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# ICEFIRE



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## **ICEFIRE**

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Excerpt from the novel:

**ICEFIRE**

by

Judith Reeves-Stevens

&

Garfield Reeves-Stevens

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# Chapter One

## THE ICE

Three minutes from Gentle Two Five's point of no return, Antarctica disappeared.

With it also vanished any chance for Operation SHADOW FORGE to succeed. Only once before in his naval career had Mitch Webber faced certain failure at such an extreme level. And, as before, he refused to accept it.

The high-visibility-orange UH-1N Iroquois carrying Webber and four others thundered through the frigid air above the Ross Ice Shelf. The large 25 painted on the twin-engine helicopter's fuselage gave its call number. The call-sign prefix "Gentle" hadn't been heard in Antarctica for years, not since the U.S. Naval aviation unit, Development Squadron 6, had transferred its peacetime support mission to the New York Air National Guard 109th Air Wing. But this was no longer peacetime, and the Navy had returned to the Ice.

As of 1715 Global Positioning Satellite time, Gentle Two Five was 800 miles from the South Pole, 3,000 miles from Christchurch, New Zealand, and 500 feet above nothing. The wind-smearred, early-summer blizzard of loose snow and ice dust below shrouded all detail of what lay beneath. Three hundred feet above Gentle Two Five, the disorienting visual effect was repeated in clouds so violently churned by gale-force winds they had become little more than a featureless gray haze. Only the eastern horizon showed variation. There, an unnaturally thin and precise crease of almost painfully blue sky confirmed that at least a division between up and down still existed. But only the artificial horizon on the aircraft's instrument console could distinguish

which of the two surfaces was above, and which below, as if when the seventh continent had vanished, it had taken the rest of the world with it.

Mitch Webber had flown helicopters through worse—over the Iraqi desert, the Colombian rain forest; he'd even dodged through the office towers of San Francisco. But unlike those other active Forge alerts, this time no one fired up at him.

He was a fifteen-year veteran of the Navy, and if he had to sum up his recent career in one word, it would be *thief*—government-approved and sanctioned. Until he'd received the invitation from NAVSPECWAR-COM—Naval Special Warfare Command—to join a new Development Unit, he had been a flight engineer and pilot by education and default. That invitation transformed him into a Special Operations SEAL by choice and determination. Now he was one of a handful of uniquely trained specialists on detached service to an intentionally low-key civilian agency—the otherwise nondescript Department of Energy. Webber's new uniform consisted of a briefcase, a tie, and an office cubicle in Arlington, Virginia. Except during a Forge operation. Then Webber was Team Leader, Nuclear Emergency Search Team One, and his uniform was combat gear.

He stood in the center of the helicopter's cabin, one hand loosely twisted in a cargo net stowed overhead, easily keeping his footing as the deck bucked in the random buffeting of the winds. The helo's pair of 1,290-hp Pratt & Whitney twin turboshaft engines shook off the assault of the Antarctic storm as easily as Webber did. The craft was the offspring of the venerable UH-1H, the "Huey" of Vietnam, but it was generations more advanced than its war-fighting ancestor. With the redundant safety factor of two engines, auxiliary fuel tanks, GPS navigation, and Doppler ranging, the Iroquois, Bell Helicopter Model 212, ruled the Ice as easily as the first Hueys had ruled the Asian jungles.

On almost any other mission before joining the DOE, Webber might have been in the pilot's seat himself, taking control of his own life and safety, and those of his team. But his NEST function on a Forge alert, like that of Lieutenant "Ox" Bregoli behind him, near the starboard window, was defined by the clothing he wore. The pilot, the copilot, and NEST One's weapons specialist were dressed in bulky and colorful Extreme Cold Weather gear—the pilots in flight green, the

engineer in red. Even their flight helmets were painted with Day-Glo orange panels. All three were dressed for survival on the Ice.

But Webber and Bregoli wore the white parka and leggings of PolarOps camouflage, their name badges, rank insignia, and the flags on their shoulders concealed by Velcro-secured white Goretex panels. In polar camouflage gear, even the massively built Bregoli would be unseen against ice and snow. Unlike the pilots and the engineer, Webber and Bregoli were dressed for combat—on a continent in which weapons were outlawed and there was nothing to fight over.

