

# Symbiotic Puppets

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This is a little out there, he thought. He swung the car around another winding curve on the quiet mountain road. If he hadn't been sure of the directions he'd gotten from Danny, he would have turned back before now. Nonetheless, he felt a certain apprehension driving through the forest with a steep embankment on one side and an equally steep drop off on the other. It was a one-lane dirt road that seemingly climbed into oblivion.

What added to his uneasiness was a byproduct of living in the modern world of today. Cell phones didn't work up here. Danny had warned him about that. Back in these mountains there wasn't a clear enough signal from a tower to get any kind of reliable reception. Regardless, the directions Danny had dictated to him over the phone were detailed and Eric continued to recognize landmarks.

It had been a while since he'd last seen Danny. Almost two years, he thought. A year ago last Thanksgiving. They were cousins, but having grown up living close to one another they were more like brothers.

He rounded another bend and spied a steep incline. According to Danny's directions, he knew this to be the last stretch before reaching the house. Eric hadn't seen Danny's new house. Danny, Jenny, his wife, and their son Billy had only been in it three months now and it was a wonderful coincidence that they had just moved up here from Charlotte. It gave him a place to stay during his summer volunteer work on the Biodiversity Project and allowed him a chance for an extended visit with Danny and his family.

The sun was dropping down towards the treetops now and it was starting to get in Eric's eyes. He reached up to pull the visor down. His hand felt around, but didn't find the edge of the visor. He glanced up, found it and flipped it down. His eyes came back to the road just as something, a thing, black against the backdrop of the sun's rays, burst out of the brush alongside the road. Eric slammed on the brakes and the car quickly came to a halt on the steep gravel road. The black thing bounded off into the thick forest on the opposite side and was gone.

"What the hell was that?" He muttered under his breath. The way the sun slanted in prevented him from getting a clear view of it. He recognized that, in truth, it could have been anything. A dog? A deer? Or maybe even a bear? Still, it moved kind of funny for any of those things. He shrugged and gunned the car to get it going again up the hill.

At the top of the slope Eric suddenly found himself on a small flat clearing where the road ended and two-story yellow house sat nestled into the lush surrounding forest. He pulled his car up next to the two other cars parked on the gravel next to the house. As Eric got out of the car, the side door of the house opened and Danny hurried over to him.

"Hey, you made it!" Danny said with a big grin. He still had the same semi-goofy look about him, Eric thought. It was the red wavy hair. Eric always thought it had given him a clown-like look. It was worse when they were back in high school. When Danny had let it

grow long. It was wavy long red hair. You could never take someone serious that sported something like that.

"I did indeed." Eric said. He shook Danny's outstretched hand and Danny pulled him into a hug.

"So what do you think?" Danny asked waving his hands all around.

Eric slowly rotated around staring into the massive forest in all directions. "Very impressive. You weren't kidding. This place is really 'away from it all'."

"You betcha. You betcha." Danny said vigorously nodding.

Eric glanced back at him. It struck him as an odd thing to say. Not really the expression itself, but he had known Danny his entire life and there was something subtly odd in what and how Danny had said this simple expression.

"So, how are you doing?" Eric asked, watching Danny a little closer.

Danny nodded some more. "Doing good. Doing good. Just great."

It was there again. Something odd. Almost a nervousness.

"You're looking good." Danny said stepping back and staring at Eric. "You know, for someone that's starting to get fat, of course."

Eric chuckled. "Yeah, a little too much eating out, I'm afraid."

"You need a wife. Good home cooking, you know." Danny smiled.

Eric laughed. "Yeah, I've tried, but they all sober up before I can get them to the Justice of the Peace."

"That's because they are all too smart to marry the likes of you. Stay away from college graduates. Find a waitress or something."

Eric smiled. "That's a good idea since waitresses make more money than I do. I'd be moving up in the world."

Danny laughed. "Well, what do you expect? Volunteer work. Didn't Uncle Eddy teach you anything?"

Eric nodded. "Sometimes I wonder."

"So what are you looking for, alien life or something?" Danny asked with a grin.

Eric shook his head. "No, just unknown things. The project involves volunteers, mostly from college campuses across the country. We are going to comb through the National Forest. The organizers believe that thousands of undiscovered species may still exist there."

"Oh, like bigfoot, huh?" Danny said with a smile.

Eric shrugged. "In all probability anything new we find will be in the form of plants and very small scale fauna. Chances are, I probably won't find a damn thing."

"Yeah. Yeah. Nothing big out here. Probably." Danny glanced around them quickly.

Eric made a quick scan at the forest surrounding them. Danny almost seemed nervous. What was bugging him? Was there something about the forest that was making him nervous? Eric suddenly remembered the thing that had leaped out across the road in front of him.

“Hey, you know when I was driving up here...”

“WAAAAAAAH!WOOOOOOH!” A wild scream shrieked out from somewhere up the mountain in the forest.

Eric jumped at the sound. Danny didn’t appear to react to the sound at all.

“What the hell was that?” Eric said staring up into the dense forest above them.

“What? Oh, that?” Danny shrugged. “That’s just Billy.” Danny spoke flatly.

“Billy?”

Danny waved it off. “Crazy kid. He’s just playing or something. Anyway, let me show you around.”

Eric started to ask something more, but Danny led him off and began a tour of the immediate property. The place was surrounded by the large trees of a seemingly endless forest. In places, higher up, massive rock outcroppings were visible. There were extensive gardens built into the side of the mountain conforming to wherever rock formations permitted some kind of access to the rich earth of the forest floor. Danny had been a very busy man over the last few months overseeing the landscaping; building small stonewalls to help retain embankments and clearing back some of the forest vegetation from around the house. They stopped next to an odd looking hump alongside the driveway.

“That’s not natural.” Eric made comment as he pointed at it.

“You aren’t kidding.” Danny said with a look that carried a story.

“I take it that’s the well.” Eric said staring down at the fake rock cover.

Danny nodded. “Yeah. Yeah. The well. One of the most expensive wells in these parts.”

“Oh?”

Danny sighed slightly. “Yeah. They started drilling that and I thought they were never going to find water.”

“How deep did they have to go down?”

“A thousand feet.”

“A thousand feet? That sounds really deep. Is that common for places this high up in the mountains?”

Danny shook his head. “Apparently not. It was the deepest well the drillers had ever done. Usually, I guess, from what they told me, the water table rises and falls with the terrain so they should have hit something long before a thousand feet, but they didn’t.”

“So they hit a spring or something.”

Danny nodded. “Yeah. Yeah. They said it was strange. They said it was like the drill bit almost dropped in. They thought maybe they had hit on some kind of large pocket of water.”

“So was it good water?” Eric asked. He didn’t really know much about well drilling or, as he thought about it, the details of household water quality.

