

STATUS-6 by W. Craig Reed

Excerpt

With his legs sore and lungs burning from the cold, Jon arched his back and stretched when the group finally stopped marching thirty minutes later. To his right, about a quarter-mile distant, the bright blue stripes covering the mess tent signaled the location of the ICEX camp. Two holes, three feet in diameter, had been carved into the ice a few feet from where the group now stood. Jon surmised they were the spent practice torpedo holes drilled by Navy Divers. Liang and company must have parked the ASDS nearby and used the holes as infiltration points. Also, Liang must have had some inside help to deactivate the intruder detection system surrounding the holes. But who? Rinaldo? When would she have had access to that system? More unanswered questions.

Rinaldo approached and said, “Since you’re the former Navy SEAL, why don’t you help our female guest suit up?”

Jon crossed his arms. “This has gone far enough. Time for some answers, Rinaldo.”

Rinaldo pointed her M-16 at Kate’s head. “How’s this for an answer—she suits up or dies.”

Jon uncrossed his arms and fought to quell the ire-stoked coals in his chest. He turned toward Kate. “Are you a certified diver?”

Kate’s nose and cheeks were red. She shivered. “I *hate* water.”

“Drinking or swimming?” Jon said, hoping to diffuse Kate’s angst.

It didn’t work. Kate looked like a small child being forced to brave a dark alley. “I can’t do this.”

While donning a dry suit, Rinaldo cocked an ear. “What’s the problem?”

Kate stared at the hole in the ice. Frigid blue water lapped against the sides. She backed up and turned away.

“I think she has a water phobia,” Jon said.

“Get her over it,” Rinaldo said.

Jon bristled. The muscles in his face tightened. He grabbed Kate’s suit and brought it to her. Facing her back, he said, “Turn around.” Shaking, Kate remained facing away.

“Please, turn around.”

Kate turned.

“Good,” Jon said. “Now look at me.”

Kate's eyes met his. Though full of fear, they were riveting, like a blue morning sky touching the edges of a Nebraska corn field. Jon felt his heart flutter. He tried to hold on to the feeling, but it refused to linger. A year had come and gone since he'd lost his wife, but the pain in his chest still held the high ground.

"I'm not setting a foot in that water," Kate stammered. Her eyes burned with defiance.

"What about a toe?"

Kate crossed her arms and said nothing.

"Just put on the suit to keep the witch happy while I think of something," Jon said.

"Something?"

"Yeah, something."

"Like what, mate?"

Rinaldo called over from the other side of the ice hole. "Five minutes, Shay."

Jon held up the suit. "Just put it on, please. I promise I'll think of something."

Kate rolled her eyes and held out her arms. "Fine, but you'd better not be lying to me."

"Who's your colleague?" Jon asked as he moved in close to help Kate don the dry suit.

"Bobby Ruppert. He's a bit rough around the edges and goes into panic mode in stressful situations, but he's a brilliant engineer."

While Jon zipped up Kate's dry suit, the scent of her perfume conjured a memory. He shivered.

"Now what?" Kate said. Her bottom lip quivered. Annelia had also done that when she was frightened.

Jon pulled on his suit. He stepped toward Kate and said, "Let's just put on our SCUBA gear and then I'll make my move."

"Your move?" Kate shot back.

Jon said nothing as he helped Kate into a BC vest, saddled up her tank, and held a Kirby Morgan diving mask in her direction. "Put this on."

Kate's tone turned urgent as she grabbed the mask. "You said you'd think of something."

"Just follow my lead." Jon pulled on his tank and ran through a system check. The action felt like a visit from an old friend and reminded him of dozens of missions survived.

Kate shook her head in defiance as she sucked in a breath. The hiss of compressed air echoed off nearby shards of ice pushed skyward by Mother Nature.

One by one, Liang's men entered the water. Jon watched Kate recoil with each splash.

Rinaldo approached. "Ready?"

Kate's eyes widened. She held her palms up as if to say, "Something?"

Now fully suited, Jon led Kate toward the water. He had to drag her the last few feet. He turned toward her, lifted up his mask, and said, "I'll hold your hand all the way. This will all be over in five minutes."

Her eyes still wide, Kate tried to step backward but Jon held onto to her hands and gently kept her in place.

"Just follow me," Jon said. "I've done this hundreds of times."

Kate shook her head as she dug her heels into the ice.

Rinaldo slapped Jon's back. The gesture did not feel friendly.

Jon slowly guided Kate toward the hole's edge. She fought to pull away. He held on tight and looked into her eyes, assuring her in silence that she could do this. Tears streamed down Kate's face and dripped onto the mask's rubber lining. Her breathing was erratic. Jon's heart ached with compassion and guilt. He felt like a jailor forcing an innocent victim into a torture chamber. The bitter taste of choler filled his mouth as he stole a glance at Rinaldo. The beast in his gut grumbled and demanded to be set loose. Jon closed his eyes and slowly breathed in and out to quell the angst.

He opened his eyes, lifted his mask again, and focused on Kate. Softening his voice, he said, "Close your eyes."

Kate stared at him through her mask. Jon could tell she wanted to trust him, but fear remained her master. He had seen this kind of panic before on the faces of green wannabe SEALs learning how to dive the Navy way. None of them had ever made it through training. For sure, none of them would have survived a dive in Arctic waters.

"Close your eyes and trust me," Jon said. "Don't open them until we're out of the water."

Trembling, Kate closed her eyes. Jon pulled on her fins and helped her into a seated position with her legs dangling into the water. He did all this with slow movements so as not to make a splash. Rinaldo stood by and watched with impatient indifference. Jon slipped into the hole...