



BRIAN FALKNER

ICE WAR

RECON TEAM ANGEL: BOOK THREE

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BRIAN FALKNER

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For Ray Richards, ONZM, DSC
1921-2013
An Officer and a Gentleman

**BOOK ONE:
BERING STRAIT**

Fighting an Ice War is like turning the military
clock back three hundred years.

In the frozen wastelands of the Bering Strait, high-
tech equipment fails, high-tensile steel shatters like
glass, communications are intermittent or non-
existent.

This is war at its most primitive.

It is war at its most brutal.

General Harry Whitehead

SEAL TEAM TWO

[TRANSCRIPT OF RADIO COMMUNICATION BETWEEN US NAVY SEAL TEAM TWO (CODENAME ICEFIRE) AND MISSION CONTROLLERS AT ACOG HEADQUARTERS, 15 FEBRUARY 2033. SCHEDULED RADIO CONTACT AT 0700 HOURS LOCAL TIME.]

ICEFIRE ONE: Icefire Actual, this is Icefire One. How copy?

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: Solid copy, Icefire One. What is your grid point reference? Over.

ICEFIRE ONE: Icefire Actual, we are in position at designated OP. Grid reference, Charlie November, four, three, five, niner, two, one. Over.

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: Clear copy, Icefire One. Do you have eyes on the island? Over.

ICEFIRE ONE: That's an affirmative, Icefire Actual. Over.

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: Interrogative, Icefire One. Is there any sign of activity? Over.

ICEFIRE ONE: That's also affirmative, Icefire Actual. Lights are on and there is movement inside. Over.

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: Can you confirm identity of the occupants? Over.

ICEFIRE ONE: Negative. It might be Goldilocks, or it might be the Big Bad Wolf. Over.

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: What about enemy activity around the island? Over.

ICEFIRE ONE: Ah, that's also a negative, Icefire Actual. We got nothing on the scopes and nothing eyes on. Looks all clear, but conditions are challenging. Over.

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: What is your visibility rating? Over.

ICEFIRE ONE: Visibility estimated at tango three. Lots of interference on the scopes also. We got a lot of bad TV here. Over.

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: Solid copy, Icefire One. You are cleared to move to grid reference Charlie November, four, three, five, niner, three, two. Over.

ICEFIRE ONE: Roger that, Icefire Actual. We are Oscar Mike to grid reference Charlie November, four, three, five, niner, three, two. Over.

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: Icefire One, hold position. I say again, hold your position. We have a transmission coming in from Overlord. They have had a break in the cloud cover and say they are picking up some kind of activity to your west. Over.

ICEFIRE ONE: What kind of activity, Icefire Actual? Scopes are still clear down here. Over.

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: Querying that now, Icefire One. Over.

[TRANSMISSION BREAK: 23 SECONDS]

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: Icefire One, this is Icefire Actual. How copy? Over.

ICEFIRE ONE: Clear copy, Icefire Actual. What have you got for us? Over.

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: Ah, no further information, Icefire One. Activity has ceased. They could not get a visual on it and could not identify a heat signature. There is no indication of enemy activity. I repeat, no enemy activity. It could have been wildlife. Over. You are re-cleared to move to grid reference Charlie November, four, three, five, niner, three, two. Over.

ICEFIRE ONE: [Garbled transmission, indeterminate noise]

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: Ah, Icefire One, zero copy on your last. You are coming in weak and unreadable. Please repeat your transmission. Over.

[TRANSMISSION BREAK: 16 SECONDS]

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: Icefire One, this is Icefire Actual. How copy? Over.

ICEFIRE ONE: [Garbled transmission, indeterminate noise, possible screaming]

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: Icefire One, this is Icefire Actual. How copy? Over.

[TRANSMISSION BREAK: 20 SECONDS]

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: Icefire One, this is Icefire Actual. How copy? Over.

[TRANSMISSION BREAK: 20 SECONDS]

ICEFIRE ACTUAL: Icefire One, this is Icefire Actual. We are not receiving your transmissions. Please relocate to higher ground and resume radio traffic. Over.

[TRANSMISSION ENDS AT 0707 HOURS]

The recording finished. The silence in the room was colder than death.

General Whitehead pushed the transcript away as if he was somehow offended by it.

General Jake Russell, ACOG, Bering Strait Defence Force, picked up his copy and folded it in half so he could no longer see the words.

They were paper copies, an anachronism in an electronic age, but at the end of the meeting they would be collected and incinerated. There was no risk of an electronic copy finding its way into cyberspace.

The room was oval in shape, as was the table in its centre. There were no windows. Here, deep in the heart of the Pentagon, security was far too tight for that. Nor were there air-conditioning ducts where microphones could be inserted. The room was swept every day for bugs.

The walls were plain and white, no photos or artwork. They were bombproof. The table resembled wood, although it was made of a bulletproof composite fibre.