Danny nodded again. “Yeah. Tastes good. They ran it through the normal tests and nothing bad showed up. Ready to see the inside?”

Eric was still staring down at the fake rock that covered the well. “Inside the well?”

Danny looked at him funny, then pointed back over his shoulder. “The house.”

Eric looked up. “Oh. Of course.”

Eric woke up. He heard the birds of the forest singing in the morning sunshine. It was very peaceful and pleasant up here. He could see why Danny had chosen to escape the city for a place like this. There was a palpable feeling of calm and peace in a lush landscape such as that surrounding this place and a fresh fragrance of---wait, sausage? Yes, that was sausage, but that too smelled pretty good right now. Eric threw on some clothes, stepped out into the hallway and followed his nose into the dining room.

“Wow, that smells good.” Eric said as he entered the room.

“Pick a chair and have a seat.” Jenny said with a smile.

Eric sat down across from Billy, who seemed to be attacking the sausage on his plate with a certain fierceness. He looked disheveled. His dirty blonde hair was wild and uncombed. But, Eric thought, it was first thing in the morning. I probably don't look all that impressive myself.

“Hey Billy.” Eric said, as a greeting.

Billy glanced up briefly. There was dirt smudged across his face and it almost seemed to Eric that he hadn't bathed in days. He stared at Eric with a thinly veiled wild and unfocused look. The look made Eric pause for a moment. There was something about it that was almost unnerving. Billy had always had sharp features which now, to Eric, seemed to have grown even sharper somehow. His eyes were almost piercing. His mouth held tight. The nostrils of his small pointy nose flared slightly.

Billy finished snapping up his sausage and dashed out of the room.

“Uh, good talking to you, Billy...” Eric said long after Billy was gone. He stared after Billy. He and Billy hadn't spent a lot of time together in the past, but they had always enjoyed each other's company.

Billy, though, like his father, did things with a certain fire. That was not to say he did things with wild abandon. He was enthusiastic, not reckless. This wired and silent boy was not the same Billy.

Jenny brought a plate of sausage over to Eric. “Is he okay?” Eric asked, waving off in the direction Billy had disappeared.

Jenny laughed lightly. “Oh. He's fine.” She said. “He's just in a hurry. He can't wait to get outside these days. Can't hardly keep the boy indoors. Just loves being out in the forest.”

“Well, I guess there are worst things for a boy to be into these days.” Eric said with a shrug. Still, this Billy was different.

“Sure is. Sure. Sure is.” Jenny said as she put the plate down. Her hand shook a little as she did so.





He was puffing considerably in the heat as he moved up the mountainside examining various small flags stuck into the ground. They marked out a rough grid. The procedure was straightforward. Each volunteer was armed with laminated pages, held together with a single circular metal clasp, depicting the most common plants and animals typically found in this area. Their job was to comb through their assigned grid section. If they found anything that was not found on their sheets, they were to call over one of the project's biologists. The biologist was the first step in determining if the find was a known species or something new. In this manner, they could thoroughly cover a fair sized section of mountainside.

Eric stared at a flag and checked it against the number written on the first laminated page. It matched. He sighed. Thankful he didn't have to climb any higher, at least for the moment. He was a flat lander. Walking up these slopes was a lot harder than he imagined.

"Excuse me, but you are standing in my world."

Eric turned. Behind him and to his left stood another volunteer. She looked at him with only the barest trace of a smile.

"Oh, I, uh...your world?"

She waved a finger around in front of her. "My world."

"Oh." Eric glanced down at the flag again. "I think, I mean...my number matches this." She was kind of pretty and for some reason that had caught him off guard.

She shook her head and pointed past him. "That's your world." She spoke in a voice that seemed flat and friendly at the same time. She brushed a lock of short black hair back from her face and was clearly waiting for him to move.

"Sorry." He stepped back on the other side of the flag into his 'world'. "I'm Eric." After he said it, he thought it sounded stupidly awkward.

"Then you have the right name tag." She said.

Eric glanced down at the sticker on the front of his t-shirt. "Yeah. Well, lucky thing, huh?"

She gave a short nod and turned moving back towards the far corner of her designated grid section. She had turned before Eric could read her name tag.

"I assume you have a name too?" Eric said trying to continue the conversation.

She only half turned as she continued walking away. "Yes, thanks."

Eric shrugged and headed for his corner. As he had been shown to do he started moving slowly, inch by inch, through his section from left to right identifying species on his

sheets. Several times he glanced over at the girl, but she seemed completely focused on her work.

It was tedious backbreaking work bending over staring intently at the minute objects on the forest floor. It was a floor tilted at an absurd angle covered with natural debris that made clumsy human footing difficult at best.

Finally, he heard the call for a lunch break from down below at the trail side. He marked out, as per his instructions, where his position within the grid was and headed down the mountainside. He was pleased that in spite of his weariness he only slipped down on to his butt once on the way down. He got in line, received the box lunch that was provided and looked for a comfortable place to sit down to eat. He spotted his grid neighbor off slightly by herself at the far end of the group of volunteers. He walked over to where she was sitting.

“Is this mountain taken?”

She looked up with a bit of surprise. She shrugged. “It’s a free mountain.”

Eric sat down.

They sat quietly for a couple of minutes eating.

“I noticed you’re not really in to socializing.” Eric said indicating the rest of the volunteers sitting and laughing among themselves up the trail a short ways.

“You noticed right.” She said.

“If you’d rather be alone just say so. I don’t want to bug you or anything.”

“Actually, I think I was ‘bugging’ them more than they were ‘bugging’ me.” She said staring straight ahead and a small smile that almost seemed mischievous.

It was a cute smile, Eric thought. “Really?”

She glanced over at Eric with the same smile and a nod. “Besides, I’m not really comfortable around people because I can’t be sure of who they really are.”

Eric smiled. “I thought that’s what the name tags were for...” he leaned forward and looked at hers, “Sara.”

“No. I mean inside.”

“Well, that just takes getting to know someone.”

Sara shook her head. “That’s not what I meant. What I mean is...I’m not sure that any of us are who we think we are.”

“Oh?”

Sara looked at Eric for a moment. She seemed to be making a decision. Finally, she gave a curt nod. “Okay. Here it is. I have a theory. It’s really out there and everyone,” she indicated the other volunteers, “thinks I am an absolute fruitcake. So, you want to hear it or not?”

Eric did not hesitate. "Let's hear it. A lot of theories that are accepted fact today were way out there at one time or another."

Sara nodded.

"Well, it's like this. Life on this planet began as microbial life. Accepted evolutionary theory has it that over the course of the next 1.5 billion years this microbial life slowly evolved into more complex life forms."

Eric gave a short nod. "Yeah. Sounds about right."