"Captain Webber. Coming up on final grid position." The pilot's voice crackled in Webber's helmet speaker, for a moment drowning out the hollow roar that filled the helicopter's cabin. Webber peered ahead, past the pilot and copilot, just able to look down through the lower nose windows at the gray haze streaming below at 120 miles an hour. He knew the Antarctic storm layer was no more than ten feet thick, yet it was opaque enough to completely obscure the startling flat expanse beneath them. It was, however, no barrier to the helo's radar. The pale amber glow of the radar display clearly revealed the Ross Ice Shelf, solid and eternal, beneath its stormy shroud.

Webber glanced back at his team's weapons specialist strapped into the unpadded, fold-down jump seat on the aft bulkhead. He was Hadrian Gowers, forty-something, overweight, uncomfortable, and one of the most important members of NEST One. Awkwardly balanced on the engineer's lap was a NEC Gladiator laptop computer, built to Department of Defense specifications for combat applications. The almost indestructible laptop was housed in a magnesium case, its hard drive encapsulated by a gelatin sleeve. Through the Iroquois's wiring harness, Gowers's deceptively compact computer was directly connected to the BO-105 gamma detector pod bolted onto the helo's starboard strut, and to the matching neutron detector on the port strut. Almost comical in his ECW gear, Gowers swayed back and forth in his seat as the headwinds struck the helo. He wasn't smiling. Unused to the rough ride, the weapons specialist had vomited twice in the past hour. But he was still the DOE's ranking expert on nuclear-trigger mechanisms, improvised or manufactured. If what the Defense Intelligence Agency feared was on the Ice *was* really there, Webber knew that Gowers was the man to have on the mission that found it, no matter how much the pudgy civilian hated fieldwork.

Webber pressed his fingers to his throat mike. "Gowers—status."

"No gamma detections," the engineer said. Webber knew that much. He waited for him to continue. "Not even random background fluctuations. It might be an equipment fault."

Lieutenant Bregoli shifted on his makeshift seat of bright yellow carryall bags—emergency shelter and food supplies, a necessity on any polar flight. "We're flying over shelf ice," he shouted back at Gowers. Bregoli kept his balance by bracing himself with the white-painted stock of his CAR-15. In his huge gloved hands, the already compact rifle looked childishly small.

Webber understood his lieutenant's assessment of the situation. On any military mission, knowing the terrain was essential. Directly below them was the Ross Ice Shelf, a single, solid sheet of ice, thirty percent of Antarctica's total shelf ice, roughly the same surface area as France—210,000 square miles. Directly under the Shelf was the Ross Sea. The thickness of the Shelf ranged from 600 feet at sea's edge to more than 2,000 feet hundreds of miles closer to land. Shelf ice meant there were no rocks or stony strata to provide the minor gamma sources that might naturally occur in ordinary terrain.

Gowers was clearly annoyed with Bregoli, impatient with Webber, much more tired than three hours in a helicopter should have made him. "I know," he said. "But even in a completely clean environment, we should be picking up random noise, spurious signals. Something. There's nothing."

Webber knew about spurious signals. The still-classified 1995 RAINBOW FORGE alert in San Francisco, in which the Federal Emergency Management Agency had come within three minutes of activating the Emergency Broadcast System and ordering an evacuation of the city, had bogged down precisely because of spurious signals. The coastal city contained hundreds of benign radiation sources, from hospital storerooms of medical isotopes, to university physics labs, engineering firms, mineralogical collections, and even fresh asphalt used for road repairs. NEST's desperate race to detect an IND—Improvised Nuclear Device—against that background clutter of legitimate point sources had been a nightmare of logistics.

In a jagged white lightning bolt down the left side of his chest, Webber still bore the scar from the last-minute, desperate shootout on the rooftop helicopter pad of the Bank of America building where the

device had been recovered. One lucky round had struck him from behind, penetrating his left triceps, then angled inward to hit his ceramic body armor from the *inside*. Ricocheting down his ribs, the bullet had halted just above his belt, where it had burned an inch-deep hole in his flesh. He had remained unaware of his wound until three mercenaries lay dead beside a tied-down executive helicopter. Hadrian Gowers had been there to defuse the device—a lethally simple chemical bomb employing fifty pounds of homemade TNT and a wax-sealed Gatorade bottle filled with just over one pound of powdered plutonium that had been catalogued as "misdirected" more than two years earlier in Japan. The explosion would not have been nuclear, but the resultant spread of the toxic, radioactive metal would have given cancer to 400,000 civilians over the next ten years and rendered parts of San Francisco and Oakland uninhabitable for more than a century.

