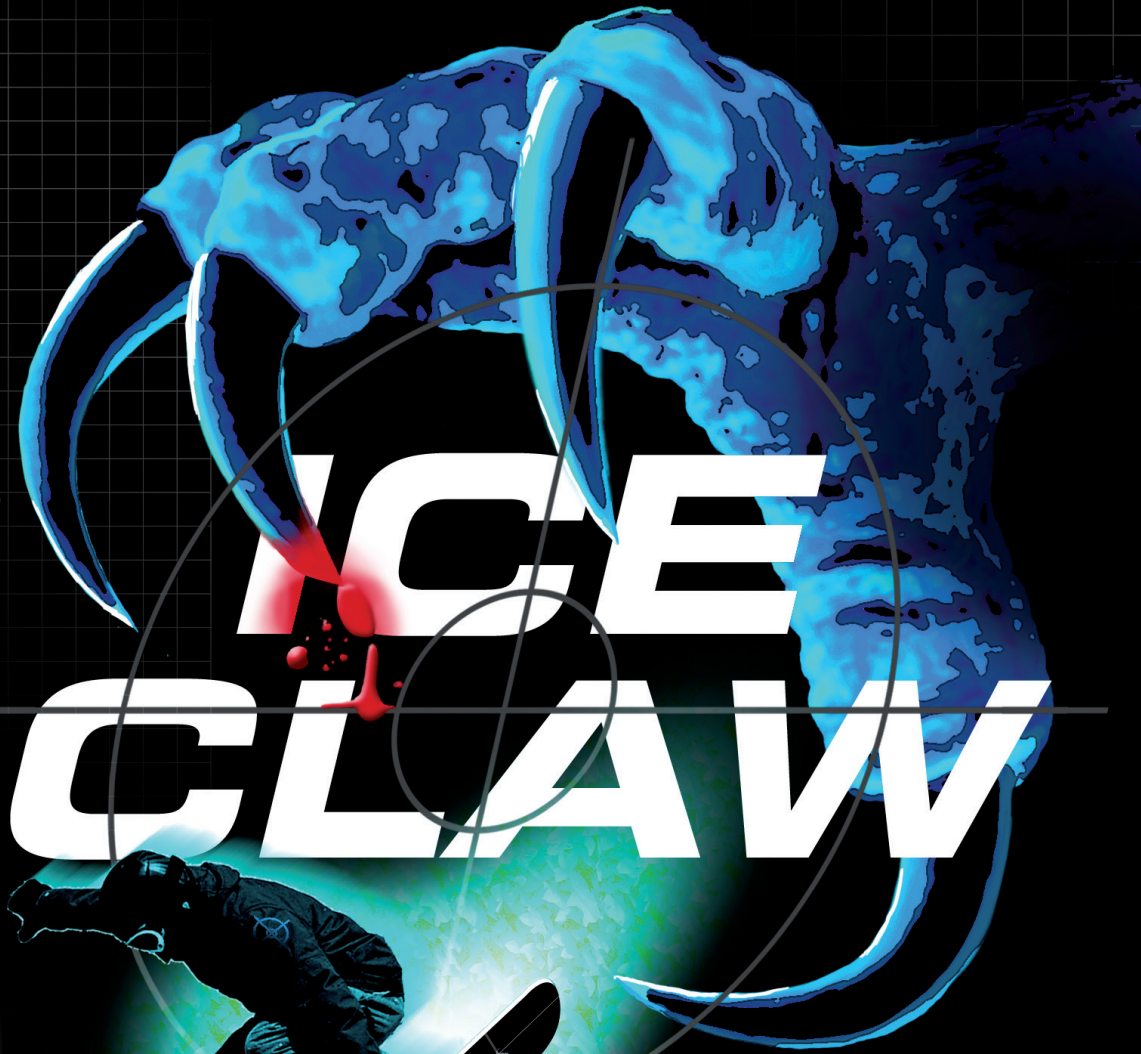


**DAVID GILMAN**



# ICE CLAW



**FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER**  
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It was too beautiful a day to die.

Max Gordon gazed up at the mountain peaks that scarred the crystal-clear sky. A whisper of mist soared up the valley beyond them, twisted briefly and escaped across the peaks. Flurries of snow scattered from the rocks like a flock of white butterflies disturbed from a meadow. But this was no gentle English summer landscape. Max was two thousand freezing metres high in unpredictable weather and no one knew that he and his best friend, Sayid Khalif, were there.

