

ICE TOMB

Chapter One ~ Antarctica

It was balmy in Antarctica the day the science team disappeared. The wind had dipped the thermometer from a pleasant -20°F to a more refreshing -35°F, but the temperature made no difference to the stalwart beakers of the south. It was October 14 in the year 2039 – the same year that China became a democratic nation, an 8.0 earthquake struck the heart of Los Angeles and the first lunar residents were settling on the moon. All these world events meant nothing to the people clustered around the radio in the communications center of McMurdo Station, the American science outpost in the southern continent. They were intent on the crackling static.

Cathy Jones, one of the National Science Foundation’s guides to the *deep south*, was hunkered down amidst the penguins and the beakers, twisting her fingers around her short coils of copper hair and chewing on her lower lip. She was monitoring radio communications with the team along with ten other people crammed into the tiny room. One entire wall of the room was filled from top to bottom with electronics within silver boxes, black dials and knobs projecting from the metal sheaths. The equipment was devoted not only to picking up radio signals throughout the continent but to patching into satellite communications as well. A bank of computer screens flashing for prompts lined a counter below and a mishmash of wires was connected to the hazard of equipment. On a desk in front of Cathy rested a couple of antiquated microphones and headsets. As they sat in silence, a blast of wind rattled the Chalet building on its foundation, but it was the crisp voice on the radio that rattled her even more.

“Holy cow! Did you get a load of that?”

“Jimmy?” Cathy squeaked as the impact of his voice hit her, after the long silence from his end.

“Still here, Cath,” he responded in a rich baritone clip. “Bet you were worried.”

“I’ll say,” she breathed. The group of men and women around her let out a collective sigh. There were five scientists and three senior managers for the NSF along with the two communications

experts. They'd been jammed in this room ever since Jimmy's plane had touched down in the Transantarctic Mountains, four hundred miles southeast of McMurdo Station. The last ten minutes, much to the chagrin of the white-knuckled lip-chewing group, his signal had been lost.

Gottlieb, the Antarctic Sciences' section head, nodded vigorously, his silver-streaked hair flipping into his eyes. "We're not about to lose you, Albright," he intoned. "It's enough that our geologists from the Beardmore Camp have gone missing."

"We're all still here, Arnold. Although Jeanna and Tom look a little pale."

Really? thought Cathy. It would make sense that Tom Debow, the slight astrophysicist with the slicked-back hair and nervous tic to his left eye, would be a little chalked from a hardy expedition, or rescue mission – however they were going to coin it in the history books. But Jeanna Sawyer was a glaciologist. They didn't come any tougher. Despite the body of a beanpole and a sweet, apple-cheeked face, she'd set you straight in a minute, if you thought she was a pushover, with a left hook that had even laid Sal on his butt more than once. Jimmy hadn't even mentioned Sal. Of course Sal Vitroni, the helicopter pilot, wasn't worth mentioning. He was ex-Navy, heavy with muscle, and his eyes had a Medusa quality that had made Cathy shiver more than once. A bloody earthquake wouldn't shake him up.

"W-what's the problem?" Cathy sputtered out, grinding her fingernails into her palms.

A pause came after the slight chirp of the radio. "It seems we've found some bodies," Jimmy finally said.

Andy and Jamal gasped behind her. "Dave? Mike?" They choked out the names of their fellow geologists.

"No, guys. Not ours. But they're definitely d-dead."

A chill ran through Cathy, as much from Jimmy's tone as his words. He was usually so . . . steady.

"It's like the killing fields here," cried Jeanna. "Only in ice."

"Let me get this straight, Jim," said Gottlieb. "Are we talking volcano?"

“No, Arnold. This isn’t Vesuvius. These people froze to death, rather abruptly. I’d say they’ve been here for a while.”

Cathy frowned and squeezed her broad shoulders through the mesh of bodies to get even closer to the radio. It was hard to imagine confronting all those corpses in the ice, but at least they weren’t their friends and colleagues. “A long time” meant there was still hope.

“How long do you suppose?” asked Gottlieb.

“Hard to say, since they’re frozen. They’re sort of deep in the ice, though. Could be a few hundred years.”

This time everyone frowned. “Um, I thought this continent was uninhabited until the last eighty years,” said Jamal, shaking the dreadlocks on his head.

“Well, everyone thought that Christopher Columbus was the first European to reach the New World,” said Jimmy with a slight lilt to his voice. “When the Vikings actually beat him by about four hundred years.”

“So you’re saying these are bloody Vikings?” snorted Andy through his bristly mustache.