But at least during RAINBOW FORGE, NEST had known what the perpetrators had wanted, and that intelligence had enabled NEST operatives, working with the DOD's Joint Special Operations Forces, to anticipate the timing and the location of the threatened detonation.

NEST and Webber did not have the advantage of such knowledge now. Nor even any strong theories. The mission-background assessments Webber had been given when he and his team had arrived at McMurdo Station one week ago, only told him that as of November 15 the total population of Antarctica was less than three thousand, spread among sixty-six scientific and meteorological stations operated by fourteen different countries. There were no official national boundaries in Antarctica, no natural resources that could be exploited with currently available technology, and no clear reason why anyone would want to smuggle nuclear weapons to the continent.

But a twelve-month-long joint investigation by the Departments of Energy and justice, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the U.S. Special Operations Command had concluded, strongly, that someone *had* or *was* smuggling one or more of those weapons onto the Ice. It was Mitch Webber's mission to find those weapons, no matter how unlikely or illogical their presence.

The helo abruptly dropped ten feet in a downdraft. If there had been anything left in Gowers's stomach, the weapons specialist would have vomited again. Instead, he just moaned.

"What about neutron hits?" Webber asked.



Gowers's voice was uneven but determined. "Normal readings across the board."

Webber automatically consulted the operational flowchart he had constructed in his mind. With its inboard auxiliary tanks, the helo had just enough fuel to complete one more search grid on its way back to McMurdo, one hundred miles away, northwest. Was the possible malfunction of the helo's gamma detector reason enough to cancel that last grid?

Webber considered his options. It was unlikely the gamma detector had been tampered with. Who would do that without also sabotaging the matching neutron detector? Perhaps not in a city, but here on the Ice, where any radiation source should stand out like a flare at midnight, Webber reckoned the neutron pod would provide minimal, but acceptable, support for the mission.

Then again, minimal but acceptable took on a different meaning measured against the devastation of a nuclear explosion.

*But devastation of what?* Webber asked himself.

Then he saw the punctuated flash of a red running light, circling five miles ahead. *Typical*, Webber thought with a flash of irritation. "Patch me through," he told the pilot, and the helo banked toward the light.

"Gentle Three Zero," the pilot intoned, "this is Gentle Two Five. Over."

The pilot of the distant, second helicopter, already on station at the rendezvous coordinates, responded at once. She was followed by another, more familiar voice, rising and falling in the frequency distortion common to Antarctic radio communications. "Look who's last at the party again. What did you bring me? Over."

Webber noted Bregoli's start of surprise at hearing his commander addressed so informally. But Webber forced a smile. It was either that or admit he'd been outmaneuvered. Once again, Nick Young had reached the objective before him.

"NEST Two, this is NEST *One*," Webber replied. "What is your fuel status? Over."

"I'm at a big seven five zero pounds," Young radioed back. By now, Webber's helo had come within a quarter mile of Young's, and the two orange craft circled each other like belligerent dragonflies deciding whether they should engage in battle or go their separate ways. The

columnar holes their downdrafts punched through the storm layer reached down to the ice, not directly beneath them, but almost 200 yards due west, attesting to the strength of the wind. "Plenty for one more grid on retrograde," Young continued. "Over."

Webber leaned forward between the pilot and copilot to check his own fuel status. Six hundred and seventy pounds. Even in the confusion of an Antarctic storm, Young had been able to find a tailwind to exploit. "Copy that," he said, suppressing any outward sign of emotional response to Young's challenge. A Forge alert was not the time to indulge in their usual sparring. "How are your detectors functioning? Over."

Young's response was not immediate. Apparently he had to confer with Glendon Morris, the DOE weapons specialist assigned to NEST Two.

"Glen says the neutron counter's nominal. But she's getting no background on the gamma. She thinks there might be a fault. Over."

Webber doubted both his and Young's gamma detectors could develop the same fault at the same time. If two gamma detectors on two different aircraft were reporting similar readings, or lack of readings, Webber was inclined to look for an exterior and natural cause. The Antarctic radio-spectrum environment was subject to a myriad violent electromagnetic events. A minor solar flare that might have no measurable effect on the rest of the planet could result in a Polar-Cap Absorption event, heavily ionizing the polar ionosphere and causing complete blackouts of HF and VHF communications. In addition to PCAs, disappearing solar filaments, coronal mass ejections, and coronal holes could all create geomagnetic storms with varying and unpredictable effects over the entire frequency spectrum.

