

Prologue



I.

Skeleton Coast, Namibia—Two years ago

As the bottom of the ravine rushed up to meet him, the dry, rocky landscape hurtling past Danny Sherwood miraculously slowed right down to a crawl. Not that the extra time was welcome. All it did was allow the realization to play itself out, over and over, in his harrowed mind. The gut-wrenching, agonizing realization that, without a shadow of a doubt, he would be dead in a matter of seconds.

And yet the day had started off with so much promise.

After almost three years, his work—his and the rest of the team's—was finally done. And, he thought with an inward grin, the rewards would soon be his to enjoy.

It had been a hard slog. The project itself had been daunting enough, from a scientific point of view. The work conditions—the tight deadline, the even tighter security, the virtual exile from family and friends for all those intense and lonely months—were even more of a challenge. But today, as he had looked up at the pure blue sky and breathed in the dry, dusty air of this god-forsaken corner of the planet, it all seemed worthwhile.

There would be no IPO; that much had been made

clear from the start. Neither Microsoft nor Google would be paying big bucks to acquire the technology. The project, he'd been told, was being developed for the military. Still, a significant on-success bonus had been promised to every member of the team. In his case, it would be enough to provide financial security for him, his parents back home, and for any not-too-overly profligate wife he might end up with along with as many kids as he could possibly envisage having—if he ever got around to it. Which he conceivably would, years from now, after he'd had his fun and enjoyed the spoils of his work. For the moment, though, it wasn't on his radar. He was only twenty-nine years old.

Yes, the cushy future that was materializing before him was a far cry from the more austere days of his childhood in Worcester, Massachusetts. As he made his way across the parched desert soil, past the mess tent and the landing pad where the chopper was being loaded for their departure, and over to the project director's tent, he thought back on the experience—from the lab work to the various field tests, culminating with this one, out here in this lost netherworld.

Danny wished he'd be allowed to share the excitement of it all with a few people outside the project. His parents, firstly. He could just imagine how stunned, and proud, they would be. Danny was making good on all the promise, all the lofty expectations they'd heaped on him since, well, birth. His thoughts migrated to his older brother, Matt. He'd get a huge kick out of this. Probably try to get Danny to back him in some dodgy, hare-brained, borderline-legal scheme, but what the hell, there'd be plenty to go around. There were also a few big-headed jerks in the business that he would have loved to gloat to about all this, given the chance. But he knew that any disclosure outside the team was strictly—

strictly—not allowed. That much had also been made clear from the start. The project was covert. The nation's defense was at stake. The word *treason* was mentioned. And so he'd kept his mouth shut, which wasn't too hard. He was used to it. The highly competitive industry he was in had a deeply ingrained subterranean culture. Hundreds of millions of dollars were often at stake. And when it came down to it, the choice between an eight-figure bank account and a dingy cell in a supermax federal penitentiary was a no-brainer.

He was about to knock on the door of the tent—it was a huge, air-conditioned, semirigid wall tent, with a solid door and glass windows—when something made him pull his hand back.

Raised voices. Not just raised, but angry.

Seriously angry.

He leaned closer to the door.

“You should have told me. It's my project, goddammit,” a man's voice erupted. “You should have told me right from the start.”

Danny knew that voice well: Dominic Reece, his mentor and the project's lead scientist—its PI, short for principal investigator. A professor of electrical engineering and computer science at MIT, Reece occupied hallowed ground in Danny's world. He'd taught Danny in several of his formative classes and had kept a close eye on Danny's work throughout his PhD before inviting him to join his team for the project all those months ago. It was an opportunity—and an honor—Danny couldn't possibly pass up. And while Danny knew that the professor had a habit of expressing his opinions more forcefully and vociferously than most, he detected something else in his voice now. There was a hurt, an indignation that he hadn't heard before.

“What would your reaction have been?” The second

man's voice, which wasn't familiar to Danny, was equally inflamed.

"The same," Reece replied emphatically.

"Come on, just think about it for a second. Think about what we can do together. What we can achieve."

Reece's fury was unabated. "I can't help you do this. I can't be a party to it."

"Dom, please—"

"No."

"Think about what we can—"

"No," Reece interrupted. "Forget it. There's no way." The words had an unmistakable finality to them.