"Does it?" Sara looked at him. "The influenza virus that plagues humanity year over year mutates sufficiently in the span 12 months to render itself immune to the antibodies the human body has generated from the previous year's version of influenza. 12 months. 1 year. Almost like it knew what it was doing, huh?"

Before Eric could respond, she went on. "In the span of 20 million years, from the end of the Triassic period into the Jurassic period the first dinosaurs went from scrawny little creatures 3 feet tall to the 30 foot Allosaurus. That's a tenfold increase in size by a group of animals considered to be complex life forms with complicated DNA. By that point in time, microbial life, life forms with DNA much simpler and more easily altered, had existed here for nearly 2 billion years. 2 billion years of evolution."

Eric just watched her.

"The cornerstone of evolutionary development is adapting to the environment a species finds itself in. Throughout the history of life on this planet, complex life forms have required only a few million years to make major adaptations to their environment. In 2 billion years how far can a simple life form go in adapting to its environment?"

There was a pause and Eric wasn't sure if her question was rhetorical or not. "Uh, well..."

Sara went on with a slight wave of her hand. "Tool making hominids have been around for what, maybe a million years now. And, in that time, a sliver of the time microbial life has been evolving here, humans point to their capacity to modify and shape their environment to improve their living conditions as one of their greatest achievements. Microbial life has been here for more than 2 billion years adapting to living in, on and all around us more complicated life forms."

Eric looked at her. "What are you saying that...microbial life somehow tries to shape its own world?"

"It's world? You mean our mutual world. And, why not?"

"Because," Eric replied, "we are able to manipulate the world around us because we possess an understanding of it. Our intelligence gives us the ability to control the world around us."

"Really? When was the last time, or the first time, we demonstrated a control over weather or earthquakes or even the common cold? Anyway, what proof have we that

manipulating one's environment requires intelligence? Tiny ocean fish burrow into the sand and create homes for themselves. They manipulate their environment for their own benefit and I doubt, by our standards, we would attribute them with a high degree of intelligence. I'll grant you that a single cell of microbial life, by itself, is not probably affecting very much, but billions of them interacting, exchanging mutations and adaptations, who knows what they are capable of. 10 million people sitting at computers, isolated, might come up with some interesting things, but network them all together where they can have unlimited communication and watch how they, collectively, become something far more."

Eric watched her for a moment and then stared out at the forest around them. "2 billion years is a long time. So, you think they're out there planning a revolt?"

A look flashed across her face. It was obvious she initially took his words as the same kind of joking dismissal she typically received, but then, just as quickly, realized that, in spite of the sound of his question, he found her theory interesting. For the first time she looked more closely at Eric. As if she was trying to see into him.

Sara smiled slightly and shook her head. "They aren't 'out there'. They're everywhere. They are in us, on us, always around us. The land, the air, our food, our water, everywhere. And why would they revolt? They've done a pretty good job of building a world they are comfortable in."

"That sounds a bit creepy."

"Think so? It gets worse."

"I'm not sure I want to hear this, but let's have it nonetheless."

Sara brushed some hair back out of her face. "Well, after 2 billion years of evolving can we really be sure of just how well they have adapted at manipulating the world around them? After coexisting within other species for hundreds of millions of years, who's to say that they haven't evolved the capacity to influence the behavior of their hosts."

"You mean they might be controlling us? I find that a little hard to believe." Eric shifted slightly, finding the pile of dead leaves and decaying forest material insufficient to pad his butt from the rocky ground.

"There are over 5 billion life forms in and on us right now. Of which we, meaning you and I as individuals, are only one of those life forms. Do the math. We are in a very distinct minority." Sara smiled again.

Eric laughed. "Well, be that as it may, I will tell that I am the biggest member here," he pointed at himself, "and I say what goes on."

"Really?" Sara asked. "Have you ever been lying flat on your back in bed from the flu? A very tiny member."

From the brief expression on Eric's face it was obvious that he had experienced that. He hung his head down for a moment staring at the ground in front of him. Finally he looked up at Sara with a wry smile. He pointed at his name tag. "Hi, we're Eric."

Sara laughed, a loud snorting laugh. She smiled at Eric and placed a hand on her chest.  
“Hi, we’re Sara and we’re pleased to meet you.”

He heard it again. This time, though, he knew he was awake. He sat up in bed. There it was again. A muffled, whack-whack sound. He felt very edgy. Perhaps it was just being awakened in the middle of night by a strange sound, but he knew he had been feeling an underlying nervousness for some days now. Whack-whack-whack. The sound came again. It was outside somewhere. While it was true Eric lived in a large city, still, even he could sense this was not a natural forest sound.

He kicked the sheet covering him off and half stumbled over to the window. The moon, while not full, was sufficiently bright to sprinkle a dim gray light into the surrounding forest. Whack-whack. The sound and a movement some 40 yards out from the house, in the tall bushy wide rhododendron, drew Eric's complete attention.

It was a white, ghostly figure swinging something. It thrashed about in fits. Sometimes it seemed to be in a rage, followed by periods of standing nearly motionless. It started flailing about again and, at the sound of whacking, Eric realized it was holding a club-like stick and banging it onto anything near at hand.

Minutes passed and Eric stood watching the figure, mesmerized. The light was too weak to make out any real features. He couldn't even say definitively whether it was a human or not. At times, the figure was hunched over and other times it seemed to stand erect. Suddenly, with a huffing grunt sound it bounded off further into the forest and out of Eric's sight.

Eric stood at the window listening and carefully searching the gray and black dappled forest for any sign of the figure. After about 20 minutes of nothing, he slowly made his way back over to the bed. He sat down and then laid back down. He stared up at the ceiling still listening and trying to decipher what he had just witnessed. At some point later on, he drifted off to sleep.

Eric groggily walked into the kitchen. While he had slept, it was a fitful sleep after watching...whatever it was he saw. In his current punchy state of mind he could almost bring himself to believe that it had been just a dream.

The coffee pot was half full and he poured himself a cup. A sound behind him brought him slowly around. It was Jenny. She was in the adjoining den, just off the kitchen. She was on her hands and knees doing something.

Eric walked to the arched doorway between the rooms and stood watching her. She seemed to be clawing at the carpeting. He did notice a small rag in one hand.

"Is something wrong, Jenny?"

She made a faint sound that, to Eric, seemed like a growl.

"Jenny?"

She lifted her head and looked over at Eric. For a moment, she didn't seem to recognize him and her expression was odd. Then she seemed to focus on him and her expression softened.

"What?"

"Is...everything alright?"

"Oh. Yes. Just a stain. A spot. I have to get it out."

Eric stared at the carpet in front of Jenny. He couldn't distinguish anything different in that part of the carpeting from any other area. He shrugged. Some people were very particular.

"By the way, I haven't seen Billy in a couple of days. Has he gone somewhere?"

