welcome.”

Alex returned to his SUV and climbed into the driver’s seat, but didn’t start the engine and just leaned back to think. According to the diorama, the tunnel to the cavern was in a direct line to the mine. He saved the location of the cavern in his GPS.

When he started the engine the digital clock showed it was 11:47 AM. “Crap!” He shoved it in gear and raced out of the parking lot.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 9

USGS. YELLOWSTONE.

When Jerry walked into the office with fresh coffee, Vivian looked up from her desk monitor. “You’re a God send. I still can’t find a reason for the tremor yesterday afternoon.”

Jerry set one of the plastic mugs in front of Vivian. “Paul’s checking out a report from one of the rangers about the lake. This morning he noticed the volume of water in the outflows has increased significantly.”

Jerry studied the GPS indicators on the wall monitor. “I’m getting a bad feeling, Vivian. The extra outflow from the lake could mean the elevation has increased significantly.”

“I know what you mean. I’m getting a little nervous about all this, too.”

Suddenly the alarm from one of the GPS units began flashing on the wall monitor. Vivian quickly typed the number into her computer. “That’s the Thumb basin. The elevation just increased by half an inch.” More GPS warning lights began flashing as Vivian typed numbers into the computer. “They’re coming from all the geothermal areas in the park, Jerry!”

Jerry grabbed his phone and entered Mira’s number. After eight rings he was about to hang up when he heard her voice when she answered. “Tell me what’s happening with the geyser.”

“Old Faithful just keeps erupting, Jerry. What should I do?”

“Get everyone out of the area, Mira. We have alarms going off all over the park, so just leave, Okay?”

“Of course! Thank you for calling. Please let me know what you find out!”

“I will.”

Jerry told Vivian what happened. “Let’s start making some calls. We need to evacuate the park and it will take some time. Until we know what’s going on, this park is closed.”

\* \* \*

## Chapter 10

### STILLWATER:

The asphalt ended abruptly, but the gravel road had been well maintained and Alex was able to continue at a decent speed. Barbed wire fences ran parallel to the road for several more miles before ending at two large posts supporting the dark wooden sign. OKANA LAND AND CATTLE COMPANY was spelled using pinewood branches.

Alex slowed down as he entered the large open graveled area between the main house and the out buildings. Several vehicles were parked in the center, so he parked on the end, climbed out, and eased the door closed.

Two hundred feet past the two-story house, large leafed trees provided shade over a small graveyard. A small crowd of mostly Native American men, women, and children, were standing around a grave. He quietly walked over to the outside edge of the group.

Okana had told him to dress casually for the funeral, and now he understood why. None of the men wore suits, only slacks or jeans and lightweight shirts. The women wore patterned dresses or slacks and loose fitting blouses. A small girl with wavy dark brown hair wore a light blue dress.

Alex could see the back of Okana's tall lean figure and shaggy blond hair standing in the front row of people. A tall woman with long shiny black hair stood to his right, and a smaller woman with blond hair on his left. On the other side of the grave, a woman wearing a long white leather dress stood clutching a tan leather bag against her chest. It was the woman from the motel office, speaking in an Indian dialect. A moment later, she stepped aside and Okana walked forward to take her place.

When Okana went to the other side of the grave to face his family and friends, he noticed Alex at the back of the crowd as he spoke to the group about his father. When he was finished, he stepped back to shake hands with everyone.

As the group broke up, Alex stepped out of the way. The dark haired woman who had been standing next to Okana moved through the crowd in his direction. She appeared to be in her mid-thirties and was quite attractive. She stopped in front of him and held out her hand.

"You must be Alex Cave. I'm Fala Baldwin, Okana's cousin."

Alex noticed the resemblance to the woman from the motel. As he took her hand, he was nearly overwhelmed by a sense of Déjà vu. "Ah, Yes. That's right."

"Okana's description was rather vague, only that you were tall with black hair. How long are you staying in Stillwater?"

"I'll be leaving tomorrow afternoon. I hope you don't mind my asking, but I noticed you called him Okana. Does everyone in your family call him by his last name?"

Fala smiled. "Yes, even his mother. It's a family bet from when he was ten. Anyone who uses either of his first names has to pay him a dollar."

Alex grinned. "He has two first names? I'd pay just to find out what they are."

Fala returned his grin and lightly shook her head when she noticed Okana moving in her direction. "Sorry, but he'll have to tell you."

Okana walked over to Alex, gave him a quick hug, and then stepped back. "I see you've met Fala."

Alex looked at Fala. "Is the woman from the motel your mother?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"The family resemblance. You're both lovely women." Alex turned to Okana. "Can we talk in private?"