A leaden quiet skulked behind the door for a few tense moments; then Danny heard the second man say, "I wish you hadn't said that."

"What the hell does that mean?" Reece shot back.

There was no reply.

Then Reece's voice came back, tinged with a sudden unease. "What about the others? You haven't told any of them, have you." An assertion, not a question.

"No."

"When were you planning on letting them in on your revised mission statement?"

"I wasn't sure. I had to get your answer first. I was hoping you'd help me win them over. Convince them to be part of this."

"Well, that's not going to happen," Reece retorted angrily. "As a matter of fact, I'd like to get them all the hell away from here as soon as possible."

"I can't let you do that, Dom."

The words seemed to freeze Reece in his tracks. "What do you mean, you can't let me do that?" he said defiantly.

A pregnant silence greeted his question. Danny could just visualize Reece processing it.

“So what are you saying? You’re not going to . . .” Reece’s voice trailed off for a beat, then came back, with the added urgency of a sudden, horrible realization. “Jesus. Have you completely lost your mind?”

The outrage in the old man’s tone froze Danny’s spine.

He heard Reece say, “You son of a bitch,” heard thudding footfalls striding toward him, toward the door, heard the second man call out to Reece, “Dom, don’t,” then heard a third voice say, “Don’t do that, Reece,” a voice Danny knew, a harsh voice, the voice of a man who’d creeped Danny out from the moment he’d first met him: Maddox, the project’s shaven-headed, stone-faced head of security, the one with the missing ear and the star-shaped burn around it, the man he knew was nicknamed “The Bullet” by his equally creepy men. Then he heard Reece say, “Go to hell,” and the door swung open, and Reece was suddenly there, standing before Danny, a surprised look in his eyes. Danny heard a distinctive, metallic double-click, a sound he’d heard in a hundred movies but never in real life, the all-too-familiar sound of a gun slide, and the second man, the man who’d been arguing with Reece all along and whom Danny now recognized, turned to the Bullet and yelled, “No—”

—just as a muffled, high-pitched cough echoed from behind Reece, then another, before the scientist jerked forward, his face crunched with pain, his legs giving way as he tumbled onto Danny.

Danny faltered back, the suddenness of it all overwhelming his senses as he struggled to keep Reece from falling to the ground. A warm, sticky feeling seeped down his hands as he struggled to support the stricken man, a thick, dark red liquid gushing out of Reece and soaking Danny’s arms and clothes.

He couldn't hold him. Reece thudded heavily onto the ground, exposing the inside of the tent, the second man standing there, horrified, frozen in shock, next to the Bullet, who had a gun in his hand. Its muzzle was now leveled straight at Danny.

Danny dived to one side as a couple of shots cleaved through the air he'd been occupying; then he just tore off, running away from the tent and the fallen professor as fast as he could.

He was a dozen yards or so away when he dared glance back and saw Maddox emerging from the tent, radio in one hand, the gun in the other, his eyes locking onto the receding Danny like lasers as he bolted after him. With his heart in his throat, Danny sprinted through the temporary campsite—there were a few smaller tents, for the handful of other scientists who, like him, had been recruited for the project. He almost slammed into two of them, top minds from the country's best universities, who were emerging from one of the tents just as he was nearing it.

"They killed Reece," he yelled to them, pausing momentarily and waving frantically back toward the main tent. "They killed him." He looked back and saw Maddox closing in inexorably, seemingly carried forward on winged feet, and took off again, glancing back to see his friends turn to the onrushing man with confused looks, crimson sprouts erupting from their chests as Maddox gunned them down without even slowing.

Danny had ducked sideways, behind the mess tent, out of breath, his leg muscles burning, his mind churning desperately for escape options, when the project's two ageing Jeeps appeared before him, parked under their makeshift shelter. He flung the first car's door open, spurred the engine to life, threw the car into gear, and

floored the accelerator, storming off in a spray of sand and dust just as Maddox rounded the tent.

