

1

“Hey, Evan. Lunch?”

Evan Marshall put the ziplock bag aside and stood up, massaging his lower back. He'd spent the last ninety minutes with his face inches above the ground, collecting samples from the glacial sediment, and it took his eyes a moment to adjust. The voice had been Sully's, and now Marshall made him out: a squat, slightly portly figure in a fur-lined parka, standing, arms crossed, thirty yards up the steep valley. Behind him rose the terminal tongue of the Fear glacier, a rich, mysterious blue riddled with white fracture lines. Large ice boulders lay scattered along its base like so many monstrous diamonds, along with daggerlike shards of ancient lava. Marshall opened his mouth to warn Sully against standing so close: the glacier was as dangerous as it was pretty, since the weather had turned warmer and the ice front was calving off deadly chunks at

an unprecedented rate. Then he thought better of it. Gerard Sully was proud of his position as nominal leader and didn't like being told what to do. Instead, Marshall just shook his head. "I think I'll pass, thanks."

"Suit yourself." Sully turned toward Wright Faraday, the party's evolutionary biologist, who was busying himself a little downslope. "How's about it, Wright?"

Faraday glanced up, watery blue eyes oddly magnified behind tortoiseshell frames. A digital camera dangled from a heavy strap around his neck. "Not me," he said with a frown, as if the thought of stopping to eat in the middle of a workday was somehow heretical.

"Starve yourselves if you want to. Just don't ask me to bring anything back."

"Not even a Popsicle?" asked Marshall.

Sully smiled thinly. He was about as short as Napoleon, and radiated a combination of egotism and insecurity that Marshall found especially annoying. He'd been able to put up with it back at the university, where Sully was just one arrogant scientist among many, but up here on the ice—with nowhere to escape—it had grown irksome. Perhaps, he reflected, he should be relieved that their expedition had only a few weeks to play out.

"You look tired," Sully said. "Out walking again last night?"

Marshall nodded.

"You'd better be careful. You might fall into a lava tube and freeze to death."

"All right, Mom. I'll be careful."

"Or run into a polar bear, or something."

"That's all right. I'm starved for some good conversation."

"It's no joke, you refusing to carry a gun and all."

Marshall didn't like the direction this was leading. "Look, if you run into Ang, tell him I've got more samples here for transport back to the lab."

"I'll do that. He'll be thrilled."

Marshall watched the climatologist make his way carefully past

them, down the rubble toward the foot of the mountain and their base. He called it “their base,” but of course it belonged to the U.S. government: officially known as the Mount Fear Remote Sensing Installation and decommissioned almost fifty years ago, it consisted of a low, gray, sprawling, institutional-looking structure, festooned with radar domes and other detritus of the cold war. Beyond it lay a frigid landscape of permafrost and lava deposits spewed ages ago from the mountain’s guts, gullied and split as if the earth had torn itself apart in geologic agony. In many places, the surface was hidden beneath large snowfields. There were no roads, no other structures, no living things. It was as hostile, as remote, as alien as the moon.

He stretched as he looked out over the forbidding landscape. Even after four weeks on-site, it still seemed hard to believe that anyplace could be so barren. But then the entire scientific expedition had seemed a little unreal from the start. Unreal that a media giant like Terra Prime had picked their grant applications for approval: four scientists from Northern Massachusetts University with nothing in common save an interest in global warming. Unreal that the government had given them clearance to use Fear Base, admittedly at significant expense and with strict limitations. And unreal that the warming trend itself was occurring with such breathtaking, frightening speed.

He turned away with a sigh. His knees hurt from hours of crouching over the terminal moraine, collecting samples. His fingertips and nose were half frozen. And to add insult to injury, the snow had turned to thin freezing sleet that was now slowly seeping through three layers of clothing and settling into the most intimate crevices of his person. But daylight was brief these days, and their expedition’s window was fast closing. He was keenly aware of how little time he had left. There would be plenty of food back in Woburn, Massachusetts, and plenty of time to eat it.

