

THE LANARK CHRONICLES

BOOK ONE

THE LAST

-W.D. McKay-

Chapter One

In all the galaxies, in all of space, in all of time, there was only One.

From the four corners of the farthest reaches, beyond the depths of nothingness, and for all that could and could not exist, the journey of the One had endured. And the One cried out—for all that was known and unknown. The time. The distance. Unfathomable. The consequences unstoppable. He was the Last. The destination . . . within reach.

With countless light-years now far behind, Maggluk made the course adjustment. The deceleration had gone smoothly. He mused on the rendezvous as he looked deep into the brilliant light of the Rubicet Crystal before him.

To his left, in the blackness of the elliptical ruby-red viewer, a tiny speck of white light appeared for only a moment and then it was gone. It returned a moment later, slightly larger. The vibrating hum of the craft's dilanthic energy force shifted tone, like a high-pitched turbine winding down.

The One studied the readouts being projected into his consciousness. He regarded the pinpoint of light in the red glow of the viewer.

He had arrived in time. Earth lay before him.

Satisfied, he returned to his Methods, having only half-completed them.

God, the insanity came close last time.

David Mace exhaled sharply. A cold shiver crossed the back of his neck as he momentarily closed his eyes, vague swirling images pounding at his brain as he recalled the nightmare from the night before.

The headaches had been minor at first, his sleep only occasionally disturbed by restlessness. But as the weeks and months progressed, the frequency of the headaches increased. They might have been manageable if the nightmares hadn't started, blasting into his subconscious to terrify him in the middle of the night. The worst ones made him feel as if he were only moments from the edge of insanity. The images would slam into him and rush through his mind like a torrent, or race about until they suddenly shattered in a spray of sparkles, falling harmlessly away. And he would wake to hours of blood-pounding throbbing in his head.

He tried desperately to make sense of the haunting images that lingered after another night of "the sweats." Sometimes in a quiet part of the day he would try to focus on them; the shadowy shapes like entities floating up into his consciousness. The flashing reds, the brilliant blasts of white light, the metallic shimmers—none of it made sense.

So now here he was, in the middle of nowhere in this godforsaken cabin, collecting "solace" or some such crap. He hadn't really paid attention to what his shrink had told him, but he would have gone along with anything just to get out of his office.

And not have to serve any time.

This wasn't quite what he'd pictured when he'd been presented with the idea of a quiet retreat. A log cabin in the mountains? For David Mace, the top scientific investigator, the best astrobiologist in the world?

Heaven help me! If my friends at the Unilife Research Centre could see me now . . . nothing but rock and pine trees as far as the eye can see. Not even a damn road, for crying out loud, let alone a phone, or hydro, or a cold beer, or anything else that might be considered convenient or comfortable for a forty-two-year old. And worst of all, he couldn't even contact Allison. Missing her was the hardest part.

He stood outside the cabin nestled deep amongst the tall pines and granite outcroppings of the foothills, taking in the gathering gloom and quiet of the early evening with a disgruntled scowl. The stillness rang in his ears. He was fed up with feeling fed up.

A peculiar sound softened his scowl. It was alien to the stillness, to the night. It sounded . . . like paper being shredded far, far away. It floated in on the breeze

behind him. David dropped the split firewood he'd been carrying onto the pile by the worn wooden steps of the porch and turned toward the noise. The *approaching* noise. And his mouth dropped open.

A giant, white-hot fireball filled the sky. It blazed across the night, seemingly melting the very molecules of the air caught in its path. It appeared to be heading directly toward him out of the dark blue velvet above the cabin. A roar filled the air around him and David pressed his hands hard against his ears, but it made almost no difference. He continued staring in disbelief, staggering under the enormity of the sight before him as the fireball descended until it was almost on top of him, blotting out everything with its blinding light. *I'm going to die.*

He stumbled forward, diving into a shallow, u-shaped granite hollow twenty feet from the cabin. A moment later the cabin exploded into flames and instantly became a raging inferno. David screamed as the dry timbers shattered from the heat, throwing shards of flaming wood in all directions. He could feel the skin on his back starting to scorch, as if his clothes were on fire. He pushed his face against the jagged granite, scraping his nose and cheeks. In seconds the blaze had consumed the tall pines in the yard.

David screamed and screamed, as much from sheer terror as from the scorching heat. The crackling roar of it increased to an ear-splitting level. And then in a heartbeat it was over, and all was darkness as the heat subsided.