Danny kept an eye on the rearview mirror as his Jeep charged across the harsh gravel plain. He clenched the steering wheel through bloodless knuckles, confused thoughts assaulting his senses from all directions, his heart feeling like it was jackhammering its way out of his chest, and did the only thing he could think of, which was to keep the car aimed straight ahead, across the deserted terrain, away from the camp, away from that crazed, insane maniac who'd killed his mentor and his friends, all while fighting for a way around the horrifying truth of his predicament, which was that there was nowhere to run. They were in the middle of nowhere, with no villages or habitations anywhere near, not for hundreds of miles.

That was the whole point of being there.

That fear didn't have much time to torment him as a loud, throaty buzz soon burst through his frazzled thoughts. He looked back and saw the camp's chopper coming straight at him, reeling him in effortlessly. He pegged the gas pedal to the floor, hard, sending the Jeep bounding over the small rocks and undulations of the outback, slamming his head against the inside of the car's canvas roof with each jarring leap, avoiding the occasional boulder and the lonely bunches of dried-up quiver trees that dotted the deathly landscape.

The chopper was now on his tail, its engine noise deafening, its rotor wash drowning the Jeep in a swirling sandstorm. Danny strained to see ahead through the tornado of dust, not that it made much difference since there was no road to follow, as the chopper dropped down heavily on the car's roof, crushing the thin struts holding up the roof and almost tearing Danny's head off.

He veered left, then right, fishtailing the car as he fought to avoid the flying predator's claws, sweat seeping down his face, the car careening wildly over rocks and cactus bushes. The chopper was never more than mere feet from the Jeep, connecting with it in thunderous blows, slapping it from side to side like it was toying with a hockey puck. The thought of stopping didn't occur to Danny: He was running on pure adrenaline, his survival instincts choking him in their grasp, an irrational hope of escape propelling him forward. And just then, in that maelstrom of panic and fear, something shifted, something changed, and he sensed the chopper pulling up slightly, felt a spike of hope that maybe, just maybe, he might make it out of that nightmare alive, and the twisting cloud of sand around his Jeep lifted—

—and that was when he saw the canyon, cutting across the terrain dead ahead of him with sadistic inevitability, a vast limestone trench snaking across the landscape like something from the Wild West, the one he'd seen in countless cowboy films and had hoped to visit someday but hadn't yet, the one he now knew, with a savage certainty, that he'd never get a chance to see, as the Jeep flew off the canyon's edge and into the dry desert air.

II.

Wadi Natrun, Egypt

Sitting cross-legged in his usual spot high up on the mountain, with the barren valley and the endless desert spread out below him, the old priest felt a rising unease. During his last few visits to that desolate place, he'd

sensed a more ominous ring to the words that were reverberating inside his head. And today, there was something distinctly portentous about them.

And then it came. A question that sent a straightening spasm shooting up his spine.

“Are you ready to serve?”

His eyes fluttered open, blinking against the soft dawn light. He glanced around instinctively, as he’d done many times before, but it was pointless, as it had been each time before. He was alone up there. There was no one around. Not a soul, human or animal. Nothing at all, as far as the eye could see.

Despite the early-morning chill, sweat droplets sprouted across his bald pate. He swallowed hard, and concentrated again.

And then it came again.

The voice, the whisper, coming from inside his own head.

“The time of our Lord will soon be upon you. Are you prepared to serve?”

Hesitantly, with a tremor in his voice, Father Jerome opened his mouth and stammered, “Yes, of course. Whatever you ask of me. I am your servant.”

There was no reply at first. The old priest could feel the individual droplets of sweat sliding down the rugged skin on his forehead, one after another, skating across the ridge of his brow before dropping onto his cheek. He could almost hear them trickling down, a slow, tortuous progress across his tightened, weather-beaten face.

Then the voice inside his head came back.

“Are you ready to lead your people to salvation? Are you prepared to fight for them? To show them the errors of their ways, even though they may not want to listen?”

“Yes,” Father Jerome cried out, his voice cracking with equal doses of passion and fear. “Yes, of course. But how? When?”

A suffocating silence gripped the mountain; then the voice returned, and simply told him, “Soon.”

Chapter 1



Amundsen Sea, Antarctica—Present day

The static that hissed through the tiny, noise-isolating earpiece disappeared, replaced by the authoritative-yet-soothing voice of the show's anchorman.

"Talk us through why this is happening, Grace?"