"NEST Two," Webber transmitted, "are you good to go on neutron only? Over."

"That's a big affirmative." Young's instant reply was no surprise to Webber. He had no doubt Young would be willing to walk across the Ross Ice Shelf barefoot with only a Geiger counter to locate an IND. He was so obsessively committed to the overall NEST mission that in one tour at the Pentagon, he had almost single-handedly forced the creation of the DOD's Counterproliferation Support Program. Thanks to Young, the DOD was now developing effective responses to rogue bacteriological and chemical warfare threats, all patterned on the

NEST scenarios intended for nuclear threats. Webber was about to reply to Young's anticipated positive mission assessment when he realized he hadn't heard the customary "over."

"I'm ready to fly search grid Baker Baker Two Two Four," Young continued. "If we split it, we'll be back at McMurdo within ninety minutes. What do you say? Over."

Webber studied the map clipped to the board in the center of the console. It was a "Grid North" navigational chart peculiar to Antarctica, with the South Pole at the top and north/south meridians running parallel to each other instead of converging on the pole. It was a confusing system for anyone trained in traditional navigation. But in a region where magnetic compasses were next to useless and even the Global Positioning Satellite constellation could only be accessed sporadically for certain hours of the day, Grid North was a useful, if arbitrary, system.

Webber's copilot understood what Webber was looking for and X'd in their current position on the chart. Young was suggesting they fly their final grid of the day to the chart's northwest, on a wide, outside curve back to McMurdo. Technically, with Young's helo and its extra fuel flying the outer area, they would cover more territory in the search. But that territory would be completely composed of more Shelf ice, more nothing.

Webber pointed to another grid, diagonally down from the first. "Negative, NEST Two. We will fly Baker Baker *Three* Two Four. Over." That, at least, would cover part of the Shelf's groundline. DOE analysts had come up with only one tentative theory to explain the presence of a nuclear device in Antarctica that made even the slightest bit of sense, and it required the presence of solid ground, not ice. It was the barest of straws, but after a week of no results, Webber was impatient enough to grasp at anything.

"NEST One," Young radioed back, and Webber could hear the condescension in his teammate's voice, "you might want to reconsider. We get close to those formations on the backside of Minna Bluff, we're going to be bouncing like a hooker's..." Young hesitated as if just remembering he had a female weapons specialist on his team. This was the modern Navy, after all. "It's going to be a rough ride, cowboy. Especially with low fuel. Over."

Webber couldn't resist the jab. "So leave the groundline to us, NEST Two. You take the Shelf. It'll be *easier*. Over."

This time Young's response was crisp and to the point, reminding Webber that only the best of the Navy's warriors were allowed into SEAL training, and only the best of the best completed that training. Already friends in the service, he and Young had gone in together and had emerged from the head-on competition with their friendship and their respect for each other even stronger. Webber knew there was a soldier every bit his equal inside Young. At least on those occasions when Young decided to take a mission seriously.

"No bullshit, Mitch," Young said. "And no offense to the pilots. But these are transport helos and transport crews. If you want to do any hairy flying, we'd better save it for the Special Ops pilots when they get here. Over."

Webber saw his pilot and copilot exchange a look. Then the pilot glanced back and carefully raised his hand, middle finger extended.

"Nick," Mitch radioed. "We're flying with *Navy* pilots. I have full confidence. Repeat: We will fly Baker Baker Three Two Four. Over."

The pilot gave Webber a thumbs-up, and then a sudden burst of radio distortion turned Young's response into an earsplitting banshee's wail. "You had full confidence in Baghdad, pal. I strongly suggest Baker Baker *Two* Two Four. Over."

Webber gripped the back of the copilot's chair as if he expected the helo to pitch. But the hover angle held steady.

It didn't help that Webber knew Young's suggestion had merit. This was a full Forge alert, but they weren't on a countdown. There had been no contact with rogue actors. No ultimatums delivered. But of all the arguments Young might have invoked, he had used the one that left Webber no choice. Baghdad.

"Screw you, too, pal," Webber said. He pressed again on his mike. "NEST Two, initiate search pattern for grid Baker Baker *Three* Two Four. Out." He touched the pilot on the shoulder. "Get us out of here." Then he moved back to the center of the cabin as the helo banked to come about and head straight into the unrelenting storm. Caught up in unwelcome memory, Webber did not acknowledge the inquiring look Bregoli gave him before he turned back to stare out the starboard window.