Fala knew it was her cue to leave. "I'll see you two later." She turned and headed toward the back porch of the large house.

Okana noticed the corners of Alex's mouth rise as he stared after Fala. "She's divorced, in case you're interested."

Alex turned and grinned shyly at Okana. "Am I that obvious?"

"It's about time you moved on, Alex. She's the main reason I wanted you to come to the funeral."

"I don't know if I'm ready for another relationship."

"I'm not trying to push you into anything, Alex. I just wanted you to meet her. She's Cherokee, in case you were wondering. Fala means crow because of her black hair."

Alex turned and watched Fala's trim figure climb the steps onto the back porch. When she disappeared into the house, he turned back to Okana. "She is lovely. How come she's divorced?"

"Her ex used to live here in Stillwater. He was one of the town's bad boys during high school. I tried to talk her out of marrying the bastard, but she wouldn't listen to me. The first time I saw her black eye she said it was an accident. Even then, she wouldn't leave him. Two years ago, she got a restraining order from our local judge and filed for a divorce, but he refused to comply. A week later he had a change of heart and signed the papers."

Alex noticed a glimmer of satisfaction in Okana's eyes. "A change of heart, huh. I don't suppose you had anything to do with it."

"I might have made a subtle suggestion."

Alex shook his head. "I've never known you to be subtle, Okana."

"You know me too well, Alex. I heard you got into Stillwater late last night. What happened?" He listened as Alex told him about the stop at Yellowstone. "Did you find out what caused the cave-in at the caverns?"

"It was probably from the earthquake and that's what's bothering me. This area of Wyoming is geologically stable. I can't explain the reason for the earthquake."

Okana gave Alex a somber expression. "We felt it here, too. Let's go inside and I'll introduce you to the rest of my family."

When Alex walked into the house with Okana, he saw Fala entertaining the small girl sitting in her lap.

Everyone turned to look when a small blond woman suddenly appeared in the walkway from the dining room. Okana walked over and put his arm around her shoulders. "Alex, this is my mom, Judith."

Alex hurried over and held out his hand. "It's nice to meet you, Misses Okana. I wish I could have met Richard. I'm sorry."

Judith accepted his hand. "Thank you, Alex. Okana's told me a lot about you. At least what he's allowed to tell us. I think Richard would have liked you."

Alex smiled. "I'm sure Okana told you what's important. I know Okana means wolf in Indian, but if you don't mind me asking, what are his first names?"

Judith laughed. "I've already lost fifty dollars for saying it too often when he was a teenager."

"One dollar each time, isn't it? I'll pay just to find out."

Fala stood and set the girl down on the chair, and then turned and smiled at Alex. “Judith named him Francis after Saint Francis. His second first name is Quanah, which Richard thought was funny. It means fragrant. Okana would throw the first punch when the white boys called him Francine and the same when he was called fragrant wolf by the Native boys.”

Alex laughed and pulled out his wallet. “It’s worth it, Francine Fragrant Wolf.”

Okana grinned shyly and felt flushed for a moment when everyone laughed, then held out his hand and took the dollar. “And that’s the last time you call me that, right?”

Alex gave him a smirk. “Sure.”

Fala liked the way Alex teased his friend. Apparently, he and Okana were close. She noticed that standing close to Alex felt natural, as if they had known each other for some time. She turned and looked down at the young girl. “Let’s get you something to eat.”

When Alex looked down at the little girl, she remained seated and held her arms out to him. He wasn’t sure what to do and looked at Fala for an answer.

Fala could tell Alex wasn’t used to children. “Alex, this is my daughter, Halona. I think she likes you.” She gave Alex a smile of approval to pick Halona up off the chair.

Alex hesitantly reached down and grabbed Halona under the arms. When he brought her close, she wrapped her arms around his neck as she sat on his forearm. “Hello, Halona.”

“Is your hair wavy all by itself?”

Alex looked around and noticed the stunned expressions on everyone’s faces. He gave Fala a questioning stare. “Did I do something wrong?”

Fala slowly shook her head. “Not at all. It’s just that Halona is usually very shy to strangers.”

Alex smiled at Halona. “Yes, it does it all by itself. Is that why yours is so curly?”

“Yes. Mom says I get it from my dad. I’m going to be nine years old in three months and sixteen days.”

Alex began to relax. He had not been around his niece very much when she was this young. *I’ve missed so much*, he thought.

They all moved into the dining room and sat around the large wooden table, Halona insisting on sitting next to Alex. Everyone stopped talking when a small tremor rattled the pictures in a nearby cabinet. When it stopped, everyone stared at Alex.