Even the chairs, high-backed, comfortable and leather, had built-in airbags to deal with any sudden traumatic incident, like a missile attack.

The workstations around the outside walls, where subordinates sat in a variety of uniforms, had no such luxuries. Their desks were plain, and their seating simple low-backed, secretarial-type, swivel chairs.

Seated around the centre table were ten people, a mix of men and women. General Harry Whitehead, as head of ACOG, occupied pride of place at the top of

the table. General Russell, second-in-command, was opposite him at the far end.

“They were the second team we sent in,” Russell said. “Navy seals again. Seal Team Two, specialists in Arctic warfare. Frostiest sons of bitches I ever met in my life. These guys have ice cubes for testicles. Kick ‘em in the nuts and you break your toe. They don’t just survive, they thrive in the coldest, bleakest places on Earth.”

“So where are they?” Whitehead asked.

“It’s a dangerous place, this time of year,” Russell said. “And in the middle of a blizzard ...”

Whitehead shook his head. “One team disappears, that could be a hole in the ice. Point man drags the rest of them in, bodies are never found. But two teams in a row ...”

“What were they doing there in the first place?”

The speaker was Emily Gonzales, the new liaison officer from the ACOG Oversight Committee. Gonzales was a compact woman with bright blue eyes

that shone with a glint of steel. The same steel was in her voice. “Why send in a Seal team, I’m sorry, two Seal teams, when you are still in contact with the station?”

“Your predecessor was fully up to date with all these details,” Russell said. “Do we really have to go over this again?”

Gonzales turned her head slowly and impaled him with those eyes. “If you want the approval of the oversight committee, you do,” she said.

General Whitehead looked as though he was about to say something to that, but thought better of it.

“I’ll answer the question,” Daniel Bilal said. A small, tidy man with a pencil-thin moustache – he had an air of calm, as though he was somehow removed from the tension in the room.

Gonzales raised an eyebrow.

“Daniel Bilal, Military Intelligence,” Bilal said.

Gonzales made a note on her smartpad.

“It’s a sensitive region,” Bilal said. “When the Pukes arrive, they’re going to come through the Bering Strait. And they’re going to come now, in midwinter, while the strait is frozen over. So if a butterfly farts in the strait at this time of year, we want to know what it had for lunch.”

“Thank you for that lesson in basic geography and biology,” Gonzales said. “But that still doesn’t explain the need for the Seal teams.”

Bilal was unfazed. “The commander of the station on Little Diomedede was Jared Legrand,” he said. “A good man. Two days ago he fell into a crevasse. His body has not yet been recovered.”

“How did it happen?” Gonzales asked.

“He was checking sensors with one of the other crew,” Russell said. “It was an accident.”

“The other crewmember, Nicholas Able, made it back alive,” Bilal said. “Legrand did not.”

“Even so, there was no reason to suspect foul play,” Russell said.

“Perhaps,” Bilal said.

The others at the table all turned to look at him.

“What haven’t you told us?” Russell asked.

“Legrand was not a regular soldier,” Bilal said.

“What kind of ‘not regular?’” Gonzales asked.

“He was one of ours,” Bilal said.

“Military intelligence.” Russell said it like it was some kind of a disease.

“He was undercover,” Bilal said. “Making sure that nothing at that station could possibly go wrong.”

“So he was a spy,” Russell said. “His death might still be an accident.”

“And it might not,” Bilal said. “Can we afford that risk?”

“Any sign that the station has been infiltrated by the Bzadians?” Gonzales asked.

“All code signs were confirmed; no distress signals have been given,” Russell said. “Comprehensive background checks were done on the crew. They all

came up clean. The remaining crew on Little Diomedede are solid.”

“Could they be under duress?” Gonzales asked. “Are there Bzadians hiding in the shadows with guns on our guys’ backs?”

“There are duress codes,” Russell said. “None have been given. I repeat, there is no reason to think that anything is wrong out there.”

“If it wasn’t in the Bering Strait, then I might agree with you and we might just wait for the storm to pass,” Bilal said. “But we don’t have that luxury. If we don’t stop the Bzadians on the ice, we sure as hell won’t be able to stop them when they hit dry land. We’ve spent the last year building up our arctic warfare capabilities exactly for that reason.”

“How sure are you that they will attack?” Gonzales asked. “We beat them back once, and they haven’t tried again since.”

“They weren’t ready,” Bilal said. “They learned their lesson in 2028. They would have attacked last

year, but they didn't have the fuel, thanks to Operation Magnum."

He stood and moved to the map. "To the west, Big Diomedede Island. To the east, Little Diomedede. Right bang in the middle of the strait. A couple of kilometres apart. Little Dio is bristling with every kind of detector you could imagine and controls a string of sensor buoys that extend for kilometres in each direction. It is also home to our control and maintenance centre here on the south-western tip. This gives the Pukes a big problem. If they try to sneak across the strait, we'll know they're coming. If they take out Little Dio, we'll still know they're coming. But if they could compromise our sensors in some way, and slip across under the cover of one of these ice storms, then the first thing we'd know about it could be when their battle tanks are spinning into Anchorage."