Twenty minutes more of flying elapsed, with no significant change in weather conditions before Young made contact again, this time to report that, according to the NEST Two weapons specialist, his helo's neutron detector was now malfunctioning. The search had to be called off for the day.

"NEST Two," Webber radioed, "we're halfway through our grid. Fly an intercept course and we'll head back together. Over."

Surprisingly, Young didn't put up a fight. "Copy that, NEST One. I'll be on your tail in ten. Out."

Webber pulled back his parka sleeve and checked one of his two watches—the cheap Timex digital set to McMurdo time. His second watch, a heavy, standard-issue Swiss Luminox, was always set to GPS mean time. For its most critical global operations, the U.S. military operated by only one clock, one time zone—Washington's.

It was 10:40 local time. Depending on the winds, they'd be landing at McMurdo by 11:30. Webber dug into a supply duffel held to the floor by two bungee cords. He broke out a dented, dull-green Thermos bottle, offered coffee to Bregoli and Gowers, who both declined, then poured some for himself in the bottle's cup lid. Unproductive, but it was his way of marking that today's mission was already over.

That was when Gowers shouted, "Neutron alarm, level three!"

Webber gulped down his coffee, moved swiftly to his engineer's side, and turned Gowers's laptop to read the spike in the display window. He checked the directional coordinates, bearing to the northeast, then shouted them to the pilot. The helo changed course as Webber replaced the lid on his Thermos. He shoved it back into the supply duffel on his way to the front of the craft to check the radar.

"There," the pilot said. His gloved finger tapped a smear of amber light on the display, twenty miles straight ahead.

"What is it?" Webber asked. The radar return was asymmetrical, as if he were looking at a cloud on weather radar.

The copilot checked the chart. "Hard to say," she answered. "No islands on the map. Probably an ice pressure ridge."

"ETA ten minutes," the pilot said. According to the DOE's only theory, Webber knew that the presence of an ice pressure ridge made some sense. "Update NEST Two," he told the pilot. But before the pilot had even touched the frequency control, Young's voice came over the

speakers. "From out of the dust, a galloping horse with the speed of light, and a hearty Hi-yo Silver!"

Webber followed the pilot's glance to port. A flashing red running light was closing.

The pilot snorted, unimpressed. "Fucking cavalry's here."

Webber's copilot tapped her screen to draw Webber's attention. NEST Two was no longer on the return leg to McMurdo. Young had apparently changed course to match Webber's.

Following protocol and using call signs, Young's pilot then came on to confirm that Gentle Three Zero was joining Gentle Two Five on the retrograde to base.

"What do you know that I don't?" Young radioed. "Over."

Webber answered. "Gowers picked up a neutron burst coming from the ridgelike radar target...twenty miles ahead. Over."

"Pick your bet," Young replied. "Rock outcropping or geo assay. Even odds. Over."

"You're the one who hangs in Vegas," Webber said. Young's helo was a quarter mile off now, still angling to match Webber's course. Webber could see Young's white combat helmet in the starboard main window. Young's bets and Las Vegas escapades were legend among the SEALs. He attacked the card tables and the showgirls as if Caesars were one of Saddam Hussein's palaces. "Over."

Young set the terms. "I'll take equipment malfunction against rock or geo team. Two to one odds—one Glenfiddich to two Absolut Peppar. Over."

The Absolut was Young's drink, Glenfiddich Webber's. Stateside, it was a nothing bet. But at McMurdo, where alcohol was not permitted in the mess hall, and liquor, wine, and beer rations were doled out and recorded on a week-by-week basis, the NEST Two leader might as well be wagering gold.

"Whatever," Webber said, not bothering to reply on the air, annoyed anew by Young's irrepressible desire to play games at all times.

But Young took silence for acceptance. "Wager accepted. Let's do it." Then his helo accelerated ahead, followed a few seconds later by a final, mocking "Out."

The NEST One pilot turned to Webber with an inquiring look. "Do we have the fuel to catch up and still make it to McMurdo?" Webber asked.

The pilot checked his instruments and the chart. "Depends on the winds on the way back."

"Worst-case scenario?"

"We sit on the ice for a few hours while they send snowmobiles with extra fuel."

"Take 'im down," Webber said.

Instantly, the deck of the helo angled down and the craft shot forward, rapidly hitting 140 miles an hour and gaining on Young.

A minute later, Webber's helo caught Young's and started to move ahead.