He raised himself up on his elbows just in time to be slammed back down by the thunderous impact of the meteor finally hitting the earth, a quarter-mile down the slope from the cabin. The sound of the blast ricocheted around the mountains, unable to escape, before finally dissipating.

David lay very still. Then he slowly eased himself back up onto his elbows. All the grass and scrub brush within a hundred yards had been burned off, the ground charred. What was left of the trees stood smouldering like grotesque, giant black toothpicks. The rest had been flattened on the way to incineration. The cabin was demolished. Parts of it continued to burn.

Stunned and still shaking, David ran his fingers through his wavy brown hair and came away with a handful of powdery white ash. Suddenly he became aware of tremendous pain. He jumped up, dazed and coughing violently in the super-heated, smoke-filled air swirling all around him. Ripping at his soot-blackened shirt, he tried to run to the creek on the far side of the cabin, staggering like a drunkard and half falling with every step. At its edge he slipped and fell hard onto the slick rocks

before tumbling sideways into the rushing water. The icy cold mountain stream was like a miracle salve, easing the agony of his scorched back.

He floated there; one arm hooked around a rock, and tried to think. He couldn't get past the image of the fireball rushing at him. *The crater must be immense.* When he at last managed to slow his breathing and clear his head enough for coherent thought, he slowly stood in the waist-deep water, cringing as the warm air contacted the seared skin on his back. Pulling his dripping shirt up out of the water, he gently eased himself into it. The chilled fabric helped a lot. He prodded gingerly at his ribs and decided the fall hadn't broken anything.

He stared in dismay at the flattened cabin while carefully picking his way out of the creek. Only a tangled pile of smouldering timbers remained, burnt, shattered, and splintered. Some leaned haphazardly against the stone chimney, which had been neatly lopped in half. Twenty yards to his left stood the remains of the equipment shed. Although spared from the flames, it too had been levelled by the force of the explosion.

Still feeling dazed, David walked over to the shed. Kicking at the rubble near where the workbench had stood, he managed to unearth his large blue flashlight. He stabbed at the button and was rewarded with a brilliant glow. *Time to look around.*

On the other side of the cabin, thin wisps of smoke drifted upward in the now dead-still air. *Almost as if nothing had happened,* he thought as he paused to peer down the slope.

A half-mile past the cabin a massive, gaping crater had been blasted into the bedrock; it glowed eerily from the meteoric heat. Ragged chunks of rock were strewn all around it. Some of the softer rock had somehow melted into spastic, twisted shapes.

David tried to focus as he staggered toward the crater, carefully moving through the scorched underbrush.

Reaching the edge of the ugly scar in the earth, he shook his head in wonder. This was no ordinary meteor. The eerie shadows of smoke that swirled above the still-glowing hot spots made it look like some ancient cauldron, seething in the wan moonlight.

After a few moments he became aware of a light breeze crossing his back. *Feels good.* He turned to angle his body toward it and in that moment, he glimpsed a shimmering flash of light deep within the crater. Turning quickly, he squinted into the darkness.

Nothing.

As he started to look away, it flashed dully again. His head snapped back around.

Nothing. *Just the moonlight playing tricks with me*, he thought tiredly.

Then he saw a silvery metallic glow lasting only a split second. It seemed to emanate from a spot some twenty yards below and left of his position.

David looked up at the moon just as it was about to break free of the fat cumulus coasting before it. The sky would be clear for the next several minutes. And with the moon full, he should be able to find his way down to the object.

As moonlight cascaded across the landscape David half crawled, half slid down the ragged wall of the crater. It was harder than he thought; he scraped his shins every few feet, and the heat was intense. He knew it should have been extreme. It wasn't.

"Better be worth it," he muttered.

The hot, wet soil oozed steam; billowy clouds of moisture rose around him. The farther down he went, the worse the smell got. *Somewhere between scorched sulphur and a rotting corpse*, he decided, having experienced both. He pressed on, stopping every few feet to ensure he could still see the ghostly glow flickering just ahead of him.

Then without warning, the steaming rock-muck gave way, tumbling him end over end until he came to rest almost on top of the glow.

He slowly reached for it with his left hand, expecting heat, but feeling only the cold of a polished alloy. He pushed away the debris, revealing a cylinder about seven inches long and less than an inch in diameter. He lifted it; it weighed only a few ounces. Both ends were sealed. The silvery, greenish glow ebbed and flowed up and down its length and seemed to almost penetrate his hand. The sides were a lattice of unfamiliar lines and symbols, etched into the shiny surface.