"Compromise our sensors?" Gonzales asked. "How?"

“On Operation Magnum we replaced a couple of circuit boards in their SONRAD station and made our invasion fleet invisible to their scopes,” Bilal said. “Who’s to say they can’t do the same to us?”

“What about Big Diomedé?” Gonzales asked.

Russell shook his head. “Deserted. It used to be a Russian outpost, but the Bzadians have never had a use for it. The only people who set foot on that rock are the local native Inupiat people.”

“You’re sure they’re Inupiat, and not Bzadians in disguise?” Gonzales asked.

“We’re sure,” Bilal said. “And in any case, there are only a few of them, and they don’t go anywhere near Little Diomedé.”

“So what’s your plan?” Gonzales asked. “You’ve sent in two Seal teams and lost them both. If you keep doing what you’ve been doing, it seems to me that you’re going to run out of Seals.”

“I agree,” Bilal said. “That’s the reason for this meeting. We want to send in the Angels.”

“Recon Team Angel?” Gonzales asked.

“The same,” Bilal said.

“Children,” Russell said, shaking his head.

“There would be Bzadians sitting in these chairs by now if not for those ‘children,’” Whitehead said.

“You are aware that the Angel program was shut down, along with the Demon program?” Gonzales asked.

“I think that is common knowledge,” Bilal said. “But the personnel are still in barracks at Fort Carson. They could be reactivated in a matter of days.”

“And why do you think a bunch of kids might succeed, where highly trained Special Forces operatives have failed?” Gonzales asked.

“If it’s holes in the ice, polar bears, or the abominable snowman, then they won’t,” Bilal said. “But if it’s enemy activity, then they just might. That’s what they do. Go behind enemy lines and pass themselves off as Bzadians.”

“And this is our only option?” Gonzales asked.

“No, not our only option,” Russell said.

“So what’s your plan B?” Gonzales asked.

“More Seals,” Bilal said.

“Find another option,” Gonzales said. “The backlash against the Angels after the last debacle is not going away in a hurry. I’d never get this past the oversight committee.”

“Helluva way to run a war,” Whitehead said.
“Command by committee.”

Gonzales ignored him.

“In that case, we’ll have to wait for the storm to pass to get satellite and aerial recon again,” Bilal said.
“And if that means we wake up in a few days’ time with aliens on our doorsteps, I want it on the record that you refused to reactivate the Angels.”

“The Angels are off the table,” Gonzales said.
“They’re not even trained for this kind of arctic stuff.”
She studied her notes for a moment. “How long before we get a break in the weather?”

“There’ll be a short window tomorrow,” Russell said. “We’ll get some satellite data.”

“What are you looking for?” Gonzales asked.

“Anything,” Bilal said. “Anything that gives us reason to believe that a million Bzadians are heading in our direction.”

Bilal held the elevator door for Gonzales when they finished. The others were staying for another meeting.

The elevator, although ornate, was armoured. It was the only entrance to the underground bunker.

“Convincing enough for you?” Gonzales asked, when the heavy sheet metal doors had closed, cutting off all sound, as well as all sight, of the command centre.

“You almost had me fooled,” Bilal said.

“When do the Angels go in?” she asked.

“They’re already on their way,” he said.

ABOVE THE ICE

[MISSION DAY 1, FEBRUARY 16, 2033. 1025 HOURS LOCAL TIME]

[BERING STRAIT, SOUTH-WEST OF LITTLE DIOMEDE ISLAND]

The cold was startling, even through the armoured, thermally heated combat suit. Part of that was the adjustment period, Price knew, as the thermals sensed the rapid temperature drop and slowly warmed to compensate. Part of it was psychological. Just looking around at this desert of sea ice; feeling the spray of ice particles that clattered against the suit; hearing the low throbbing moan of the arctic wind; it was enough to cause an involuntary shiver no matter what the temperature inside the suit.

Price's leg itched. The new one. Grown for her by human scientists using Bzadian technology. According to Monster, she was part Bzadian now, and no amount of arguing that it was her own cells they had cloned, would convince him otherwise.

Or maybe he just liked to tease.

It was not long after dawn. At this time of year, in this part of the world, the sun could not be bothered making an entrance until well after ten in the morning. It would hover tiredly above the horizon for a paltry eight hours then sink, as if exhausted, below the ice.

That gave them only a few hours to reach their mission objective. It was too dangerous to move out on the icefloes in the darkness, even with night-vision goggles. And overnight the temperature dropped to even more dangerous lows.