Just then, another wall of ice crumbled behind her and collapsed on itself, crackling like distant thunder. Grace Logan—Gracie, to her friends—turned away from the camera and watched as the entire cliff plummeted into the gray-blue water and disappeared in an angry eruption of spray.

Perfect timing, she thought with a glimmer of satisfaction, a brief respite from the solemnity she'd been feeling since she'd arrived on the ship the day before.

Under normal circumstances, this could well have been a pleasant, sunny, late-December day, December being the height of summer in the Southern Hemisphere.

Today was different.

Today, nature was in turmoil.

It felt as if the very fabric of the earth was being ripped apart. Which it was. The slab of ice that was tearing itself off the rest of the continent was the size of Texas.

Not exactly the kind of Christmas present the planet needed.

The breakup of the ice shelf was now in its third day, and it was only getting started. The cataclysm had kicked up a ghostly mist that thinned out the sun's warming rays, and the cold was starting to get to Gracie, even with the adrenaline coursing through her. She could see that the rest of her team—Dalton Kwan, the young, breezy Hawaiian cameraman she'd worked with regularly over the past three years, and Howard "Finch" Fincher, their older, über-fastidious and annoyingly stoic veteran producer—were also far from comfortable, but the footage they were airing was well worth it, especially since, as far as she could tell, they were the only news crew around.

She'd been out there for over an hour, standing on the starboard observation deck of the RRS *James Clark Ross*, and despite the thermals and the gloves, her fingers and toes were shivering. The royal research ship, a beefy three-hundred-foot floating oceanographic and geophysical laboratory operated by the British Antarctic Survey project, was currently less than half a mile off the coast of Western Antarctica, its distinctive deep red hull the only blip of color in an otherwise bleak palette of whites, blues, and grays. Gracie, Dalton, and Finch had been on the continent for a couple of weeks, shooting footage in the Terra Firma Islands for her big global-warming documentary. They had been ready to pack up and head home for Christmas, which was only days away, when the call from the news desk back in D.C. had come in, informing them that the shelf's breakup had started. The news hadn't been widely circulated at that point; a contact of the network inside the NSIDC—the National Snow and Ice Data Center, whose scientists used satellite data to track changes in the spread and thickness of the polar ice caps—had given them the heads-up on the sly. With the competition snoozing and the *James Clark Ross*

a day's sail away from the action and already heading toward it, Gracie and her crew had jumped on the opportunity for an exclusive scoop. The BAS had graciously agreed to have them on board to cover the event, going so far as to arrange for a Royal Navy chopper to ferry them in from the island.

Several of the ship's onboard scientists were also on deck, watching the walls of ice disintegrate. A couple of them were filming, using handheld video cameras. Most of the crew were also out there, staring in resigned and awed silence.

Gracie turned back to face the camera and pulled her microphone closer. In between the irregular, thunderous collapses of the cliff face, the air reverberated with the distant, muffled retorts of the ice's tortured movement farther inland.

"This breakup was probably caused by a number of factors, Jack, but the main suspect in this very complicated investigation is just plain old meltwater."

She heard more hissing as the signal bounced off a couple of satellites and traveled ten thousand miles to the network's climate-controlled newsroom in D.C. and back; then Roxberry's voice returned, slightly confused. "Meltwater?"

"That's right, Jack," she explained. "Pools of water that build up on the surface of the ice as it melts. This meltwater is heavier than the ice it's sitting on, so—basic law of gravity—it finds its way down into cracks, and as more and more water pushes through, it acts like a wedge and these cracks grow into rifts that grow into canyons, and if there's enough meltwater to keep pushing through, the ice shelf eventually just snaps off."

The physics of it was simple. The highest, coldest, and windiest continent on the planet, an area one and a half times as big as the United States, was almost entirely

covered by a dome of ice over two miles thick at its center. Heavy snowfalls blanket it in winter, then spread downward by gravity, flowing like ice-cold lava to the coast. And when this ice floe runs out of land, it keeps going, beyond the edge of land, but it doesn't sink: It floats, cantilevering over the sea in what we refer to as ice shelves. They can be over a mile thick at the point where they start floating, tapering to a no-less-staggering quarter mile at the water's edge, where they end in cliffs of a hundred feet or more above the waterline.