“That should not have happened,” he told them. Suddenly he remembered his conversation with Bruce in the restaurant. “Do any of you know what they are doing in the old gold mine?”

Okana looked across the table at Alex. “The government set it up as a research facility during the Apollo missions. Now a contractor leases it from the government, but no one knows what they do there.”

“I wouldn’t mind checking it out tomorrow before I leave.”

Okana shook his head adamantly. “You won’t be able to see anything. The mountain range is shaped like a narrow horseshoe. The only way inside is at the open end. They have armed security guards at the entrance. They won’t let you in.”

Fala had an idea. “I’ve been riding horses up the mountain range every summer since I was ten. Uncle Richard taught me where to go. I can get you up to a lookout area on the rim of the mountain.”

Judith reached over and put her hand on Alex’s arm. “If those people at the mine are causing these earthquakes, you and Okana need to shut them down. Richard and I built this ranch, Alex. I’ll be damned if I’ll sit by and let it be destroyed by those people.”

Alex felt small fingers clasped his hand, so he smiled down at Halona.

Halona stood from the table and pulled on Alex's hand. "We need to sit outside after eating, cave man."

Alex gave her a short laugh. "Cave man?"

Fala looked down the table at Halona. "Why is he a cave man?"

"Because that's what Uncle Okana calls him. He said it's because he likes rocks and his last name is cave."

Okana grinned when Alex looked at him. "I'd better go saddle the horses." As he walked out onto the front porch, Okana burst out laughing.

As the rest of the group headed out onto the porch, Judith turned and looked up at Alex. "He's just like his father."

Alex watched her eyes sparkle for few seconds, before she turned and walked to the far end of the covered porch and stared out across the desert. He felt Halona's tug on his hand and followed her over to a two-person chair. Once he sat down, Halona scooted over beside him. When he looked up at Fala, her eyes told him she was grateful for indulging Halona's forwardness. He gave her a small smile.

Fala walked over beside Judith at the railing. "I miss him, too."

Judith took Fala's arm around her own. "Okana is going to stay with me for a while. At least until I decide what to do with the ranch. Without Richard, I might have to sell it."

When Judith began to cry, Fala wrapped her arm around Judith's shoulders. "There's no hurry. You just need some time to think about things. I'll stay here for a few more days, too."

Judith brought a tissue from her pocket and dabbed her eyes. Fala was like a daughter to her and Richard. She turned and looked up at her. "What do you think about Alex? Halona sure likes him."

"It's kind of strange, actually. It's as though I've known him for a while."

"Okana thinks very highly of him." Judith turned from Fala's arm. "I'll go clean up the kitchen. Why don't you go sit with him for a while? Get to know each other a little better."

Fala walked back across the porch and sat down on the chair facing Alex and Halona. She couldn't understand why Halona had taken to Alex so quickly.

When Alex looked over at Fala, he felt comfortable, as if he had sat here with her before. "Where do you work, Fala?"

"I'm a veterinarian. I spend the majority of my time working with the animals in the park. That's why Halona and I live in West Yellowstone."

"That's not too far from where I live. Have you ever been to Bozeman?"

"No, I've never needed to go there."

"Perhaps I could show you and Halona the highlights sometime."

"That sounds nice, Alex. Thanks."

"What's the story with Okana's hair? He doesn't look like a Native American."

"Judith was already pregnant when she fell in love with Richard. Okana's natural father, Jim Westmont, was a young Navy officer. He was killed in a training accident his second year out of the academy. Judith and Jim were best friends with my parents and Richard here in Stillwater. Long before Okana and I were born. Richard was a good father for Okana. They loved each other immensely."

"Uncle Richard was funny." Halona piped in.

Okana walked up the steps. "The horses are saddled, so whenever you two are ready we can get going."

Alex walked beside Fala as they followed Okana down the steps and around the house to the barn. When they entered, the aroma of hay and manure reminded Alex of home.

Okana indicated a large brown mare with a black main. "I set the stirrup height the same as mine, so it should be close enough." He stroked the long jaw of his own dark brown stallion. "I raised this stud from a colt. He's a handsome devil, just like me."

Alex stepped into the stirrup and swung up onto the mare. "Works for me."

Once Okana and Fala were ready, they rode out of the barn at a lope to let the horses get warmed up. A few minutes later, they were galloping across the desert.

As they approached the base of the gray mountains, Alex could see a few sparse areas of vegetation on the steep sides, but there were no trees, only ragged cliffs. Fala led them past an old rock quarry where remnants of broken gray stone blocks lay scattered in discarded heaps, apparently not suitable during the construction of the municipal building.