“Com check,” she said. She watched the fin of the submarine disappear down the hole in the ice as the five other Angels sounded off, two to six. Two was Sergeant Panyoczki: Monster. She was glad he was here, and not only for his soldiering skills. He was someone she trusted, absolutely, without question. But more than that. He was someone she cared deeply about. Whatever they faced out here, they would face it together.

It had taken the submarine over four hours to find the lead – a fracture between two floes, where the water had not had time to refreeze and was covered by only a thin crust.

The winter ice in the turbulent Bering Strait has a life and a geography all of its own, due to the constant buffeting of the currents that run through the narrow passage between Russia and Alaska, bringing with them the outflow of sea ice from the Arctic Ocean. Great floes collide with each other, erupting into ridges and hummocks, piggybacking on top of each other to create rafted floes. All of this constantly scoured by the wind-born ice.

For years the great Bering Strait currents had prevented the strait from freezing, but a relatively recent, and inexplicable, change in the local climate had led to the accumulation of more and more sea ice, “drift ice” latching onto land-fixed “fast ice” and gradually spreading until a bridge of ice connected the

two continents, with the Diomed Islands, Big and Little, at its centre.

The submarine had located numerous leads in the ice canopy above, but most were too small, unstable, or in the wrong location.

Once the lead had been found, the submarine had surfaced at speed, using the top of its fin as a battering ram to smash its way through three or four centimetres of ice.

The submarine was gone now and Price sensed, rather than saw, its grey bulk slip away beneath the ice. On the surface of the water, delicate petals of frost flowers were already starting to form. Pretty, fractal shapes, like miniature white ferns, spreading and branching off, again and again.

Within minutes, the water would wear a white coat of frost, and within the hour it would be strong enough to walk on.

“Oscar Mike in five mikes,” Price said. “Check your battery levels.”

Batteries could behave strangely in these temperatures, and a dead or low battery meant no thermals, and that meant death in this bitter and frigid world. They each carried a spare battery for that reason, and there were more on the equipment sled.

“Rope up,” Monster said.

The ropes were lightweight nylon cords, thin but immensely strong. They had to be.

“We’re sheltered here,” Price said, clipping hers on and checking that it was secured properly. “You’d better prepare yourselves for what we’re going to hit once we get out of this lead.”

“I can hardly wait,” The Tsar said. He smiled his confident, charming smile. Another good addition to the team. He had proved that on Operation Magnum. He was still a bit cocky and full of himself, but that had diminished as he had got to know them better.

PFC Emile Attaya was the next in line in front of Price, who double-checked the karabiner clips at his end. Emile was a good-looking Lebanese kid who

smiled constantly and seemed to burn energy the way other people breathed air. Having Emile around was like having a new puppy in the house and although it went against protocol, nobody, not even the commanders back at Fort Carson, called him by his surname. He was always just “Emile”. Like Monster, English was not his first language. But unlike Monster, he spoke it well, with merely a trace of an accent.

“We should have brought parasails,” Emile said. “We could have used the wind and sailed there.”

“If it was blowing in the right direction,” Wall said. “Which it’s not.”

PFC Hayden Wall. The other new Angel. He talked constantly and was usually moaning about something. He did it with the broad “A” and missing “R” of the native New Englander. His dour moping was a complete contrast from Emile’s infectious enthusiasm and quick smile.

“Or bobsleds,” Emile said. “We could have had dogs to pull us along.”

“Somebody find his off button,” Barnard said, but she smiled as she said it. Even cynical, sarcastic Barnard was not immune to Emile’s puppy dog charm.

Price took an ice-axe from the equipment sled and slipped the loop over her wrist. The others followed suit.

She watched each of them, thinking about the faith they were putting in her as leader of the mission. She hoped it wasn’t misplaced.

She shouldn’t even be here. With a new leg and the intense trauma, both physical and psychological, of the disastrous Operation Magnum, nobody would have blamed her for turning down the mission. But she had said yes, and told anyone who asked that it was because she didn’t feel her fight was finished, that she didn’t want to let down her comrades, that she felt she had something to offer. She had a thousand reasons.

But the truth was that six months lying in a hospital bed plus another six months of rehab had bored her senseless. Fort Carson too had bored her

with its regimented mealtimes and mindless routines. She needed the buzz: the thrill, the coil-gun jumping in her arms, adrenaline coursing through her body. Sometimes it seemed she only felt alive when she was in imminent danger of death. But she couldn't tell that to anyone. Not even Monster. If the counsellors back at Carson heard her say that, they would never let her out of their sight.

Someday the war would be over, one way or another, and she would have to deal with it. But that day was a long way off, and by then she might not even be alive to worry about it.

"Weapons check," she said. She checked her own, hitting the release that would spring the coil-gun over her shoulder and into her arms.

"Okay, Angels," she said. "Listen up. You are probably wondering what we are doing here."

"Yeah, bro," Wall said. "I am wondering why I am freezing my ass off in the middle of nowhere when there are warm bunks and hot pizza back at base." He

seemed to be having a problem with his weapon release.