"Hey, cowboy," Young radioed. "You don't have the fuel for this. And I don't pick up hitchhikers. Over." Young's helo started closing the gap.

"What's your top speed?" Webber asked his pilot.

"With the pods and aux tanks, one fifty. Same as him."

"Then you'll just have to outfly him."

The pilot grinned. The helo pushed forward again.

Within another minute, the two craft were neck and neck, only one hundred yards apart. The winner would be decided by the vagaries of the wind.

The radar target they approached—by now, the secondary objective of the flight—was indeed a pressure ridge. Two thousand feet below, the ice river that flowed from the landmass of Antarctica across the surface of the Ross Sea had hit a slight upwelling in the seabed. The contact between ice and rock had slowed the movement of the ice and, over hundreds of years, had created a distortion at the ice surface, like the water of a fast-moving river deformed by a submerged rock.

To Webber, the pressure ridge looked like a small mountain rising a hundred feet above the blizzard. Veins of ice, compressed into exquisite, jewel-like bands of aquamarine and emerald green, were caught in the ridge folds. Glaciologists could calculate the age of the formation from its colors. But to Webber, the visual appearance of the target suggested it was solid ice, with no outcropping of rock buried within it

that could account for the neutron burst. That meant either the neutron counter had malfunctioned as Young said, or that, somewhere near the pressure ridge, there was an accumulation of fissionable material.

They were two minutes from contact with the ridge, engines screaming in the race with Young, when Webber checked again with Gowers.

"Strong background count," the engineer confirmed. "Level two." An equipment malfunction was looking less likely the longer the readings continued. Webber knew what had to be done. No more games.

"NEST Two, this is NEST One. We have a *latent* Forge target. Repeat, *latent* Forge. Approach vector Romeo Zebra. Over."

Webber waited for Young to copy, then to hang back. The Romeo Zebra approach called for one NEST helo to stay airborne out of harm's way while the first landed to gather onsite intelligence. It was standard operating procedure.

But Young didn't copy.

"Nice try, cowboy. But you're not winning the race that way. Over."

Mitch cursed. "NEST Two acknowledge! Approach vector Romeo Zebra! We have a level-two neutron alarm!"

But Young's helo veered off to the east of the pressure ridge without answering.

Webber knew he had to make an alternate decision. He could deal with Young later. Right now, his pilot and his crew were looking to him for orders. It was his responsibility to give them.

"Circle to the west," he told the pilot. He looked back at Gowers. "Tune to narrow scan, full sensitivity."

NEST One's engineer rapidly typed on his keyboard, shifting his legs to hold the computer in place as the helo shuddered in a sudden crosswind. "Still at level two," he reported.

Webber's craft reached the far, southern side of the pressure ridge in less than a minute. Young's helo was already on station, hovering.

"Make that Absolut chilled," Young radioed.

"NEST Two Leader, you are in violation of procedures. This is an alert, not a drill. Over."

Looking out his own helo's canopy, Webber could see Young's white form between the pilot and the copilot of the second helo. Young waved. "Lighten up, Dark Knight...." His voice warbled in the drifting



radio frequency, despite the proximity of the helicopters, now less than fifty yards apart. "You're the one with the operational detector. We've been all around the ridge. Where's the source? Over." He said the last word with overprecise sarcasm.

Webber looked at Gowers. The weapons specialist shook his head. "Still level two." If they were anywhere close to a stockpile of fissionable material, the pod should have gone to a level-one alarm. "Gotta be a malfunction."

Webber exhaled. "Okay," he told the pilot. "Let's see how close to McMurdo we can..." He didn't finish. "What's this?" He pointed to an edge of the pressure-ridge boundary glowing on the radar display. There was a sharply symmetrical bar a few hundred yards from the upward sweep of the ridge, due south.

The pilot squinted through the canopy, past Young's helo, into the empty air between the two layers of wind-smearred clouds. "Something under the blizzard. Metal, maybe. Could be a fuel cache."

Webber reached for the binoculars in the pocket at the side of the copilot's seat.

The rotor blades of Young's helo were a blur at the edge of Webber's magnified field of vision as he scanned the storm. The clouds were so uniform he couldn't be certain if the binocs were in focus. Then there was a flash of white against the gray—a regular shape against the random visual noise of a natural landscape. Something was down there. Camouflaged.

Webber spoke into his mike. "NEST Two, I am declaring an *active* Forge alert. Approach vector Romeo Zebra. Over."