Fala reined her horse to a stop on the far side of the quarry. "The trail starts here where they hauled drills and explosives to the top of the quarry to break up the rock."

Alex stopped and stared up at the side of the mountain. If there was a trail, he couldn't see it. The stone appeared to be nearly vertical as it rose up toward the sky.

When Fala began the ascent, the narrow trail forced Alex to follow behind her with Okana bringing up the rear. Some sections of solid rock trail were barely wide enough for the horses, with a vertical wall on one side, and a sheer drop off on the other.

When they reached the top fifteen minutes later, they were forced to stop by a ten-foot tall chain link fence. Holes had been recently drilled into the rock where poured concrete anchored the support posts. From their vantage point on top of the horses, they could see down into the valley below. From this elevation, the entrance into the mine appeared to be very small.

"Are you sure this place is occupied?" Alex asked. "I don't see any vehicles, and the open area in front of the mine looks like it hasn't been driven on in years."

Fala turned her horse around to look at them. "We can't get down there from here. We should head back down and return to the ranch."

"I think once we get back I'll head into town and find out what they might be doing here."

There was only enough room for the horses to turn around, so they began their decent in reverse order with Okana leading the way.

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COBRA:

Rita had agreed to stop her experiments, and so far the seismic events had ceased, which gave credence to Henry's theory their tests had been the cause. The only problem was that until the other device arrived, there was little to occupy her time.

Henry kept thinking about the laboratory below and the massive steel door at the entrance. He looked across the dining table at Chris, who was reading a magazine. "Do you have the key for the elevator that will allow us to go down to the lowest level of the facility?"

Chris looked up at Henry. "Yeah, but there isn't anything down there. Just a big safe in the floor."

That got Rita's attention and she looked up from her laptop computer. "I'd like to see it."

Chris shrugged and stood from the table. "I'll go get the Key."

Henry slid his chair back and stood. "I believe we may find an answer as to why this facility was sealed."



Rita closed the laptop and stood. "I was searching the Internet for any information about this place, but I can't find anything except it was a gold mine. Either the people that worked here are all sworn to secrecy, or they're all dead."

Chris walked into the lounge from the living quarters. "Let's go."

The trio walked across the main room and entered the elevator. Chris inserted the key and gave it a quarter turn, then pressed the button for the fourth floor.

Once the indicator light for the third floor blinked off, Henry noticed it was taking much longer to reach the bottom. When he felt the pressure against his eardrum increase, his anxiety level also increased. He felt as though it had taken an hour before the elevator car slowed to a stop and the doors opened.

Chris stepped out first and flipped the light switch. Three rows of eight-foot long fluorescent lights on the ceiling fluttered in the darkness before bursting into bright white light.

When Henry and Rita stepped out, Chris waved his hand down at the three-foot square steel vault door in the concrete floor. "They welded the door closed. Whatever is in the vault must be pretty secret." He pointed up at a large metal hook secured to the concrete ceiling. "That's directly over the vault, so they must have used it for hauling something in and out of the hole."

When Henry looked at Rita, he noticed the concern in her eyes. "You must allow me to call Director Donner, Rita. We must find out what is buried down there."

Rita stared at Henry and crossed her arms. "As I explained to you before Henry, once he knows where we are he'll storm this facility. I'm not looking forward to being locked in a cell."

"I will not press charges against you, Rita. Just get me out of this bomb shelter."

Rita cocked her head. "This isn't a bomb shelter, Henry."

Henry sighed. "Of course. My mistake."

From the tone of Henry's voice, she could tell he was extremely agitated. "What happened, Henry?"

"When I was . . ."

The concrete seemed to lurch up beneath them, throwing them off balance. Henry toppled over, crashing onto the floor as Rita and Chris dropped down on to their hands and knees. It was over quickly and everything was still until alarm horns began blaring in the room.

Rita and Chris hauled Henry onto his feet, dragging him into the elevator. Chris stabbed his finger against the button for the top floor hoping the elevator still worked. When the doors closed, they felt the car rising up the shaft. The alarms increased in volume as they approached the second floor. When the doors finally opened on the main floor, the first thing they saw straight across the room was the massive steel door closing.

Chris reached down and grabbed Henry up into his arms as he and Rita ran for the opening. The ever-narrowing gap seemed miles away, and then a heavy thud sound echoed across the room as the door slammed shut. They continued running, desperately hoping the locking bolts had not slid into place, but before they arrived, the green light above the door blinked out and the red light came on.

"Shit!" Chris yelled as he stopped and set Henry down.