“Don’t worry about it, Wall,” The Tsar said, moving over to give Wall a hand. “It’s just typical ACOG. They send us out on these missions but everything is so top secret that we don’t know whether we’re wiping our ass or blowing our nose until we see the colour of the tissue.”

“And I don’t care how warm the bunks are at Fort Carson,” Barnard said. “I’d rather be out here doing something, than sitting around doing nothing.”

She wasn’t the only one, Price thought.

“Okay,” Price said. “This is a straightforward reconnaissance mission. We are to avoid contact. In any case, ACOG tells us there’s no enemy activity within fifty clicks.”

“Except for a million Pukes lined up on the Chuchki shore, waiting to have a go at us,” Wall muttered.

“That’s the point, Wall,” Barnard said. “They’re fifty clicks away. They’re not here.”

The Tsar stepped back so Wall could test his gun again. It released without problem, jumping straight into his hands. He tried it three or four times to be sure.

“Little Diomed Island is packed with so many sensors that they can hear a snowflake freeze,” Price said. “And those sensors tell us that the Pukes are still sitting on their backsides over in Russia. All we have to do is stroll over to the island, set eyes on the control station, observe and report.’

“Report on what?” The Tsar asked.

“There are two operators on that station,” Price said. “Specialist Gabrielle Bowden and Specialist Nicholas Able. We need to know that they’re both okay, and that everything is as it should be.”

“Maybe we should have just phoned and asked them,” Wall said.

Price ignored him. “Once ACOG are satisfied that everything is aboveboard, we get the hell out, as quickly as we can.”

“And if we run into any real Pukes?” Wall asked.

“Then we’ll waste them all,” Emile said. “Bring it on.”

“He’s kinda cute,” Barnard said. “Reminds me of Wilton.”

“Emile, our orders are to avoid engagement,” Price said. “Don’t go all Chuck Norris on me.”

“Gonna be a walk in the park,” The Tsar said.

“Some park,” Wall said. “Where’s the grass, the lake and the pigeons?”

“I think this place is awesome!” Emile said, gesturing around at the translucent blue and white of the walls of the lead.

Price wasn’t sure what was worse. Wall’s constant griping or Emile’s manic energy.

“All right, Angels. We are Oscar Mike,” Price said.

“Checking your ropes, my dudes, and maintain each two metre separations,” Monster said.

Price hid a smile. For two years now she had worked with Monster. His Bzadian was flawless, but he still couldn’t speak English worth a damn.

Price had warned them the wind would get worse when they got higher, but even she wasn’t prepared for the furious gust that hit them as they emerged from the shelter of the lead. They crouched, heads into the wind, and dug their axes deeply into the ice.

“Boo-yah, my first real mission,” Emile squawked on the com.

“No, it’s not,” Price said. “We’re not officially here. The Angels have been stood down, remember? This mission doesn’t exist.”

“At least we get real bullets,” The Tsar said. “Not like Magnum when we only had puffer rounds.”

“Puffers would do no good here,” Barnard said.

She was right. The compacted powder of puffer rounds exploded into a cloud when it hit body armour. The target breathed it in and was unconscious within seconds. But puffers were useless against an enemy wearing full face masks – a necessity in this frigid air.

“Move ’em out, Angels,” Price called after the worst of the squall subsided.

The Tsar was on point. He stood and began to move, leaning almost horizontally into the wind. Price kept an eye on Wall and Emile. They were unknown quantities. They had the best scores of all the trainee Angels, but that meant nothing when you got into the field.

Wall, in particular, had only one year of training, but his skill with a rifle rivalled that of the legendary Blake Wilton. Even so, Wall was only on the mission because two more experienced Angels had been injured in training and one had mysteriously disappeared from Fort Carson.

Price's leg itched again, left side, just below the knee.

Some of the ridges and hummocks they climbed, some they avoided. The flat areas at the centre of floes were the easiest, but they were also where the wind was strongest.

Already, Price was starting to wonder if the two missing Seal teams had simply fallen through gaps in the ice. That would explain the screams and the sudden loss of radio contact. But it wouldn't explain Legrand, the station commander who had died in mysterious circumstances.

"We could walk past a Puke patrol in this weather and never even see them," The Tsar said.

"We're not likely to run into any Pukes here," Barnard said. "We are south of the islands. The direct route between Russia and Alaska is to the north. This route would be much longer and the ice here is too rough for tanks."

"Why is that?" The Tsar asked.

“There’s more movement in the icefloes,” Barnard said. “Because it’s warmer here than up north.”

“Yeah, bro, this is real toasty,” Wall said.

“Anything else to complain about, Wall?” Barnard asked. “Don’t hold back; let’s get it all out there.”

“Well, now that you mention it,” Wall said, “I can’t understand why they’re making us walk. Haven’t they heard of snowmobiles?”