Young's response to Webber's call to action was immediate. His voice had lost its playful edge. "Standing by. Over."

Webber slipped the binoculars back into their pocket. He leaned toward the pilot. "I want you to fly over that, get it in the downdraft so I can see what it is. You up on your evasive maneuvers?"

Alert for the hunt, the pilot nodded and started forward, dropping altitude sharply. Webber was relieved that this time Young's helo held to the correct position. He turned to check on the other two members of his team. Gowers had placed his laptop on the deck, and was breaking out a small aluminum case containing a MACS Dual Modular radiation monitor. It was more sensitive than the exterior pods, but its limited range made it useful only for close-contact detection.

The pilot expertly brought Gentle Two Five over the camouflaged target, spun around 180 degrees, then slowly edged backward until the clear spot created by the main rotors' downdraft found the rest of the encampment—a drilling derrick, twenty-five-feet tall, with a diesel generator beside it, two pallets of fuel drums, and a large, eight-passenger Tucker Sno-Cat with treads and skis. All metal surfaces had been painted white. About twenty feet from the derrick, Webber could see a prefab cabin, twenty feet by fifteen. A supply pallet leaned close against it, almost blocking the only door, and there was another small generator behind it. Other supplies, perhaps four or five pallets' worth, were fifty feet away from the cabin, opposite the fuel drums, protected by a fluttering orange tarp, half-covered with snow.

The downdraft also revealed four frantically waving figures in red parkas and snow goggles, urgently signaling the helo to back off.

"Anyone know if they're from McMurdo?" Webber asked.

The pilot and copilot both said, "No," together. The pilot added, "I don't see any flag. Argentine maybe?"

Webber grimaced at the possibility. Argentina considered Antarctica an extension of the Patagonian archipelago, and had arbitrarily assigned a large wedge of the continent to Tierra del Fuego, Argentina's twenty-third province. In 1978, the government had airlifted a pregnant physician to the largest Argentine station in Antarctica and had promptly given the newborn baby Argentine citizenship, ostensibly establishing, though only to themselves, that Antarctica soil and Argentine soil were the same.

Argentina had also instigated the first and only military action within the Antarctic Convergence. Its helicopters and soldiers had attacked an outpost of British troops on South Georgia Island during the failed 1982 attempt to wrest control of the Falkland Islands from Great Britain.

The U.S. Department of Energy had reluctantly predicted that, if history were to be any guide, some of the more radical elements within the Argentine government might consider Argentina within its rights to use tactical nuclear explosives to begin extensive exploration of Antarctica's icebound mineral wealth. The Ross Sea, though, was nowhere near the region Argentina claimed as its own.

"Land," Webber said. He reached through a flap in his parka to remove the safety from his .45 automatic. If he were about to deal

with Argentine nationals, at least he would be spared the sudden-death arena of a confrontation with terrorists. His rules of engagement stated that weapons would be used only to enforce Article V of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, which prohibited nuclear explosives on the Ice. The International Court, rather than military action, could sort out the other details later.

Gentle Two Five scraped against the rough ice as it touched down in a veil of blowing snow and ice crystals. Bregoli instantly popped the starboard cargo door and slid it open, flooding the cabin with a sudden gust of freezing wind.

Webber jumped out, keeping one hand on the door frame until he was sure of his footing. Bregoli followed, stopping to help Gowers down. The pilot and copilot had flown for NEST before in this situation, the Iroquois was to be kept on instant-takeoff status until Webber ordered otherwise.

The helo had landed with its nose pointing directly at the derrick, and Webber sighted off the craft as he struck off through the stinging snow, Gowers at his side. In a few minutes, Webber knew he'd have to tug his fur-edged parka hood over his helmet and slip his gloved hands into the mittens hanging on his belt. But for this moment of contact, the bite of the cold was an acceptable trade-off. He needed to be able to see and hear without obstruction.

When the derrick appeared as a dark shadow within the snow squall, Webber turned to Gowers. The NEST One engineer, his apple-cheeked face almost as bright as the ECW gear he wore shouted over the wind.

"Level one! Straight ahead!"

Webber glanced back at Bregoli, holding up his hand to signal the soldier to hang back. Bregoli already held his CAR-15 ready. Then Webber touched his fingers to his throat mike. "NEST Two, we have a confirmed target."