Henry stared at the door and up at the ceiling. His lower lip began to tremble as he slowly lowered himself onto the floor.

Rita noticed Henry was shaking and knelt down beside him. When he looked up at her, the fear in his eyes broke her heart. *Something terrible must have happened to him*, she thought. She gently wrapped her arm over his shoulders and pulled him close against her chest. She felt him shaking with

fear as she listened to his deep sobbing. *This is my fault.* She thought and gently rocked him in her arms.

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Fala's horse reared up as the mountain seemed to lurch into the air. She managed to hang on to the horn, but as the horse came down, its front legs slid over the edge of the trail, dragging her down the mountain.

Alex caught the movement in his peripheral vision and jerked his head around. "NOOOO!" he roared as he watched Fala and the horse toppled down the side of the mountain. He leapt off his horse and jumped over the edge, his boot heels sliding across the flat gray stone as he leaned back against the surface for balance.

Fala's foot became trapped in the stirrup and the horse dragged her down the mountain as she struggled to get free. The horse suddenly bounced into the air and her foot slipped free. She turned to look back just as the horse flew over a cliff and disappeared.

"AHHHHH." Fala groaned as she dug her fingers along the rock, desperate for something to grab before slipping over the edge.

As he continued sliding down the rock, Alex stared in numbed silence as Fala's horse disappeared from sight. When Fala suddenly disappeared, his heart nearly stopped. "NOOOO!" He yelled as he continued sliding down the mountain.

As her torso slid over the edge, Fala's right fingers suddenly dug into a crack in the rock. The searing pain in her knuckles from the sudden weight brought tears to her eyes, yet somehow she managed to hang on. When Halona's smiling face flashed through her mind, she gritted her teeth, forcing all her willpower to the tips of her fingers as they began to lose strength. She knew it would only be a matter of seconds before she could no longer hang on.

When Alex noticed the flesh color on the edge of the cliff, he pressed his palms hard against the surface to slow down. He slid to a stop at the edge of the cliff, rolled over on his side, and reached out to grab the small set of fingers clinging to the edge of a small crack. When he saw the fingers began sliding lose, Alex lurched forward over the edge.

When Fala felt her fingers slipping, she knew she was going to die and whispered an Indian prayer for Halona.

Alex barely managed to grab Fala's wrist as his chest stopped just before he went over the edge. "Reach up and grab my arm!" he yelled down at her.

When Fala felt a hand crushing her wrist, she turned to look up. Alex was staring down at her, his face a mask of desperation. She summoned all the strength she had and threw her free arm up toward Alex, but missed his arm by mere inches. She heard Alex groan under the added strain and knew she only had enough strength for one more try. She clenched her teeth as she swung her arm up toward Alex. Her fingers tightened around his wrist, squeezing it hard to hang on.

Alex's other hand was all that was keeping him from sliding over the edge, but he could tell Fala was not going to be able to climb up on her own. If he released his other hand to help her, they would both slide over the edge. When her hand began to lose its grip, Alex knew he had no choice. He let go of the rock and reached down to grab Fala's coat collar, barely getting a grip as he began to slide forward toward the edge of the cliff.

Alex suddenly felt his belt dig into his stomach as he stopped sliding. His only thought was to drag Fala up over the edge. As he pulled on her coat collar, the rest of her coat held tight to her body as he dragged her up to his shoulders. "Reach up and grab my belt!"

Fala stretched as far as she could, barely managing to slip her fingers around the thick leather strap near Alex's stomach, then she hauled herself up over Alex's hips. Only then did she notice Okana straining to hang on to Alex's belt. Once her knees were over the edge, she rolled to one side and sat on her butt.

Alex felt himself being pulled back from the edge. Once back on solid ground, he rolled over and stared at Okana's grim expression. "Thanks buddy."

"I happened to be in the area." Okana looked over at Fala. "Are you hurt?"

Fala held up her bleeding fingers. "I can't feel my fingertips yet, but I'll be all right."

The trio remained seated as they waited for the adrenalin to flush out of their systems. Fala leaned forward and kissed Alex on the cheek. "Thank you."

When Alex looked over the edge and saw the bloody body of the horse two hundred feet below, he leaned back and released a long sigh of relief as he looked back at Fala. "I'm sorry about your horse."

Okana stood and reached down to help Alex and Fala up from the ground. "Let's get back up to the horses before they leave without us."

They carefully climbed back up the steep rock face and found the two horses staring down at them. Alex climbed onto his mare and reached down to help Fala up behind him, once Okana was settled on his stallion, they continued down the mountain.

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