“Or how about a chauffeur-driven limousine?” Barnard said. “Take you right up to the front door and lay out the red carpet for you.”

“I was just saying,” Wall said. “This is the thirties, not the sixteenth century.”

“Snowmobiles make noise and heat,” The Tsar said. “You want to advertise that we are coming?”

“Why not?” Wall asked. “The LT said there are no Pukes for fifty klicks.”

“Wall,” Monster said.

“Yeah?”

“Keep mouth shut,” Monster said.

“Amen to that,” The Tsar said.

They passed an upside down V made from two giant slabs of ice, both oddly straight and rectangular-shaped. Not long after that a narrow track dropped into a deep gully – a huge scar between two floes that had iced over and was gradually healing. Here the walls protected them from the wind and the flying snow. That continued for over a hundred metres before they emerged onto a flat sheet of ice where the going was smooth, although the wind was cruel.

Some time after that, Price realised the ground beneath her feet was vibrating. At first she thought it was the wind, or the judder of the equipment sled over the rough ice, but it quickly became clear that the ice itself was moving. The vibration rapidly progressed to a shaking that made it difficult to walk, then a sudden sideways lurch in the ice beneath their feet threw them all to the ground.

Price started to get up, but Monster called, “Wait.”

There was another jerk and another. For a few minutes the ice went crazy, shaking like an earthquake.

As harsh as it had been, at least the Australian desert was steady under your feet, Price thought, embedding her axe in the ice and gripping it tightly. On Operation Magnum they had been on T-boards or motorbikes most of the way. On this mission it seemed the enemy would be the least of their problems.

“What’s going on?” The Tsar asked.

“Ice quake,” Barnard said. “It’s not a glacier we’re on; it’s a sea. A bunch of icefloes all bumping and scraping against each other.”

“That nothing,” Monster said. “Will get much worse.”

“Okay, everybody, just relax. Stay where you are,” Price said. “We’ll be Oscar Mike again as soon as we are sure this has settled down.”

The flat plain took them to a ridge that stretched as far as they could see in either direction. Two icefloes had rammed into each other and the compressed ice had pushed up, forming the sail of the ridge, and down, forming the keel. It was not a smooth shape, but a rough jumble of ice pieces. There was no alternative but to climb it.

The equipment sled was going to be the biggest problem. It would have to be carried. That meant unroping.

Monster took the back end by himself. Price and The Tsar were about to take one front runner each when Wall stepped in. "I'll take it, bro," he said to Price.

She stepped back, grateful. The rehab had been intense, but she still didn't feel as strong as before. Monster said it was just confidence, and maybe he was right, but either way she was happy not to put her new leg and her rehabbed muscles to such an arduous test.

Wall was surprisingly strong, she saw. Not bulky like Monster, but a sinewy strength. He trudged steadily up over the hummock. He didn't appear to notice or mind the lashing of the wind.

Behind them, Monster, carrying the entire back end by himself, seemed happy enough, and somehow they got the sled to the top. They stopped there briefly before beginning the climb down the other side, resting the sled often as they found their footing.

At the base of the ridge, they set off again across smooth clear ice that was like glass beneath their feet.

A brief lull in the storm revealed two dark shapes in the distance, one huge, the other glowing with artificial light.

The glowing shape was their destination. Little Diomedé. Ice-covered and climbing up out of the sea of white, it was the peak of an underwater mountain. It dominated the area, along with its larger brother, Big Diomedé.

The wind came back up and with it great flurries of snow and ice. The islands disappeared as if they had been no more than a mirage. The conditions were approaching white-out, and Price knew they would have to stop soon. It would be too dangerous to continue, a fact that became very obvious when The Tsar stumbled, yelling, his arms windmilling. Monster reacted quickly, yanking on the rope. Price was jerked backwards and sat down on her backside, hard. So did Wall, in front of her, and it rippled up the line to The Tsar.

When Price crept forwards to see, he was sitting with his legs dangling over the edge of a crevasse.

It was wide, at least four metres across. If Monster hadn't reacted quickly, then The Tsar might have plunged straight in, pulling the rest of them after him. The mission could be over in a second, and no one would ever know their fate. Maybe the mystery of the missing Seals really was as simple as that.

At the bottom of the crevasse, nearly two metres down, was a dark river of ocean. The crevasse was new, probably formed in the recent ice quake.

“Okay, Monster,” Price said. “How do we get across?”

Monster had served alongside their last lieutenant, Ryan Chisnall, in the Great Ice War of 2028. He was the only Angel with arctic experience.

“Can we use the ladders?” The Tsar asked.

“Is too wide for ladder,” Monster said. “Would not be stable enough. Not in such winds.”

“So what then?” Price asked.

“If we had snowmobiles, we could try to jump it,” Emile said.

“And if we had a magic wand, we could make it disappear,” Barnard said. “But we don’t have that either.”