Jenny had gone back to working on the invisible spot again. She stopped, though she still stared at the floor.

"Billy?" She said. "Oh, he's around here somewhere. Probably in the forest. Yes. Yes, the forest." She resumed her scrubbing.

"Oh. Okay." Eric said and slowly backed up into the kitchen. He turned around and suddenly there was Danny standing in the middle of the room.

"Ah. Good morning." Eric said.

Danny turned to look at Eric, but he seemed to be looking right through Eric and off into the distance.

"Are you alright?" Eric asked.

Danny eyes focused in on Eric. "Oh. Yeah. Fine. Just fine."

Eric nodded. "Hey, you didn't happen to hear anything last night by chance, did you?"

"Hear anything? Like what?" Danny spotted the coffee pot and poured himself a cup. He gulped down nearly half the cup in one drink.

"A whacking noise. It woke me up and when I looked out the window I saw something."

"Something?" Danny gulped down the rest of his coffee. "Like what?"

Eric shook his head. "Don't know."

Danny poured himself another cup. "You were probably just dreaming. You wouldn't believe the dreams I have."

"Really." Eric said, clearly not inclined to write off what he saw last night as a dream. He knew he had been awake.

"Oh, yeah. Sometimes, I wake up more exhausted than when I went to bed. You'd think I had run a marathon in my sleep. Anyway, need to get to work."

Eric looked at him. Danny was dressed in jeans and a long sleeve flannel shirt. "You don't look like you're dressed to go to work today." He said.

Danny glanced down at himself. When he lifted his gaze up again it seemed as though he had drifted off into a distant place again.

"I...I'm going to work in the forest today. In the forest."

"Oh." Eric said. "Taking the day off, then?"

Danny seemed to come back again. "Yeah. Yeah, I've got some stuff I needed to get done around here."

"It's kind of warm out for flannel isn't it?"

"Not for me. Besides," Danny pointed at his red hair, "I'm Irish, remember. As pale as my skin is if I don't cover up the sun will burn me to a crisp. I always stay covered up. Underneath these clothes I'm as white as a ghost." He laughed.

"A ghost, huh?" Eric said.



"You seem a little out of it today." Sara said sitting on a mossy rock and nibbling at her sandwich.

"Huh?" Eric pulled himself back from somewhere else, but as he looked at Sara with a puzzled expression, he couldn't remember where that somewhere else was.

"You seem distracted."

Eric nodded with a wearied look. "I feel distracted, but I can't seem to put my finger on what it is."

"So, you're distracted by the vastness of nothing." She said with a smile.

Eric shrugged. He knew she was just trying to be funny, but he was having a hard time focusing and it was really bugging him. "I guess."

"Well, it could just be the heat. Are you drinking enough water?" She asked.

Eric nodded and lifted his water bottle to show her it was half empty. He filled it each morning before leaving his cousin's house and packed a few ice cubes into it to help keep it cool through the day.

"I'm a little tired too. I didn't sleep well again last night." Eric said.

"More weird stuff?"

Eric nodded he had been telling her of some of the odd things he had been noticing at Danny's house. She had found his stories entertaining.

"More whacking noises last night."

"You should go out see if you can find out what's making the noise." Sara said.

Eric glanced over at her as if she had just told him to go jump off a cliff---a literal cliff.

"Outside? In the forest? At night?"

Sara laughed. "Yes, how else are you going to figure what's making the noise?"

"Well, I don't know what I might run into out there."

Again Sara laughed. "What do you think is out in the forest at night?"

"I have no idea. That's the point."

Sara shook her head with a smile. "There isn't anything out in the forest at night that's not in the forest in the daytime. Besides, you stumbling about in the forest in the dark would, by far, be the scariest thing out there."

Eric thought of the ghostly white figure he'd seen now on a couple of occasions in the forest at night. "I'm not so sure about that. Don't forget about Jenny's large urns in the backyard I found smashed to pieces."

Sara shook her head. She clearly found Eric's apprehension amusing. "Animals, particularly hungry bears, can be very destructive when they're searching for food. I don't think there is any great mystery in that."

"Maybe."

"Actually, I've noticed some of the others here," she waved back over her shoulder towards the other volunteers back up the trail, "acting a little funny at times too. One of them thinks he glimpsed bigfoot. I think it's the heat. It's definitely hotter than usual."

Eric gave a quick nod.

Sara smiled again. "Or maybe it's something in the water today."

Eric gave another quick nod. A moment passed and he slowly lifted his water bottle up and stared at it. "Maybe so..."

“That, is *not* sterile.”

“Excuse me?” Eric asked.

The woman pointed at his water bottle. It still had a little dirt stuck on the outside of it from setting it on the forest floor with condensation on it. “That is not a sterile container. You must use a sterile container to collect the water in before testing. Otherwise, you could have any number of contaminants that aren’t from the water at all. Here,” she said as she reached under the counter and pulled out a small plastic, sealed bottle, “take this and---”

“No, no, no.” Eric said hastily. “You don’t understand. I don’t care about the usual contaminants.” Eric shrugged. “Whatever they might be.”

The woman stared at him across the counter. “Then I’m not sure what it is you want us to do.”

“I do want you to test the water, but not for the usual standard... ‘whatevers’. The water was already tested and nothing showed up, but I think there might be something else, something that doesn’t show up in the usual tests.”

The woman studied him for a moment. She seemed to be trying to decide if he was utterly crazy or what. “Well,” she said, “we are able to perform a wide range of tests, but you would have to narrow down what it is you want us to look for. You realize that the range of possibilities is quite large. Are you looking for some type of chemical or a bacteria of some kind or what?”

“Uhhh...” Good question Eric thought. What am I looking for? The more he thought about it the more possibilities seemed to rear their respective heads. Maybe this was just a crazy idea. Like Sara’s microbial theory? Hmm.

“Bacteria.” It was a guess, but as good a guess as anything else.

The woman stared at him again. “There are categories of bacteria. Could you be a bit more specific?”

Eric shook his head. “No, but I could be more vague.”

The woman’s expression didn’t change. She didn’t think he was funny. She sighed. “Look, I’ll tell you what. We have students here from the University. They are here to do co-op work. Typically, we don’t always have a lot for them to do. Why don’t I let them play around with your ‘sample’ and see what they can grow out of it?”

Eric smiled. “That would be great. I would really appreciate it.”

The woman gave him a short, curt nod. “Think nothing of it. It is our sacred duty.” Her voice was utterly monotone, but clearly sarcastic.

Well, Eric thought, she does have a sense of humor after all.

“Here.” She said, holding out the small plastic sample bottle again.

Eric stared at the sample bottle dumbly.

The woman pointed at his dirty water bottle. “Well, I don’t want that.”

“Oh, right.” Eric said and began transferring the water.