With that, three red figures appeared in the shifting curtains of snow, walking straight for them. None appeared to be carrying weapons. Webber knew that meant they could be part of a geological survey team. But still, there had been four people on the ground before the helicopter had landed. Before moving forward, Webber looked about for the fourth man but saw no sign of him. Now the snow squalls were so bad even Bregoli had disappeared from view. Webber spoke into his

mike. "I am about to make contact with the on-site personnel. They do not appear to be armed. Over."

There was no response from NEST Two, but Webber had no time to question why. The first of the red figures was within ten feet, his face invisible behind snow goggles and the ice-frosted fur trim of his parka's hood. Webber sought out any markings on the parka-flags, corporate or mission patches. Nothing.

He raised his empty hand in greeting. "Hello!" he shouted. "Mitch Webber, United States Department of Energy."

The silent figure in red was joined by his two companions, also silent.

Webber trusted his instincts. These were not Argentine geologists. "Gowers—back off," Webber said in a low voice. He slipped his hand into his parka, about to grasp his weapon. Then the snow around him flashed yellow-orange a split second before the thump of an explosion pushed against his back.

Webber didn't have to look behind him to know that his pilot and copilot were dead. Gentle Two Five had just exploded, and with a greater release of energy than its remaining fuel could have provided. He dived forward, using the momentum of the explosive force to his advantage, .45 out and firing before he even hit the ground, shouting, "Abort! Abort!" into his mike.

One figure in red fell back, snow goggles shattered by two slugs from Webber's gun. The other two figures broke left and right, vanishing into a sudden eddy of blinding ice crystals—the unmistakable maneuver of trained soldiers.

Webber came out of his roll in a crouch, crusted with snow, his .45 held ready. He shot a glance over his shoulder, saw Gowers facedown on the ice, the radiation monitor beside him, its black case already white with drift. Webber's pulse quickened. Gowers had been taken out by a shooter hidden in the storm—the missing fourth man.

Even as he dropped the magazine from the .45 and slapped in a fresh one, Webber knew his situation was hopeless. The only cover was the drilling installation a hundred feet ahead of him. Undoubtedly, that was where the two hostiles had gone. Plus the fourth man who must have been behind him—the one, Webber knew, who had taken out Gowers and Gentle Two Five.

Webber scrambled across the ice for the body of the hostile he had dropped. Dark crystals of blood had already frozen around the demolished face, gore studded with shards from the snow goggles. Webber quickly searched the body's red parka, all the while attempting to raise NEST Two on his radio. Even though he knew his life might end at any moment, Webber's voice was even, controlled, and decisive. He had no thoughts except for the mission.

"Nick—we've been ambushed. Helo's been taken out. Four hostiles. No ID. I've taken out one. Gowers is down. No sign of Ox. Come back, over."

The body was clean. No personal effects—a terrorist signature. No weapons—an anomaly. Webber scanned the immediate area. No sign of any movement. He hurried back to Gowers.

The weapons specialist was still breathing, but each intake of breath was a struggle. Webber kneeled down and carefully rolled Gowers onto his side. The spreading stain of blood on the engineer's chest was almost invisible against the orange of his parka, but it was large enough for Webber to know Gowers would never make it back to McMurdo on his own.

He pulled the chemical heating packs from the chest pockets on Gowers's parka, cracked them, kneaded them, then stuffed them up under the parka to provide more warmth. He leaned closer to the engineer, speaking loudly, trying to get him to focus. "Gowers! Did you see Ox?"

"Cold..." Gowers whispered.

Webber abandoned that strategy. The drilling installation might have a sheltered area. The SnoCat, at least, would have a heater, probably a radio more powerful than the one on his belt. The drilling installation became his target.

"I'll come back for you," Webber told the engineer. Though he knew if he didn't keep that promise in the next ten minutes, it would make no difference.

His hand still on Gowers's parka, Webber glanced back toward his helo. In the shifting billows of snow, he saw the orange glow of the fire consuming Gentle Two Five, but no other movement. He swiftly recalled the layout of the installation as he had seen it from the air, plotting his approach to bring the derrick between him and the SnoCat.

He turned back, released his grip on Gowers, and stood up.

He heard the crunch of ice behind him.

Webber knew that no one could have moved up behind him so quickly. At least, not in a red parka.

He whirled around to confront Nick Young. "You weren't supposed to land! There're hostiles all around!"

"No shit," Young said. He almost looked contrite. "Sorry, cowboy. End of the trail."

Then Nick Young raised his M-16 and fired point-blank into his best friend's chest.

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