

PROLOGUE

*Burnt Mountain Viral Research Centre,
100 kilometres north of Fairbanks, Alaska.*

Daytime at Burnt Mountain was a cold, grainy Alaskan twilight.

It was snowing, gently now, but it was clear that the overnight falls had been much heavier. The wind whipped down the mountainside into the valley, gusting the snow into whirls and flurries. Every now and then the sun ghosted through the clouds, giving the scene an unearthly glow, but just as quickly it was gone. The air itself seemed to crackle with ice.

There was little that could survive around Burnt Mountain in midwinter. Not man, nor beast, not even the smallest of creatures: insect, microbe, virus.

Tony "Stony" Crowe wiped snow from the faceplate of his armoured bio-suit. He shifted his eyes from the grey haze of the sky back to the telescopic sights of his Heckler & Koch XM8, scanning the snow-covered roofs of the small complex of buildings in the valley below. Even softened

by drifting snow, the flat grey shapes carried a palpable menace.

At the centre was a large industrial-looking building that could be mistaken for a factory. Four long, narrow wings extended from each corner of the building. At one end a squat concrete block structure sat between two of the wings. From this distance, through the snow, it looked like a crouching beast.

Tall twin-spiked security fences surrounded the entire compound, hanging heavy with their crop of snow, but the gates were strangely, ominously, open.

Sergeant Colin “Mandy” Manderson crawled into Crowe’s vision, keeping low behind a snowdrift. The tinted glass of his faceplate hid his face, but the identity of the lanky Texan was in no doubt from the large red “2” velcroed onto his suit at the shoulders, just below the insignia of the USABRF. United States Army Bioterrorism Response Force.

Crowe keyed his throat mike. “Perimeter team, all clear?”

“Nothing moving but the snow,” a quiet voice reported in his earpiece.

“Okay, move ‘em out.” Crowe gave Manderson a hand signal as he spoke.

A sharp gust of wind kicked snow across his faceplate, and when he cleared it Manderson was gone. Crowe shook icicles from his weapon and rose to his feet, shuffling carefully after the Texan.

Crowe took position at the back of the team, watching his men, a nest of deadly white vipers, slithering silently down the hillside.

They broke cover at the base of the gully and sprinted the few metres to the snow-logged fence at the perimeter of the grounds, before skirting around to the gates, embedded in ice, rigidly open a gap of about a metre.

The team snaked through and, on a signal from Crowe, dropped to the ground and crawled through the packed snow across to the wall of the building, below the line of sight of the small, snow-encrusted windows that were scattered, seemingly randomly, along the length of the wall.

Crowe keyed his mike. "Perimeter team?"

"Still all clear, you are good to go."

"Do it!"

Smith and Miller had the door off its hinges in a second with two close-range shotgun blasts, the shock wave rippling cracks through the ice coating the wall. They swung back to let the others pass, weapons at the firing position.

Manderson was first through, Crowe on his heels. They fanned out automatically, seeking fields of fire, finding targets, taking in the scene.

Whatever Crowe expected to find, this wasn't it.

It was as if they had burst into a fairytale. A sparkling, iridescent, Disney-esque world. It was the reception area come guard station. Everything – the walls, the security desk, even the guard's telephone – was covered with a

thin sheen of frosted ice, making pretty, twinkling stars in the flickering glare of the fluorescent tubes that lined the ceiling. Behind a large and solid-looking desk, a riveted metal door led further into the interior of the building.

"Lights are on, but nobody's home." It was Manderson's voice in his ear.

"Heating system has been shut down," Miller reported, looking at one of his instruments. "It's colder than the devil's armpit in here."

"Leave it that way," Crowe ordered. Whatever had happened, this was not the right time to start circulating air around the building.

"Over here," Smith said urgently, and Crowe moved quickly towards him. Behind the security desk there was a pile of rags on the floor, covered, like everything else, with a frosting of ice crystals.

Not rags, he realised, as Smith used the snout of his XM8 to spread the fabric out, the ice crackling as he did so. It was a uniform. A guard's uniform. More than that, a belt, shoes, even underwear. A gun.