“Eric, Eric, perfect, perfect.” Danny grabbed Eric by the arm and nearly dragged him into the living room almost as soon as he had walked in the door. When they were standing in the living room Eric pried Danny’s grip off his arm.

Danny glanced all around as if checking to see if anyone was listening in on their conversation. The house was quiet.

“Listen. Listen to me. I have something I need to talk to you about.” Danny said. He glanced around again. Then he just stood silently.

“Uh, I’m listening.” Eric said, staring at Danny.

A warbling, haunting song drifted in the windows from somewhere off in the forest. It was muffled by foliage and distance. Eric couldn’t make out what was making the sound, but it sounded slightly familiar.

“It’s...it’s about Billy.”

Eric pulled his attention back to Danny and nodded. “Is something wrong? I’ve kind of noticed something going on with him.”

Danny grabbed Eric’s arm again. “You’ve seen it too. I knew it.”

Eric extracted his arm once again. “Seen what?”

Danny took a couple of steps away, stopped and turned in a kind of jerky way. “I think he’s about to go.”

“Go? Go where? You mean like run away?”

Danny stared at Eric as if he had just said something in a foreign language. Danny’s focus seemed to shift away somewhere else. “I think Billy’s about to glance off.”

“Glance off? What are you talking about?”

Danny slapped his hands together and shot one straight off the other. “Glance off. Gone.”

Eric shook his head. “Danny, I don’t understand.”

Danny nodded his head vigorously. “Yes, you do. We all understand. Particles. We are all just particles of energy, held together by energy. At any moment any one of us could just shift from the particle form of energy to the wave form and glance off into the cosmos where we began.” Danny held his hand up in front of his face. “At any moment...”

Eric’s thoughts seemed to swim away from him for a moment and he thought he could see it. That sense of all the energy that bound him together starting to unravel. That energy just glinting off like a sun beam reflected away from a brilliant mirror, shooting

off into depths of space. He could feel the idea pulling him into it. Like a distant call beckoning him. With a sudden spasm he regained his grip on reality.

“What are you talking about, Danny? Quantum physics? You’re a sales rep, you can’t possibly understand the intricacies of physics. More than that, you’re a Republican.”

In a bound Danny was out of the room. “I’ve got to stop him.”

Eric spun around. “Stop who?”

“Billy.” Danny shouted over his shoulder. He was out the door and gone. The door swung wildly out and back.

Eric knew he needed to do something, but he couldn’t quite focus on what it was. And... he could feel a part of himself quietly slipping away. He looked down at his hands. They were shaking.

“Are you there?”

“Huh?” Eric said turning around.

Sara stood a short distance down slope and to Eric’s right.

“I was talking to you and you just seemed to drift off. I may be a bit strange, but I don’t think I’m boring.” Sara said with a half smile.

Eric sighed and shook his head. “I’m sorry. I just...don’t seem to be with it today.”

“Or yesterday and...maybe even the day before that. You just haven’t seemed like yourself the past few days.”

Eric started to nod then shook his head instead. “I don’t feel like myself.”

“Maybe your microbial masters are in the process of rebuilding you.” Sara said with a smile.

Eric smiled a weary smile back at her. “Maybe so. I wonder who I will be then.” He laughed a little.

“Well, I really think you are just sleep deprived. Maybe if your cousin’s house is a bit too wild you need to find somewhere else to stay. You can’t go on like this. Frankly, I don’t know how you can do this,” Sara waved down towards the ground in front of her, “all day as tired as you are.”

Eric shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess when I’m here I’m kind of psyched about finding something new. Having my name in the history books for having discovered something completely new.”

“Why don’t you just talk to your cousin? Figure out some way for you to get a decent night’s sleep. Some temporary respite from ghosts or bigfoot or whatever.” Sara said as she moved up slope a couple of feet and began the slow tedious work of carefully probing the leafy debris beneath her.

Eric stared down at the ground. “I’ve tried talking to Danny, but it’s like, I don’t know. We just can’t seem to carry on an actual conversation. I don’t know what it is. We never used to have any trouble talking.”

“Maybe he’s just not the same person you grew up with.” Sara said, somewhat distracted by her work.

“I didn’t think any of us were.” Eric said glancing over at Sara with a smile.

Sara looked up and smiled back. “Don’t get me started.”

Eric laughed a little. He stared down at his feet. “I am beginning to wonder, though.” He said quietly and mostly to himself.





Eric sat up in bed. What was that? He sat still listening. It sounded like a cat. A cat in great distress. He crawled to the end of the bed and stared out the window. Nothing. The night was dark and he couldn't see much of anything.

He hadn't been sound asleep anyway. Even when something bizarre wasn't happening around here, Eric was increasingly finding that sound sleep eluded him. He sat back against the wall. A feeling of anger and frustration swept through him. He knew he desperately needed more sleep and couldn't understand the constant jittery, edgy feeling that clung to him now night and day. It was like being pumped up on caffeine while thrashing about in a thick fog.

There! He heard it again. This time he was fully awake and knew he hadn't dreamed it. A growling, squawking sound.

Eric hopped out of bed and poked his head out into the hallway. To the right led to the dining, to the left was Billy's room. Straight in front of him was the front door. It was sat partly open. Well, that's not right, Eric thought. He took a step towards it and heard what sounded like a low growl from down the hall to his right.

I don't like this, he thought. Some wild animal has now come out of the dark forest, through the open door and is now sitting in the dining room waiting for me. Great.

Eric stood absolutely still for another full minute. Nothing. Alright, he thought, be a man and go see what this thing is. He stood absolutely still for another full minute. He took a deep breath. Okay.

Slowly wandering down the dark hallway, he desperately wished he had made note of where the light switches were. At the edge of the dining room he stopped. To his right was the kitchen, to his left the den. He stared at the various dark shapes of chairs, table and hutch and listened, hoping fervently that none of the shapes moved. Nothing and no one stirred.

A quiet moan came from the short hall beyond the dining room. That was the master bedroom and bath. It's got Danny and Jenny, Eric thought. He shuffled around the dark table shape and kicked his toes into one of the chair legs. Grabbing the back of the chair tightly and gritting his teeth he held in a painful curse.

Moving on he stopped at the open door of the master bedroom. There was a night light in the master bath and it cast an odd slightly bluish glow over the room. Under a white sheet on the bed, something moved in a slithering kind of way. It seemed to wriggle one way and then back in the other direction.

Eric started to take a very slow, quiet step backwards thinking he was intruding upon his cousin's privacy and then stopped. That clearly wasn't two people in the bed.

A low growl came from the sheet.

“What the...?” Eric almost jumped at the sound of his own voice and then a second time at the thought that he had stupidly articulated his thought.

In an instant, the edge of the sheet at the foot of the bed flipped back and the thing raised up on its front legs. Wild static laced hair bristled all around its head.

