

CHAPTER 1

A warm breeze caressed him, the sun's rays pleasant against his skin, but as he soaked up the moment something sharp struck the back of his neck.

He reached up and found his hand streaked with red; he wiped again with his other hand and found it the same, but it was not blood.

The breeze stirred and a faint odour filled his senses. He raised his fingers cautiously to his nose and inhaled, the redness gritty against his skin, and wrinkled his nose in disgust.

Sulphur.

Without warning, his back felt cold to the point of discomfort. Almost icy. He shivered, his skin crawling with the sudden temperature drop as more pin-pricks - painfully sharp stings accentuated by the sudden cold - racked his body.

He picked up a fistful of sand and watched as its coarse grains cascaded through his fingers like liquid from a jug, shivering as the red snow drifted and billowed in the strengthening wind. Whipped into swirling clouds, the sky was filled with dust, and as he watched all traces of summer blue vanished.

When the full force of the wind struck it was like a battering ram. He fumbled, grasping at handfuls of red sand and buried grass to steady himself, and managed to keep from falling backwards.

This isn't real, he thought. This can't be happening.

He scrambled to his feet and forced himself toward the bridge he had crossed little more than an hour before. Blinded by stinging dust, and with his breathing impeded by painful coughs and splutters, he steeled himself against the biting cold.

Step by step he struggled on, leaning into the howling wind and teetering unsteadily as the gusts increased. Finally, he was forced down, and could rise no more.

DAVID JOWSEY

The dust blew in swirling drifts around his shuddering form. It blanketed itself over his body and he struggled to breathe, until, with a final gasp at life, he surrendered and lay still.

The open cavity of a mouth, which had once smiled so happily at the beauty of a summer's day, now lay dry and unmoving. Dust swirled inside, filled the open space and clogged the airway to leave nothing exposed but a single area of flesh.

It was the only evidence that Tom Richards had ever existed.