As he turned to retrieve the sample bags, he heard Faraday speak again. “Five years ago, even two, I’d never believe it. *Rain.*”

“It’s not rain, Wright. It’s sleet.”

“Close enough. Rain in the Zone, with winter coming on? Unbelievable.”

The “Zone” was a vast stretch of northeastern Alaska, hard against the Arctic Ocean, sandwiched between the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge on one side and the Yukon’s Ivvavik National Park on the other. It was a tract so cold and desolate that nobody wanted anything to do with it: temperatures struggled to get above zero only a few months out of the year. Years ago, the government branded it the Federal Wilderness Zone and promptly forgot all about it. There were, Marshall reflected, probably no more than two dozen people in all its two million acres: their own scientific team of five, the base’s skeleton crew of four, a small band of Native Americans to the north, and a scattering of backpackers and loners who were too hard-core or eccentric to settle for anything but the most remote. How strange to think there were few people farther north on the planet than their little group.

A sudden, tremendous report, like the crack of a cannon, shook the glacial valley with the violence of an earthquake. The sound echoed across the tundra below them, violating the profound silence, bouncing back and forth like a tennis ball, growing slowly fainter as it receded into endless distance. Above, the face of the glacier had shorn away, tons of ice and snow adding to the frozen rubble lying along its forward edge. Marshall felt his heart lurch uncomfortably in his chest. No matter how many times he heard that sound, its violence always came as a shock.

Faraday pointed toward it. “See? That’s exactly what I mean. A valley glacier like the Fear should taper to a nice, thin ice front, with a minimum of meltwater and a healthy percolation zone. But this one is calving like a tidewater glacier. I’ve been measuring the basal melt—”

“That’s Sully’s job, not yours.”

“—and it’s off the scale.” Faraday shook his head. “Rain, unprecedented melting—and there are other things happening, too. Like the northern lights the last few nights. You notice them?”

“Of course. A single color—it was spectacular. And unusual.”

“Unusual.” Faraday repeated the word thoughtfully.

Marshall did not reply. In his experience, every scientific expedition, even one as small as this, had its Cassandra figure. Wright Faraday—with his prodigious learning, his pessimistic outlook on life, his dark theories and outrageous predictions—played the role expertly. Marshall gave the biologist a covert glance. Despite knowing him casually as a university colleague, and now having spent a month almost continually in his presence, he didn’t really have a good idea what made the man tick.

Still—Marshall thought as he filled and sealed a fresh bag, recorded the sample’s location in a notebook, then measured and photographed the extraction site—Faraday had a point. And that point was one reason he himself was collecting samples at an almost frantic pace. A glacier was a near-perfect place for his kind of research. During its formation, as it accumulated snow, it trapped organic remains: pollen, plant fibers, animal remains. Later, as the glacier retreated, melting slowly away, it gracefully yielded up those secrets once again. This was an ideal gift for a paleoecologist, a treasure trove from the past.

Except there was nothing slow or graceful about this glacier’s retreat. It was falling to pieces with alarming speed—and taking its secrets with it.

As if on cue, there was another ear-shattering explosion from the face of the glacier, another shuddering cascade of ice. Marshall glanced toward the sound, feeling a mixture of irritation and impatience. A much larger section of the glacier’s face had fallen away this time. With a sigh, he bent toward his specimens, then abruptly swiveled back in the direction of the glacier. Among the fractured ice boulders at its base, he could see that part of the mountain face beneath had been exposed by the calving. He squinted at it for a moment. Then he called over to Faraday.

“You’ve got the field glasses, don’t you?”

“Right here.”

Marshall walked toward him. The biologist had pulled the binoculars from a pocket and was holding them out with a heavily

gloved hand. Marshall took them, breathed on the eyepieces to warm them, wiped them free of mist, then raised them toward the glacier.

“What is it?” Faraday said, excitement kindling in his voice. “What do you see?”

Marshall licked his lips and stared at what the fallen ice had revealed. “It’s a cave,” he replied.