Eric flinched, but held his ground. His eyes focused in the dim light.

“Oh, my God!” He whispered. That thing doesn’t have any clothes on and it’s married to my cousin.

“Jenny?” Eric whispered softly. “Uh, Jenny, it’s me. Eric. Uh, sorry. I, uh...”

Jenny ducked back under the covers with a grunt and began wriggling around again. Something in her manner told Eric that she wasn’t really even seeing him. That she probably wasn’t even conscious.

To the right the French doors that led out of the bedroom and on to deck stood open. The decking outside the doors creaked and out of the corner of his eye, Eric saw movement. He couldn’t catch a glimpse of what it was. Only that it had leaped over the railing, an 8 foot drop to the backyard, and was gone.

“So...what is it you needed me for again?” Sara asked.

“Sanity.” Eric answered as he drove.

“Hello. Did I not tell you my theory on microbial life controlling the universe? Are you sure I’m the best choice for that?” Sara said.

“I need you to help me figure out what’s happening here.” Eric said in a low voice.

The road turned from pavement to gravel and began to wind its way steeply up the mountain.

“You’re right. This is kind out there a bit, isn’t it?” Sara said as held on to the dash to lessen the jolting of the car.

“It’s just up here now.” Eric said as they headed up the last stretch.

The car came to a stop at the top of the long driveway. Eric and Sara got out.

“And so...?” Sara said looking around. It was quiet.

Eric shook his head. “Uh, I don’t know.” He cupped his hands up around his mouth to shout, but before he could they heard it.

It was somewhere between a scream and a howl. They both turned and looked up the mountain, through the forest, at one of the rock outcroppings. It took them both a moment to spot him.

“Billy.” Eric said.

“What’s he doing?” Sara tried to shade her eyes to get a better view.

“I don’t know, but...” Eric’s voice trailed off. He seemed to be unable to focus on Billy or anything in particular.

“Well, don’t you think we should get up there?” Sara said staring over at Eric.

Eric stood, expressionless.

“Eric?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” Eric shook himself out of it and started up the mountain.

The going was tough. Rocks, dead trees and tree limbs, last fall’s dried leaves, soft earth and vines made the footing treacherous. Not to mention the steepness of the incline. Being in better physical shape Sara was gaining on the outcropping faster than Eric. She reached the base of it well ahead of him.

It was 40 feet almost straight up. She had to circle around about 30 feet to the right and work her way up to the top. When she was on top she crossed to within 10 feet of Billy. He stood out on the edge. The front edge of the outcropping was not a clean 90 degree

drop off, but instead it curved out to a vertical drop. Billy stood out at point that curved so sharply that Sara thought it impossible that Billy hadn't slid over the edge already. She hesitated.

There was a scuffling sound behind her and from the huffing she knew it was Eric nearing the top.

Billy let out another piercing screech-howl. He held his arms out wide open as if he were trying to embrace something.

Sara took a step forward. Her foot slid slightly before it gained enough friction to stop. She hesitated again. "Billy?" she called out.

Suddenly, from behind Sara, across the small clearing that comprised the top of the outcropping, a wild thing came flying out of the forest. It was howling, tattered, flailing about as it ran, with sticks and leaves waving about in its red hair.

Sara let out a short scream in surprise as she half turned back towards it. She stumbled, lost her footing and slid down the curved rock edge a couple of feet before coming to a stop again down on one knee.

The howling thing came on straight for Sara and from its speed as it crossed the clearing it was obvious that its momentum would take both Sara and Billy over the edge with it.

With a grunt and after some wild scrambling Eric collided with the thing in the middle of the clearing. The two went tumbling over the uneven rocky ground.

"Danny!" Eric yelled. "Danny! Danny!"

They tussled for a moment longer before both stopped moving. They each breathed heavily.

Danny stared up at Eric. His eyes unfocused and confused. "Where...? Eric?" He glanced all around. "Why is my office such a mess?"

"Eric." It was Sara. There was something in the tone of her voice.

Eric glanced over at her. Her body language told him she was afraid of slipping further down and over the edge.

Eric looked back down at Danny. "Danny, stay here." Eric stood up. "Danny, just...sit in your office."

Danny lay on his side. He pawed slowly at the thick moss that covered much of the rocky clearing. "My papers...these are not filed right at all..."

Eric scrambled over to Sara and pulled her back up on to more level ground.

Sara, still crouching, half turned and looked back towards the edge. "Billy." She said softly.

Eric glanced over at Billy who was still managing somehow to stand out on the precariously sloping rock face. He seemed to be mumbling or growling something, almost like a chant.

Eric took a couple of quick and tentative steps out towards Billy and in an instant the loose moss and lichen covering most the rock face crumbled away under Eric's feet. He fell down on to his back with a heavy thud and slid down the sloping rock towards Billy.

"Eric!" Sara called out.

Eric tumbled down the rock and plowed into the back of Billy's legs which, despite the steepness of the slope, actually caused Billy to fall backwards, flat against the rock face. Eric slid past Billy and over the vertical edge of the rock face. After a moment, Billy, who appeared to have been knocked unconscious, followed Eric on down.

Sara cried out and scrambled forward. She too started to slide downward, but after a moment of frantically dragging both hands and feet she generated enough friction to stop her descent.

Sara hung frozen and numb. Something caught her attention. To her left there was a slight movement. At first, she couldn't identify what it was. Then she saw it. A thick, shaggy, dark colored vine. It snaked along the rock face disappearing somewhere left of center and reappearing a short ways to the right of the center of the rock outcropping. At both ends it was wiggling, almost vibrating, at both ends.

Overcoming her fears Sara let herself slide a little further down the rock face. Leaning out, far more than she was comfortable doing, she spotted them. Eric had grabbed the vine as he slid over it and now hung from it with one hand while in his other hand held a fist full of Billy's shirt. Billy hung limply below him.

"Eric." Sara said, almost whispering.

Eric looked up at her. "I don't think...I can do this...very long." He tried to smile, but he was straining to hang on.

Sara could see the ground on both sides of the rock outcropping sloping downward and meeting directly below Eric and Billy. They still hung, though, at least 20 feet above the boulders that lay at the foot of the rock face. It wouldn't be a pleasant landing.

Sara glanced about looking for some means of helping them. Then she heard it. An ugly cracking sound. She knew instantly it was the vine. She glanced to her left and saw strands of vine snapping.

"Eric, the vine." Sara called out.

Eric looked up at her. His expression told her that he knew what was happening, but there wasn't anything he could do about it.

Another sound cut into through the moment. It was an oddly melodic chirping sound.

Sara looked around. She couldn't tell what it was or where it was coming from.