Jimmy chortled. “You’re a piece of work, Andy. Think for a minute. You’re all scientists – except for a few bureaucrats and that wicked beauty nestled between you.” Cathy’s face grew warm. Gottlieb and his entourage scowled, although the NSF manager had a quirk to his lips.

“We’ve learned through extensive study that everything we know, or believe we know, is relative. Einstein taught us that. From our position, it looked like we were the first, given our own little slice of history. But we should never be so arrogant as to believe that we are like Christopher Columbus, that we’re one step ahead of the other guy. Usually we find out, to our extreme embarrassment, that we’re one step behind.”

“Is this a philosophy lesson or a science expedition?” asked Gottlieb.

“I thought it was a rescue mission,” said Jeanna. “But there’s... nothing left to rescue here.”

Cathy grimaced. It was hard enough to hear Jimmy a little off the mark, but Jeanna?

“So you turn around and come back,” said Gottlieb.

“No,” said Jimmy firmly. “This tunnel leads to something. It’s where all the unusual heat is coming from. Maybe we can still find Dave, Mike, and the others.”

“Jim,” Cathy broke in. The way she clipped his name from affectionate to imploring made him pause.

“It’ll be okay, Cath.”

“Dave and Mike disappeared. These people are dead. How can you say ‘it’ll be okay?’”

“Because we’re being cautious,” said Jimmy.

“By plunging through an icy graveyard?”

“Cathy,” said Gottlieb. “It’s Jim’s call. He’s a big boy.”

Cathy glared at him, but fell silent. What more could she do? They’d only allowed her to monitor the situation out of courtesy to Jim, since he was McMurdo’s chief volcanologist. She had no business in the communications room unless she was on the other side of the mike, guiding an expedition. Which is where she should be, but Jimmy had vetoed her attempt. He was well aware of the danger. They were *all* aware of the danger. That’s why there were ten people here instead of two. When one or two people disappear in Antarctica, it’s a tragedy, but not uncommon. When five or six, it’s time to investigate. When ten...

Oh, she couldn’t go there. Not with Jimmy in that hollow tube of ice surrounded by corpses.

“Well, this is interesting,” Jimmy’s voice crackled over the radio again. “Seems to be some sort of structure. It’s so deep under the ice you’d have to crack it with dynamite to build anything here. Or maybe melt the ice with a thermodynamic event.”

“Such as a fissure in the earth’s crust?” Jamal suggested.

“Possible. But then you’d have a heck of a lot of water to pump out in order to build something this big.”

“Define ‘this big,’” said Gottlieb, stroking his chin.

“About fifty stories.” The room was filled with blinking eyes. “Oh, here. There’s a nice little access tunnel, ten by twenty.”

“Sounds really damn little,” rasped Andy.

“We’re going up now. Some sort of ramp. Now this you’ve got to see.”

“Try describing it instead,” said Gottlieb in his calm, placating manner.

“We’ve come to a round, hollow metal tube. Like a huge barrel used to store hazardous material. All that’s missing is the skull and crossbones sign.”

“Get out of there!” shouted Cathy.

“Cath, darling. You have no sense of humor. You know how I like to exaggerate.”

“Sure,” she snapped. “Like when you mentioned the fireworks of lava on Mount Erebus. They burned right through your suit.”

“And I returned, still kicking and driving you crazy.”

“You’d darn well better this time too.”

“Are you finished?” asked Gottlieb, raising his eyebrows.

She nodded, although she couldn’t help but shoot him another glare.

“Tell me about this tube,” said Gottlieb. “Are you standing in front of it?”

“I’m standing in it, Arnold. It has a diameter of about eight feet... feet... feet. Oh, look at that. It echoes too. You know I’ve seen something like this before. It was—”

His voice cut out as a loud gong sounded over the radio. Cathy jumped to her feet. “Jim?” A repetitive hammering noise crackled in and out through the receiver. “Jim!” she screamed. Then she heard them over the bounding noise. Voices. Some high-pitched, some low-toned, one unmistakably baritone. Screaming.

She was tugging at her hair, ready to rip it right out of her head. She wanted to jump through the mike and somehow haul him out. Before she could do anything, the gongs stopped, but the

screaming continued for another minute. “Jim?” she said faintly, her chest tight as a coiled spring.

“Oh hell!”

He was still alive. “Jim, are you all right?”

“Right as rain. Just had my head pounded out. I don’t know what the heck this is, but it sure is loud. I could feel the vibrations right through my body. Ears are still throbbing.”

“Turn around,” said Cathy. “Get out of there now.”

“We’re all okay,” he said, ignoring her as usual when she tried to talk sense into him. “This thing is amazing. Somebody build a giant MRI machine.”