A blanket of snow the size of a football pitch clung precariously to the rock face a hundred metres above him. One shudder from the breeze, a single tremor from the overladen trees, and a thousand tonnes of snow would avalanche down and crush him and his injured friend to death.

Fifty metres away Sayid lay twisted in pain and fear. Max had to reach him and get him off the mountainside. There wasn't much time. A sliver of the loosely packed snow crunched down, tumbling beyond Sayid.

'Don't move!' Max shouted, an arm extended towards the boy in warning as he trod carefully, using his upended snowboard to probe the snow.

Max's breath steamed from his exertion as he slumped on to his knees next to Sayid. Using his teeth, he pulled off his ski glove and tenderly cradled his friend's leg.

Sayid cried out. His eyes scrunched up, then widened at the pain.

'Sorry, mate,' Max said, keeping one eye on the threatening field of loose snow above them.

'It's broken,' Sayid mumbled.

'Your leg's all right. Probably just a twisted ankle.'

'You think so?'

'Yeah,' Max lied. 'Serves you right, going off-piste. The whole idea was to stay on safe slopes.'

He eased Sayid into a sitting position, straightened the crooked leg and wiped snow from the boy's face.

A stupid bet: Sayid on skis against Max on his snowboard - who'd get to the bottom first? But Sayid had veered off several hundred metres back and dipped into this dangerous cleft. It was a deceptive snowfield promising fast skiing and Max's warnings had been ignored. When Sayid hit the fallen tree trunk lying just below the surface he'd tumbled forwards for another ten metres. He was lucky he hadn't snapped his neck.

Max busied himself with the broken ski. Pulling the tie cord from Sayid's ski jacket, he strapped the good ski across the snapped piece - forming a cross.

'You making a splint?' Sayid said.

Max shook his head. 'You don't deserve one, you idiot. This is your way out of here.'

'Are you kidding? I'm in agony. I need a helicopter.'

Max finished the binding. 'You won't need anything if that lot slips off the mountain,' he said, nodding towards the snowfield.

An ominous crunch reinforced his warning as a huge chunk of snow gave way. It growled down the far side of the slope, a frightening display of weight and power.

'Max! What do we do?'

'If we don't get out of here in a hurry, panic would be a good idea. We've gotta move, Sayid. Grab the cross-piece.' Max clamped Sayid's hands on to the broken ski, which now served as a handlebar. 'Sit on the good ski, hold on tight, and aim for down there.'

Sayid scrambled for something in his pocket. 'Wait. Hang on!' He pulled out a string of small black beads, spun them round his fist, kissed them and nodded nervously at Max. 'OK. Go!' he said.

Sayid's fear for his life overcame the stabbing pain in his foot as Max shoved him away.

Looking like a child on a tricycle whose feet had come off the pedals, Sayid sliced through the snow, the rush of wind carrying his yelps of fear back towards Max.

Max had just clamped his boots on to the snowboard when the mountainside fell. The scale of the huge block of snow mesmerized him. It dropped in slow motion, a fragment of time during which he knew he could not outrun anything that powerful or fast. A shudder came up through the ground.

Max bent his knees, lunging away as the blurred power smashed the trees two hundred metres to his right. Swirling powder smothered him and the gust of wind from the avalanche pummelled his back. He threw his weight forward and curved away as fast as he could. The avalanche ran parallel to him for more than a hundred metres, growling destruction, like a frustrated carnivore hunting its prey.

A surge of adrenalin pumped through Max's veins. The lethal risk of riding the edge of this terrifying wave was forgotten as a wild excitement overtook him. He laughed out loud. Come on! Come on! I can beat you. I can win!

A boulder-sized chunk of snow broke loose from the main fall and careered towards him. A sudden reality check. Max arched his back, veered inside the block of snow and felt the swirling edge of the avalanche smother his knees. Don't fall! Not now!

And then it was suddenly over. The monster snowfall smashed only metres away from him on to compacted snow, rocks and the treeline.

Spraying crisp, white powder, Max turned the board side-on and stopped. Looking back, he saw that where he and Sayid had been only moments earlier was now unrecognizable.

The silence was almost as frightening as the short-lived roar of the avalanche. Sayid had skimmed beneath snow-laden branches and gone through the other side. He was well out of harm's way. Max gulped the cold air. The voice inside his head was still laughing with victory but Max was under no illusion. If that avalanche had veered his way, he'd have been buried alive and crushed to death.

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