With a final crack the vine snapped and she watched a bizarre scene unfold in apparent slow motion. The left side of the vine had broken and Eric and Billy were now swinging on the loose vine downward, but as they did their weight was bending the right side of the vine back on to itself. As a result, the thick vine slowed their descent and gracefully swung them down on to the leaf covered ground along the right side of the rock outcropping.

For a moment, everything was still. Then the odd chirping sounded again.

Eric rolled over and sat up. He felt like he had been beaten with a very large stick. He checked Billy. He was still unconscious, but appeared to be okay. It took him a moment to recognize the chirping sound next to him. He fished his cell phone out of his pocket and stared at it.

“Well, I’ll be damned. It comes in up here.” He answered it.

Sara still clung to the side of the rock face numbly. She shook herself out of it and, clinging as tightly as she could, crept back up the rock face. When she reached the top she saw Danny staring closely at a piece of moss as if he was reading it. In the distance, from somewhere further up in the forest, she heard a woman’s voice singing.

Leaving Danny to finish the story of the moss, Sara scrambled down around the right side of the rock face to where Eric still sat.

“Is Billy okay?” Sara asked as she slipped down on to her butt in the leaves next to Eric.

Eric nodded. “I think so.” He held up his cell phone. “I called 911. They’re on their way.”

“Oh. That was you’re phone ringing?”

Eric nodded again. “It was the water people. They found a bacteria in the water they have never seen before and, get this, they suspect if you ingest enough of the bacteria they suspect you might be prone to ‘hallucinatory states’.”

They exchanged slow silent nods.

“Any other symptoms?” Sara asked.

Eric shook his head. “They don’t know.”

From somewhere up the mountain Jenny’s voice belted out her song again.

Sara glanced up the mountain towards the singing voice and where Danny still lay, paging through the moss. “I think it’s more than a suspicion now.”

Eric smiled at Sara. “You think?”

“Hey,” Sara said suddenly, “I think you just found the most interesting new species in the whole Biodiversity Project.”

“Well, what do you know? I found something after all.” His expression darkened and he was quiet for a moment.

“I’ve been drinking the water too.” Eric said softly.

Sara nodded.

“So, this bacteria is in me.” Eric said, with a slight bow of his head.

Again Sara nodded.

Eric looked over at Sara. He had a slight smile, behind which was clearly uncertainty.

“So...am I...are ‘we’ something new?”

Sara stared at him for a moment. Then realized he was referring to her theory. She shook her head slowly. “I...honestly don’t know.”

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*The Hamlet Mysteries series...*

## To Not Be In Hamlet

Sam MacNeil, part time mystery writer, has returned to his hometown to house sit for his parents as they start a lengthy vacation. What Sam has forgotten while away is the quirky weirdness of the little town of Hamlet. With expectations that he would quietly do his time in Hamlet the discovery of a dead body, clearly murdered, changes everything. Now Sam finds, much to his chagrin, the residents of Hamlet are expecting him to solve the murder. Not only does Sam not want to be involved in it, but the authorities have made it clear his help is not wanted. Was it the angry businessman from Detroit? Was it the shifty handyman the victim worked with? Sam doesn't know, but when killers from Detroit show up the situation is taking a serious and deadly turn. And then there's Becky. An old friend who clearly has more than friendship on her mind. Murder, killers and romance...this is not how this brief stay in Hamlet was supposed to go.

## The Art of Hamlet

An old family friend asks Sam to look into a break in at her house. She is an art collector and critic, but nothing has been stolen and the only thing disturbed are some small

statues. While it is a puzzling incident Sam doesn't think it is a serious issue, but when a neighbor is murdered and found bobbing in a nearby lake the story is once again taking a dark turn. As usual Sam is not inclined to get involved in a murder investigation, but somehow he seems to be sliding in that direction anyway. In addition, the County Detective seems to have recognized that Sam might be of some use---regardless of the consequences for Sam. And what of Sam's old classmate, who is now a seemingly crazy hermit, ranting on about terrorists in Hamlet? Is that actually possible? To complicate things even further something is happening between Sam and Becky. Love and Death seem to be chasing Sam through the wacky streets of Hamlet.

## Ophelia's Hunt

Sam's women troubles have seemingly tripled. There is Becky and the relationship that Sam has found himself in with her. However, suddenly, there is Callie. Sam's wealthy and wild ex-fiance who has appeared in Hamlet. Is she here to get Sam back? Everyone thinks so---including Becky. Then there's the beautiful woman named Misty. She seems to have a particular interest in Sam as well. And, of course, there's murder in Hamlet once again. Questions abound. Is the lovely Misty a suspect or a new love interest? Who are the men stalking Callie? How is Sam going explain all of this to an increasingly angry Becky? Why is the County Detective actually soliciting Sam's help? Should Sam be flattered or very careful? With love and murder swirling around Sam how is he going to survive this?

## The Ghosts of Hamlet

Sam MacNeil, part time writer, is house sitting for his parents in his hometown of Hamlet. The people of Hamlet are far more quirky than Sam remembers from his childhood and he is keen on leaving them behind and getting his life back, but it's those dead bodies that are the real problem. They just keep showing up. Murder in the small town of Hamlet has taken a noticeable uptick since Sam has returned and the residents have taken notice. Sam claims it has nothing to do with him and yet...Now, even worse, the residents are seeing ghosts and they blame Sam for that as well.

Sam may get his chance to escape Hamlet now that his parents are heading home, but can he really walk away without solving the mystery of the ghosts? Will he get away before the "gangsters" from Detroit catch up with him and turn him into a ghost? And what about Becky? He really wasn't planning on a romantic entanglement to muddle things up.

So what do ghosts, gangsters, girlfriends, musk ox and talking cans of beans all have in common? Sam MacNeil and the quirky town of Hamlet, of course.



# The Play of Hamlet

It is finally here. The Founder's Day festival in Hamlet. A gala event highlighted by a play depicting the bizarre founding of Hamlet. Sam is not only the star of the play, but also a target for Scanlon and his killers from Detroit. They are determined to finish him off once and for all. But Sam knows they are coming and, with the help of the quirky residents of Hamlet, he has his own plans in the works. What Sam doesn't know is that Scanlon isn't the only killer from Sam's past that is out to get him. Could the biggest day of the year in Hamlet be Sam's last?

# The King of Hamlet

The sixth story in the Hamlet Mystery series starts out where most of the stories end up...with a dead body. The trouble is Sam is found standing over the dead body and refusing to explain what has happened. He seems willing to take the fall for the guy's murder, but he is clearly hiding something. His friends are sure he didn't commit murder, but who is he protecting and why? What Sam is not telling anyone is that he is playing a more dangerous game than any of them can imagine. As bodies begin piling up around Sam he is increasingly wondering if he has a guardian angel or has become an unwilling accomplice to the Angel of Death. Once again women and murder are causing headaches for Sam.