David stood and puzzled over the tube. "I'm getting too old for this. I don't know what you are, but you are definitely coming with me," he told it.

Holding the tube tightly, he scrambled to the top of the crater as best he could. At the top he stopped, breathing hard from the strain. *This place will be crawling with scientists by morning*, he mused. *But they will have missed the prize*. He smiled. He couldn't wait to get back to his lab with the cylinder. No one was going to rob him of this.

Walking uphill took some effort, and his aches forced him to move slowly. When he reached the demolished cabin he headed back to the creek to rinse the mud off himself and to soak his shirt again. Then he located a vantage point some fifty yards from the cabin on a small knoll covered in pine needles, and sat down. From here he could observe the cabin and the approach from the crater.

He stared, perplexed, at the small cylinder. Excitement, fear, and exhilaration warred in his thoughts. He stared for a long time before finally succumbing to the night and sleep.

By the time the cold grey of dawn's first light turned the distant peaks into black silhouettes, astronomers around the country were racing to arrange transport to the impact site.

Pacing in her condo, Allison Andrews checked her watch for the twentieth time. *God, I hope David is alright.* Bad weather had shut down the local airport. It would be noon at the earliest before she could fly out. She still had three hours to wait. And with that thought she decided she might as well do it at the airport—maybe she could catch a break.

The break came—but not until midday. *Great,* thought Allison, *the one time the forecasters have to get it right.* Undeterred, she walked quickly across the tarmac to the Unilife helicopter and settled in next to Bill Hansin, one of David's associates and good friend.

Thankfully the hour-long flight seemed to pass quickly. She looked out the window as the helicopter banked sharply. They would have to land on a small level patch of granite southeast of where the cabin had stood.

"Good Lord! Look at this place," Allison breathed, voicing what the rest were already thinking. "It's like a bomb hit it."

"In a way, one did," said Bill shaking his head as he surveyed the damage. "I just hope he's okay."

The pilot skilfully made his landing. "You guys only have about half an hour—this storm's rolling in fast," he said, nodding at the dark clouds looming over the mountains.

The two passengers hopped down and jogged away from the slowing rotors toward the flattened cabin. Allison didn't want to think that he may have been inside. At the top of their voices, she and Bill yelled for David over and over, but to no avail. Allison could feel the grief trying to well up inside her and she worked hard to

force it back down; she refused to accept the worst. After a quick check of their watches and a glance at the sky, they hurried down to the crater, still calling out and still hearing nothing.

Working as fast as they could, they took photographs and logged details about the crater. When in the distance the helicopter's engine came to life with a familiar whine, Allison cursed under her breath.

They grabbed their packs and headed back to the helicopter. The pilot lifted off and veered sharply east as they buckled themselves in. As it turned they could see another helicopter heading to the site. "Media?" Allison asked.

"Maybe."

"Animals!"

"Mostly," Bill agreed.

Allison stared sightlessly out the window all the way back to the airstrip. The scientific discovery of the meteor crash was meaningless now. David Mace was dead. Killed by a meteor. *For Christ's sake, how ridiculous. The one single man on Earth who probably knew more about the quest for life in outer space—killed by the very universe he sought to explore. What are the odds?*

What are the odds? The question lingered. She thought for another long moment. *Something's wrong here. He can't be dead. Injured maybe, but not dead. Not David Mace. The paranormal science nut. And the best lover I've ever had.* Another riptide of grief washed over her as the helicopter touched down. Her eyes felt raw and achy. But they had searched everywhere they could in the time they had, and found nothing.

By the time they gathered their gear and took the shuttle across town to the Unilife Research Centre, it was almost dark. All the way to her condo, she held it together in the back of the cab. The moment she'd paid the driver and exited and the rain touched her cheek, she let it all go.

Clutching the railing leading up to the side entrance of her building from the deserted street, she felt lost.

Her mind flashed images of David over the past months, even years—but no one was supposed to have known about it then. The walks, the loving—sometimes soft and slow, other times with a passion and heat that bordered on violence. The dinners and shows, the week in Scotland, backpacking, or just reading for hours at her cottage. And now? *Now . . . a crater where my life used to be.*

The rain grew heavier. Allison regained some composure

and forced herself up the steps. She entered the high-rise and caught the elevator to sixteen.

Her place was dark, and she left it so. Exhausted, she let her green leather jacket drop to the floor, kicked off her shoes, and flopped down on her queen-size bed. There she stared at the rivers of rain running down the floor-to-ceiling windows until the weight of the day pushed her eyes closed and she slept.