“Did you hear me!” she shouted.

“Calm down,” said Gottlieb severely. “I don’t want to make you leave.”

Cathy bit down on her tongue.

“What did you say, Jim?” he prompted.

“You know, Nuclear Magnetic Resonance Imaging. Uses sound waves to check out the atoms in your body. How does it work again, Tom?”

“Oh,” said Tom a little vaguely. “Yes, well, atoms tend to spin slightly off the vertical axis. What the MRI does is use a giant magnet to make the protons from the nucleuses in the atoms line up at the same time as radio waves pulse energy through the scanner. The protons absorb the energy required to make them spin in a different direction.”

“Like stopping and spinning a top in the opposite direction,” said Jimmy.

“Right,” said Tom. “Are you going to let me do this?”

“Sorry,” said Jimmy sheepishly. “Go on.”

“Anyway, by turning the magnets on and off very rapidly, they can take slices of the human body down to the atoms by altering their spin when they’re on, then, when they’re turned off, the atoms release the excess energy they absorbed from the radio waves, giving us an image.”

“I was in one once,” interrupted Jim. “Checking out my liver for a tumor. That was when I was on the sauce after my wife died. Bad time.” He chuckled mirthlessly.

No one else did.

“It was like this, only smaller. Drum rolls of sound. Very claustrophobic. Very loud. I wonder who’s looking for tumors here.”

“Jim, I think you should... turn back,” said Gottlieb.

“Are you kidding?” said Jim. “This is better than a volcano. Somebody built a giant lab down here. And I’m going to figure out its purpose.”

“Dammit, Jimmy...” Cathy tried to blink away the tears, but they crept out anyway.

“But I’ll send Jeanna, Tom, and Sal back to the helo.”

“Not on your life,” growled Sal. He’d been unusually quiet up until this point, but now his military background came into play. “I never leave a man behind.”

“I don’t want to go either,” said Jeanna in a stronger voice than Cathy had heard earlier. This was the Jeanna she knew. “This place is so strange and miraculous, like science on steroids. I want to discover who made it.”

“I’m staying too,” said Tom, surprising everyone. “There’s something almost celestial about this place.”

“Are you feeling the neutrinos?” grunted Andy.

“Maybe,” said Tom.

Andy shrugged and rolled his eyes. “Nutcase,” he whispered.

“You have to be, to be a physicist,” said Jamal. “A lot of genius and a little bit of insanity. That way you can swing your mind around anything.”

“Are you insulting me?” said Tom in his high-pitched whiny voice.

“Never,” said Jamal. “You the man, Tom.”

“And don’t you forget it, rock-splitter.”

“Hey,” said Jamal.

“Well, if you’re all in agreement,” said Gottlieb, “you have my permission to go forward.”

“Thanks for the go ahead,” Jimmy said snidely.

Everyone in the tiny room laughed, except Cathy. They all knew that, despite Gottlieb’s title as the head of the National Science Foundation in Antarctica, his authority meant nothing to these bull-headed scientists. Cathy clenched her sweaty palms. Sometimes, despite their PhDs and their research papers and their various titles, they were just idiots.

On the radio the voices had petered out and a pall of silence hung over it – nothing punctured it but the clip-clop of boots on the metal tunnel. Finally Jimmy broke through with a gasp.

“What is it, Jim?” asked Gottlieb.

“We have a chamber, maybe fourteen feet high. Red granite blocks on top. Small tunnels extending out the sides at oblique angles. There’s a layer of dust on the floor. No exit. Looks like a dead end.”

“Smells funny in here,” said Jeanna.

“Yeah, “ said Sal. “Something like a burnt Christmas dinner.”

“Burnt a few turkeys in your day, have you Sal?” asked Andy, winking at the others.

“More than a few—”

“I don’t see anything funny about this,” said Cathy. “You’ve reached a dead end. There are no people except dead ones outside. It smells like burnt flesh. Does that tell you anything!”

“Cathy!” Gottlieb swung around, his teeth grinding together.

“Maybe you’re right, love,” said Jimmy quietly. “This does look like ash. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“What’s that!” yelled Jeanna, her voice pitched to a soprano shriek.

“There’s a door rolling shut. Run, dammit, run.”

Cathy’s fingers bit into Andy’s shoulder beside her. He didn’t even flinch. His usually comical face was ashen.

“Oh God, we’re trapped!”

“What’s that!”

“Light of some sort.”

“Fire,” said Jimmy in an oddly monotone voice. “Love you, Cath.”

There were ear-splitting shrieks followed by a deafening roar, then silence.

Cathy’s knees buckled and the world blackened around her.