“And if the Bzadians hadn’t invaded, I’d be hitting on girls in the school cafeteria right now,” Wall said.

“Instead of freezing my nuts off here with you Rambo wannabes.”

“Shoulda, woulda, coulda,” Price said. “We’ll split up. Monster, Barnard and Wall go half a klick north. The rest of us will go half a klick south. Constant radio contact. If we lose contact, return to this point. There’ll be a way around or across.”

She was right. Price and her team had gone barely twenty metres when Monster’s voice spoke over the com.

“Angel One, this is Angel Two. How copy?”

“Solid copy, Angel Two,” Price said. “What have you got?”

“Is bridge,” Monster said.

It was a bridge of ice. Part of the wall on their side had sheared off, creating a sloping ramp across to the other side.

Monster went first, easing himself over the side of the crevasse.

He stood on the base of the bridge and jumped up and down a couple of times, testing it.

“Is good,” he said, with a thumbs up at Price.

“If it can take his weight, it’ll hold anybody’s,” Barnard said.

Monster dropped to his hands and knees and crawled out onto the shaft of ice. Still it seemed solid, the broken ice welded at either end by the cold.

“Oscar Kilo,” he said, then moved away from the edge, using his axe to anchor himself, in case any of the others slipped.

They got the sled across by lowering it on ropes to the bridge, where Monster hauled it up to the other side.

Price, now last in the team, eased over the edge of the crevasse and found her footing at the base of the bridge. Her new leg began to twinge and spasm. It did that sometimes, for no good reason. As if she didn’t have enough other problems to deal with. She

stretched it out, which seemed to help, and began to crawl across.

The next spasm made her body shake, but she realised with horror that this was not her new leg playing games. A massive vibration in the ice had made the whole ice bridge tremble.

“Here we go again,” Barnard said.

“Hurry,” Monster shouted.

Price was halfway across when the ice began to shake uncontrollably. She buried her axe in the bridge to stop herself slipping sideways, then wrenched it out again as she felt the rope around her waist tighten.

She slid forwards as the rest of the Angels hauled on the rope. Ice was splintering and cracking all around her as the great icefloes moved, then the bridge dropped away, the shaft of ice shattered by the unimaginable pressure from either side.

She fell into the crevasse, landing on the rubble of the ice bridge. For a moment she was floating on the surface of the water, then the crushed pieces of ice

gave way. But before she could fall through, the rope snapped tight, slamming her into the wall of the crevasse. She grabbed the rope with both hands and jammed her knees up against her chest, to keep her feet out of the water. The impact swung her around, away from the wall and she realised with horror that the far wall, which had been four or more metres away, was now less than half that distance and closing rapidly.

“Get me out of here,” she screamed, but already she was rising, sliding up the smooth ice.

“Get your feet up! Get your feet up!” Wall yelled.

Price spun her hips around, lifting her feet up out of the crevasse just as there was a massive rumble and a crunch of ice from behind her.

She rolled over and saw that the crevasse had gone. The ice sheets had rammed together, leaving only a long crack in the ice.

“We should have waited,” The Tsar said. “We would have been able to step across.”

“That wouldn’t have been nearly as much fun,” Emile said.

The others all laughed, and Price laughed with them. But he was right.

She bit her lip to stop herself from whooping with exhilaration.

“There it is,” The Tsar said.

It had taken them an hour to travel less than a hundred metres over rugged and broken ice, but it had brought them to a wide flat area. Spirits were good. Their progress was slow, but steady. As the lights of Little Diomedé came into view again, Price felt a surge of confidence. It did not even look that far and, with the flatter ice ahead of them, they should make good time. The ice here was strange, like nothing they had seen before. Some odd quirk of the weather and the geology of the ice had created a series of rounded hillocks, giant ice pimples stretching in every direction as far as they could see.

“Do people actually live on that rock?” Emile asked, staring at the vague light in the distance.

“Somebody’s gotta do it,” The Tsar said.

“It’s, like, in the middle of nowhere,” Emile said.

“What do they do for fun?”

“Scan for Pukes, and play Scrabble,” Barnard said.

“And I was joking about the Scrabble.”

“I’d be bored out of my mind in three minutes,” Emile said.

“No surprises there,” The Tsar said.

“Has it occurred to anyone that we look like Pukes?” Wall asked. “I mean, am I the only one thinking this through? Little Diomedes is full of sensitive scanners. Their whole mission is to watch out for enemy forces in the vicinity and yet we’re expecting to march right up to it?”

“As I said, our mission is to observe and report,” Price said. “Their equipment can pick up vehicles and equipment from clicks away, but it won’t pick up foot

mobiles in these conditions unless they are really close. We'll keep well out of range."

"And if we don't see anything suspicious?" Wall asked.

"In that case I may go in myself and check it out from the inside," Price said.