Everything, in fact, except the guard himself.

"Looks like he stripped off and ran out there naked!" Smith made a vague nodding movement in the direction of the main doors.

"He wouldn't have lasted two minutes," Crowe murmured.

* * *

It took them three hours to check the complex. Every room the same. Ice-covered walls, ice-covered floors, ice-covered everything; everything, that was, except people. In room after room they found piles of clothes. Discarded hastily in untidy ice-covered heaps on the floor.

It was Mandy Manderson who eventually figured out the ice.

"Sprinklers," he said, pointing to a red nozzle in the ceiling of one of the passages. "There must have been a fire in the complex somewhere. Activated the sprinklers. When the heating shut off, it all froze."

Crowe nodded. But they had found no trace of a fire.

"Where are all the people?" Miller voiced their thoughts. "It looks like they just stripped off and ran outside into the snow."

"Maybe it was a nudist convention," Mandy drawled, with a sideways glance at Crowe.

"Maybe they were abducted by aliens," Miller contributed.

"Yeah, nudist aliens," Mandy said.

"Maybe some new virus got loose," Smith suggested. "Made 'em go crazy."

Crowe shook his head, his face expressionless inside the bulletproof glass of the bio-suit. "There'll be some rational explanation for this," he said.

He crossed to a window at the end of the passageway and stared outside as if expecting to see the missing scientists frolicking in the sub-zero temperatures. The

wind was gusting harder now, funnelled down the valley by the mountains ahead and behind them. It picked up snow and hurled it at the building in long driving blasts that threatened to smash through the toughened glass of the window.

“Remind you of something?” Manderson said softly, moving up beside him.

Crowe glanced up at him. “Novosibirsk?”

“It’s happened again, hasn’t it?”

Crowe looked at the icy fury outside and said nothing.

BOOK ONE
THE CHIMERA PROJECT

1. THE END

Saturday, September 26

The end of the world started with a rush of adrenaline for Tane Williams and Rebecca Richards standing on the roof on an inner city hotel, staring at the streetlights and the darkened pavement twenty-one storeys below.

It had been raining earlier and the lights reflected in shimmering bursts from the wet road and small puddles on the footpath.

"You ready?" Rebecca asked with a grin.

Tane grinned back to hide his nervous gulp and checked the carabiner on his rope one more time.

"Whenever you are!"

"Let's do it!" she said, and turned, backing slowly towards the edge of the building.

Tane stepped in a shallow pool of rainwater as he too put his back to the dim sights and sounds of the busy Auckland street below.

Just for a moment he looked up at the stars. They pierced the haze of lights from the buildings around them,

scattered like salt-sprinkles on a black satin tablecloth. The rain had stopped many hours ago and the night was clear and beautiful.

"Tane?" Rebecca's voice dragged him back to earth once again. He took his eyes off the stars and focused on the rope.

That was the only way he was going to step off the edge of a twenty-one storey building; by focusing on the one thing that would prevent him from plummeting to certain, and grisly, death: the rope.

"Remember to stay together," Rebecca said, "or we'll tear the hooks out of the banner."

The banner was resting on the ledge between them, about ten metres in length, tightly rolled into a long vinyl cylinder, clipped onto each of their belts. Tane didn't think there was much chance of it tearing, but there was a chance of it pulling one of them in the wrong direction and what that might lead to he didn't want to think about.

Rebecca stepped off the edge of the building and, before he could think any more about it, Tane followed. The vinyl banner slid smoothly off the ledge and hung suspended between them.

A light gust of breeze gave Tane a gentle reminder that he was high above the ground, on the outside of a building, but other than that it was no different to all the times they had practised at the indoor climbing wall, or on the abseiling course at the school camp.

Tane steadied himself on the side of the building,

feeling the rope accept his weight, and looked around. The moon was lurking about, low on the horizon, coating with silver the apartment blocks and high-rise offices that surrounded them.

He took a step, feeding out the rope, getting a good grip with each boot before taking another step, walking backwards down the side of the building.

His boot slipped at one point and his knee slammed into the side of the building with a thud. He was wearing kneepads though, so no damage was done.