There had been a handful of major breakups in the last decade, but none this big. Also, they were rarely captured live on camera. They were usually only detected long after the event, after scrutinizing and comparing satellite images. And even though what Gracie was witnessing was only a localized portion of the overall upheaval—the collapse of towering cliffs of ice at the shelf's seaward edge—it was still an astounding and deeply troubling sight. In twelve years in television news, a career she'd dived into straight after getting her BA in political science from Cornell, Gracie had witnessed a lot of tragedies, and this one ranked right up there with the worst of them.

She was watching the planet fall apart—literally. “So the big question then is,” Roxberry asked, “why is it happening now? I mean, as I understand it, this ice shelf has been around since the end of the last ice age, and that was, what, twelve thousand years ago?”

“It's happening because of us, Jack. Because of the greenhouse gases we're generating. We're seeing it at both poles, here, up in the Arctic, in Greenland. And it isn't just part of a natural cycle. Almost every expert I've talked to is now convinced that the melting is accelerating and telling me we're close to some kind of tipping point, a point of no return—because of man-made global warming.”

Another block of ice disintegrated and crashed into the sea.

“And the concern here is that this ice shelf breaking off and melting will contribute to rising sea levels?” Roxberry asked.

“Well, not directly. Most of this ice shelf is already floating on water, so it doesn’t affect sea levels in itself. Think of it as an ice cube floating in a glass of water. When it melts, it doesn’t raise the level of water in the glass.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“I guess I’m not the only one who’s forgotten their sixth-grade physics.” She grinned.

“But you said there’s an indirect effect on global sea levels.” Roxberry’s voice exuded expertise, as if he were generously allowing her a chance to display her knowledge.

“Well, this area, the West Antarctic ice sheet, is the one place on the planet that scientists have been worried about most, in terms of ice melts. More specifically, they’re worried about the massive glaciers sitting on land, behind this ice shelf. They’re not floating.”

“So if they melted,” Roxberry added, “sea levels would rise.”

“Exactly. Up until now, ice shelves like this one have been keeping back the glaciers, sort of like a cork that’s holding in the contents of a bottle. Once the ice shelf breaks off, the cork’s gone. There’s nothing left to stop the glaciers from sliding into the sea—and if they do, the global sea levels rise. And this melting is happening much faster than forecasts had predicted. Even the data we have from last year is now considered too optimistic. In terms of disaster scenarios due to climate change, Antarctica was considered a sleeping giant. Well, the giant’s now awake. And, by the looks of it, he’s really grumpy.”

Roxberry quipped, “I’m trying real hard to avoid saying this could just be the tip of the iceberg—”

“A wise choice, Jack,” she interjected. She could just picture the smug, self-satisfied grin lighting up his permatanned face and groaned inwardly at the thought. “A grateful audience salutes you.”

“But that’s what we’re talking about here, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely. Once these glaciers slide into the sea, it’ll be too late to do anything about it, and . . .”

Her voice suddenly trailed off and dried up, as something distracted her: a ripple of sudden commotion, shrieks and gasps of shock and outstretched arms pointing out at the ice shelf. The words still caught in her throat as she saw Dalton’s head rise from behind the viewfinder of the camera and look beyond her. Gracie spun around, facing away from the camera. And that was when she saw it.

In the sky. A couple of hundred feet above the collapsing ice shelf.

A bright, shimmering sphere of light.

It just appeared there, and wasn’t moving.

Gracie concentrated her gaze on it and inched over to the railing. She didn’t understand what she was looking at, but whatever it was, she couldn’t take her eyes off it.

The object—no, she wasn’t even sure it was an object. It had a spherical shape, but somehow, it didn’t seem . . . *physical*. It had an ethereal lightness to it, as if the air itself was glowing. And its brightness wasn’t uniform. It was more subtle, graded, intense at its core, then gradually thinning out, as in a close-up of an eye. It had an unstable, fragile quality to it. Like melting ice, or, rather, just water, suspended in midair and lit up, if that were possible, only Gracie knew it wasn’t.

She darted a look at Dalton, who was angling the camera toward the sighting. “Are you getting this?” she blurted.

“Yeah, but,” he shot back, looking over at her, his face scrunched up in sheer confusion, “what the hell is it?”