"Using your invisibility cloak," Wall said.

"Something like that," Price said.

"They don't call her the Phantom for nothing," The Tsar said.

"I'll believe that when I see it," Wall said.

"Monster has seen it, and Monster still doesn't believe it," Monster said. "She like ghost."

"For the record, Wall, you need to watch your attitude," Barnard said.

"My attitude is doing just fine, bro," Wall said.

"Thanks for asking."

"I'll remember that if I ever have to pull you out of a crevasse," Barnard said.

“What if they do see her?” Wall asked. “What are they going to think about a Puke creeping around?”

“If I get caught, my orders are to ask them to contact ACOG, who will verify my identity,” Price said.

“And if they shoot first and ask questions later?” Wall asked.

“I didn’t say it wouldn’t be risky,” Price said.

“If you want a safe job, try Burger King,” Barnard said.

Wall snorted and turned away, muttering under his breath. Price couldn’t hear what he said and couldn’t be bothered finding out.

“What happens if the station really is attacked by Pukes?” Emile asked. “Do they just sit there and wait to get blown to pieces? Seriously, if they want to invade, first thing the Pukes gonna do is pound the guacamole out of that place, right?”

“Any sign of trouble and the operators bug out,” Barnard said.

“How?” Emile asked.

“Hovercraft,” Barnard said. “They also have an airstrip, but you couldn’t rely on that this time of year, in case of a blizzard. Like this one.”

“Enough idle chitchat, Angels,” Price said. “It’s time to check in with HQ.”

“We’ll have to get out of the wind,” The Tsar said. “The satellite dish needs to be steady.”

“There’s no shelter here,” Barnard said. “These hills are too rounded.”

“Then we’ll make our own shelter,” Price said. “Monster?”

Monster took a snow shovel from the sled and dug into the leese of the nearest hillock. He scooped out a shallow cave, dumping snow on either side as additional protection from the wind.

“Strange,” Barnard said.

“What?” Price asked.

“This hill is made of snow,” Barnard said. “Not ice.”

“What does that mean?” Price asked.

“It doesn’t snow much here,” Barnard said.

“So where’d all this snow come from?”

“I don’t know,” Barnard said. “And how did it get dumped in this big pile?”

“Anything on the scope?” Price asked, suddenly concerned and unsure why.

“Nothing,” The Tsar said. “But the feed is so poor that we could be standing next to a Bzadian battle tank and not even see it on the scope.”

The handheld scopes depended on a feed from all-seeing satellite eyes high above them. But in these conditions those eyes were almost blind.

As soon as the snow cave was big enough to hold the team, Monster strapped the shovel back onto the sled. Inside the concave shape he had created, the wind was almost absent which was a great relief.

“Emile, you take guard,” Price said.

The Tsar handed the scope to Emile who studied the screen carefully. The Tsar retrieved the satellite radio unit from the equipment sled. He opened the

radio cover and pressed a few buttons. A small dish emerged, unfolded and automatically oriented itself to the right point in the sky. The Tsar checked a few things then activated the set and plugged it into his com unit, switching it so they all could hear.

“Heaven, this is Angel One. How copy?” Price asked.

The voice came back almost immediately. “Solid copy, Angel One. This is Heaven.”

“Heaven, we are in position at designated OP: grid reference, Charlie November, four, three, five, niner, three, one, over.”

“Good work, Angel One. What is your visibility rating? Over.”

“Tango two at best,” Price said.

There was a short silence, then the voice on the other end said, “How you doing, Price?”

“Good, Wilton,” Price said with a grin. “How ’bout you?”

“I’m fine,” Wilton said, his voice thin and crisp through the radio. “How’s the arctic?”

“Arctic? This is the subarctic,” Price said. “The arctic circle is eighty clicks thataway.”

“I’m glad they didn’t send us to the arctic,” Wall said. “It’d be cold and miserable there.”

“I wish I was there with you,” Wilton said.

“No, you don’t,” Barnard said.

“Ignore her, it’s much nicer than you’d think,” Price said.

“Nice?” Wilton asked.

“Sun’s out, the water is cool, we’re all in our swimsuits, drinking ice-cold beers around the pool,” Price said, wiping frost from her face mask, and stretching her new leg to stop it from cramping up.

“Now I know you’re lying,” Wilton said. “You ain’t old enough to drink beer.”

That brought laughter from the team.

“We have eyes on the island,” Price said.

“Any sign of enemy activity?” Wilton asked.

“Negative on that,” Price said.

“Confirming no sign of enemy activity,” Wilton said, reverting to formal radio procedures. “Next check in at 13:30 mission time.”

“See you then,” Price said.

The Tsar unplugged and packed up the transmitter.

“Okay, Angels, we are Oscar Mike,” Price said.

“LT!” Emile said.

“Azoh!” The Tsar said.

Price spun around and saw what they saw. The mission had barely begun. And already it was over.