They lowered themselves past a window and Tane's breath caught in his throat as he stared in, right at the face of a security guard.

He threw a panicky glance at Rebecca, but she just put her finger to her lips. Looking back he saw why.

The guard smoothed back his hair, straightened his tie, and licked his thumb before using it to flatten his eyebrows. He struck a couple of staunch, macho poses, jutting his chin forward like an old-time movie star.

Inside the brightly lit hotel corridor, Tane realised the glass was acting like a mirror. The guard was looking at himself, not at Tane, in the darkness outside.

Even so, they waited for the guard to turn away, before continuing down.

It seemed to take forever, but it was really just a few seconds, until Rebecca called out, "Here." Her words carried softly to him in a puff of breeze.

Tane looked around and at first could not find what

he was looking for. Then he saw it. The large metal eyelet firmly set into the concrete of the building. It was some kind of stay for the window cleaning platforms.

The banner had a large spare carabiner attached, for exactly this purpose, and he twisted his hip around until he could attach the carabiner to the eyelet, testing it before unclipping the banner from his belt. He took a padlock out of his pocket and clipped it around the carabiner and the eyelet.

It would take a hacksaw to remove the clip now.

He looked across at Rebecca to find that she was waiting for him.

"All cool?" she asked.

"Cool," Tane replied, despite feeling anything but.

"On three," she said.

Tane grasped the clip that kept the banner furled, and waited.

"Three!" Rebecca said.

Tane laughed and pulled off the clip, watching the banner unroll down the side of the building. Two weeks of careful planning had finally come to fruition. The banner, with its important, world-shaking protest message about ... whatever Rebecca's latest cause was ... was in place, ready for the march the next day.

Rebecca grinned back and pointed upwards.

Tane groaned. Going down had been the easy part. Going up was going to take a lot more effort.

He clipped his ascender onto the rope above him

and pushed it up as high as he could, before starting the arduous trek back up the rappelling rope.

Fifteen minutes later they were both lying on their backs, whooping with exhilaration, in between sucking in deep breaths, on the flat parapet of the hotel roof.

From an open window, in an apartment, somewhere nearby, an old Joni Mitchell folk song reached out plaintively to them.

"Anybody see us, you reckon?" Tane asked.

"Can't see any police or security guards," Rebecca replied. "I think we got away with it."

Tane rolled carefully off the parapet onto the roof itself and began to strip off his harness.

"That was fun," he said.

"Really?" Rebecca grinned at him. "I thought you were going to puke when we first stepped over the edge."

"No way! I was cool as!"

"I don't think so," she laughed.

Tane lunged at her, pretending to shove her off the parapet.

She squealed a little, then laughed again. "I can't wait to see their faces tomorrow morning. When all the press and the dignitaries turn up and the first thing they see is our banner."

They quietly made their way down the stairway to the top floor of the hotel, and caught the lift to the lobby.

Nobody took any notice of them. Just a couple of backpackers, wandering around a busy inner city hotel.

"How is the writing going?" Rebecca asked, on the long bus trip back home.

"Good, yeah, pretty good," Tane replied.

"What are you working on now?"

"I got a cool new idea for a book."

"About?"

"You wouldn't be interested."

"Tell me anyway."

Tane looked at her closely under the dim interior lights of the bus, trying to make out her expression. "Not if you're going to criticise it."

"Promise," Rebecca said, grinning.

"Okay," Tane said. "It's about these Neo-Nazis who go back in time to the Second World War, and they take with them all these modern weapons, and they start to alter the course of the war. But this kid finds out about it and he and his mates go back with weapons of their own to battle the Neo-Nazis."

"Sounds exciting," Rebecca said.

"I've only written the first chapter so far," Tane said.

"But it's kind of shaping up well."

"Of course, time travel is impossible," Rebecca said.

"I knew you'd criticise it."

"I wasn't criticising your idea!" Rebecca retorted. "I was

just pointing out that time travel is not actually possible."

"Anyway, it doesn't matter because it's only a story," Tane said.

"I suppose."

"And they'll invent it one day."

"No, they won't." Rebecca said, staring out the window of the bus at the regular flashes of the motorway streetlights.