# The Graves of Hamlet

As if the town of Hamlet didn't have enough trouble with dead bodies now, it appears, someone is digging them up in the cemetery. The quirky residents of Hamlet are sure this has something to do with Sam. As usual Sam doesn't really want anything to do with whatever is going on, but when someone tries to make the cemetery Sam's permanent home one dark night it would seem that Sam will need to sort this out---if only to save himself. To add to the confusion, with Becky out of town, Sam must also figure out who the half naked woman is that keeps showing up on his deck sun bathing. Oh, and who are these other guys that just showed up in Hamlet? The grandson of the recently deceased retired cop who is lying about his real identity and the suspicious looking guy casually asking questions around town about the same dead cop...?

# Polonius' Plight

Here's a surprise...there's been a murder in Hamlet---again. This time, however, Sam is very much intentionally involved. It's the suspects. The guy was found with a gaping shotgun blast to the chest. Like the one in the trunk of Renee's car. Of course the last person to be seen with the murder victim was Jen---and she seems to have disappeared. And why is Reese, the County Detective looking for Becky and her grandfather's .38? Sam is sure none of his friends are murderers, but to keep any and all of them out of jail he needs to find out who the killer is and fast. To make matters worse, while Sam is trying to solve a murder and hide his friends the Town Council of Hamlet has had enough of Sam and the murders that seem to follow him around. They passed yet another of their many bizarre ordinances. Sam has been ordered to leave Hamlet.

# The Office of Scientific Operations

With the conclusion of the traumatic events in 1933 surrounding the shocking affair involving the city of New York and a beast commonly referred to as "King Kong", the president of the United States, Franklin Roosevelt, established the Office of Scientific Operations (OSO). The purpose of the OSO was to monitor and evaluate the level of risk and assist in any manner the mitigation of danger of any and all scientific operations and anomalies. With the rapid pace of scientific discovery this office was given the highest priority and clearance to investigate any potential threats or consequences to the interests of the United States of America.

What follows are the real stories behind the cinematic cover-ups presented to the general public...

## Release #1

### from the declassified files of the Office of Scientific Operations...

#### **From 1953...**

File #153 (commonly referred to by the public as "The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms")

OSO agents Elliot Simms and Robbie Regan, while observing an atomic test in the Arctic, are unwittingly caught up in the release of prehistoric beasts from millions of years of suspended animation in the ice. Now they must help in stopping this new terror as it moves steadily down the east coast destroying anything in it's path.

#### **From 1954...**

File #157 (commonly referred to by the public as "Them")

OSO agents Simms and Regan investigate the odd circumstances surrounding a missing FBI agent only to stumble upon a horror in the New Mexico desert and if they cannot find a way to stop it there is a very good chance this could be the end of humanity.

## Release #2

# from the declassified files of the Office of Scientific Operations...

## **From 1954...**

File #159 (commonly referred to by the public as "Terror in the Jungle")

OSO agent Jonathon Wyatt is pulled off vacation to an island in Indonesia to investigate sightings of pteranodons. The island is not far from the island known infamously as Z Land. It was once the headquarters of Dr. Zeitner whose experiments in genetically manipulating prehistoric monsters terrorized the world in the 1930s before the OSO put a stop to it. Wyatt's job is to determine if these are indeed Dr. Zeitner's creatures, but what he finds is much more deadly. This is no way to spend a vacation---trying not to get eaten.

## **Release #3**

# from the declassified files of the Office of Scientific Operations...

## **From 1954...**

File #161 (commonly referred to by the public as "Revenge of the Creature")

After the capture of an unknown species of half man half fish is brought back to a Florida marine institute, OSO agents Wayne and Wyatt must determine the risk to the American people it poses. When the creature escapes and begins terrorizing the citizens of Florida the risk becomes all too real. Now they must hunt it down and stop it's killing spree, if they can.

## **From 1955...**

File #165 (commonly referred to by the public as "It Came From Beneath the Sea")

OSO agents Simms and Regan are sent out to Pearl Harbor to investigate damage to one of the Navy's most advanced atomic submarines by some kind of giant creature. While the Navy has a hard time believing it, the OSO knows such creatures are real. It soon becomes apparent by the large number of ships being lost that something dangerous is hunting throughout the Pacific. Now, with the creature openly attacking the west coast

of the United States Simms and Regan join the fight to stop this thing before the entire Pacific is destroyed by it.

## Release #4

### from the declassified files of the Office of Scientific Operations...

**From 1954...**

File #163 (commonly referred to by the public as "The DC Creeper")

On a break from hunting monsters for the Office of Scientific Operations, OSO Agent Wyatt is trying to adjust to a more crowded domestic life. As brutally murdered bodies begin showing up in the nation's capitol, though, this doesn't seem like it is going to be much of a break. The newspapers have dubbed the hulking killer "The Creeper" and it looks like Wyatt is going to have to hunt him down and stop him before Wyatt becomes the next victim.

## Release #5

### from the declassified files of the Office of Scientific Operations...

**From 1956...**

File #166 (commonly referred to by the public as "Tarantula")

Agents Simms and Regan from the Office of Scientific Operations, the OSO, returning from the Pacific Coast having just finished dealing with yet another monster threatening the United States are redirected to a small town in Arizona to verify that a large tarantula that has been terrorizing the local inhabitants has been destroyed by the Air Force. With Beka, a woman who insists on tagging along with the intrepid agents---a clear violation of official regulations---in tow, they quickly discover that the threat of the giant spiders in the Arizona desert are not over just yet.

**From 1956...**

File #171 (commonly referred to by the public as "Invasion of the Body Snatchers")

The Office of Scientific Operations, the OSO, has sent agents Wayne and Wyatt out to the small California city of Santa Mira to locate a missing Air Force major, sent to investigate the impact of some meteors, and to understand the meaning of his last cryptic message to Washington. What they find is that, while the city of Santa Mira may look like a quaint place to visit it soon becomes apparent that a missing Air Force major is the least of Wayne and Wyatt's problems. There is something very strange and deadly going on in Santa Mira. Something that seems...alien?

## **The New Sheriff**

Travis Ames, somehow, has developed super powers. Exactly what these powers entail he's not sure. He's still learning how to control his powers, but he's already decided that he should use this new found power to fight crime. And...if he made a little profit along the way, well, that wouldn't be so bad either. But reality has a way of altering the best laid plans. He has quickly figured out he has no idea how to go about crime fighting. And, to make matters worse, he has learned the hard way, his new powers won't protect him from getting hurt or, quite possibly, killed. Can he survive long enough to learn how to use his powers? Can he get an aging detective to teach him how to fight crime? Can he prevent Aubrey, the new girl, and everyone else at work from figuring out what he can do? How long can he keep this up before he makes that one small mistake and ends up dead?