"Wanna place a bet?" Tane asked.

"No," Rebecca said. "But time travel is impossible."

"I read a book once," Tane said. "I can't remember what it was called, but it was about these grad students who go back in time to medieval days to rescue a missing historian and they fight—"

"*Timeline*," interrupted Rebecca. "Michael Crichton, 1999."

"Yeah, that's it. But anyway, they manage to create this ... like ... pinprick in the fabric of time somehow and then they kind of transmit themselves through it."

"I know. I read it," said Rebecca. "I mean the science was quite good in it, about the fabric of space-time, and the quantum foam, all the way up to the part where they transmit themselves through that tiny hole into the past."

Tane thought for a moment. True, he wasn't as good at Maths and Science as she was. Tane's strengths were in English and Art, and he was a school legend on the harmonica, but even so the time travel thing sounded at least feasible to him.

"Why?" he asked eventually. "Why couldn't they transmit themselves?"

"Try to think logically," Rebecca said firmly, but not unkindly. "How could you transport a live human being through a pinhole of any kind?"

"What about a fax machine!" Tane said suddenly. "You put a piece of paper in at one place and it gets sent along a telephone wire and it comes out in another place."

"No, it doesn't."

"Yes, it does," said Tane, starting to get into the argument, even though he knew she was going to turn out to be right.

"No, it doesn't," repeated Rebecca. "A copy of the piece of paper comes out. The actual piece of paper you sent stays right where it was. All you are sending is an electronic image of the paper, just like a digital photograph of it. Fax is short for facsimile which means copy."

"So ... um ..." Tane was losing and he knew it.

"We can transmit pictures, sound, even movies through wires, or through the air in radio waves. But we can't transmit a solid object. Not even a piece of paper."

It was at about ten o'clock, walking home from the bus stop, that Tane resumed the argument, as if they had never left off. "So if we can't transmit people through time, what about sounds, pictures and movies, like you said?"

Rebecca had to actually think about that for a moment, which was a small victory for Tane. He pulled out his harmonica and played a slow blues riff as they walked along.

"Nope," she said at last. "If I understand the science right," and Tane thought she probably did, "then you could only send stuff backwards. You couldn't transmit to the future because that hasn't happened yet."

"But you could send it to the past?"

"Well ... theoretically. But let's say we invented some kind of radio transmitter that could broadcast through time. Something that could transmit messages through the quantum foam. Nobody could listen to the messages we were sending, because in the past they wouldn't have invented a radio receiver that could pick up the transmission."

"Oh," said Tane, thinking that Rebecca, as usual, made perfect sense.

They reached Rebecca's house and stopped.

All the lights were off, but one of the windows flickered bluely with the glow of a television. Her mum was watching TV, which was no great surprise, because that was pretty much all her mum did. At least since her dad had died.

"Oh," said Tane again, pointlessly, and glanced up at the sky just in time to catch the brief flash of a shooting star.

That was when the inspiration struck him. That was the moment when it all seemed so clear.

"So what if someone in the future had already invented a time radio transmitter and was sending messages back to the past, waiting for someone to invent a receiver?"

He wasn't sure if that sounded silly or not, and he waited for the usual rebuff from his friend.

It didn't come.

"What's that again?"

"Well, let's say that some time in the future someone invents one of those transmitters you were talking about. And say they are sending out messages, through that foamy stuff, just waiting for someone in the past to invent a receiver."

"Well, I ... um ..."

"What if we built a receiver and listened in? Just waited for a signal from the future."

"The thing is, the whole concept of quantum foam is not even proven. And I wouldn't have the slightest idea how to build a receiver," Rebecca mused. "But it's an interesting idea."

That may not have sounded like much, but it wasn't very often that Rebecca thought that Tane had an interesting idea, so it was kind of an important day, if only for that reason.

Although, with hindsight, it was actually an important day for much bigger reasons than that.

"See ya tomorrow, mate," Rebecca called, and skipped up the driveway towards her darkened house.

Tane looked after her for a while, until she disappeared

into the carport and inside her home.

“See ya, mate,” he called softly, long after she was gone.