

# The Plague

K McConnell

[www.kmccconnellbooks.com](http://www.kmccconnellbooks.com)

[kmccconnell@kmccconnellbooks.com](mailto:kmccconnell@kmccconnellbooks.com)

"What is it?" Carson moved quickly down the side of the excavation. Tension ran high around the dig since the two previous missions, the 4th and 5th to Mars, had uncovered a variety of fossilized remains. Mostly tiny fragments, but analysis strongly suggested they came from larger fauna---not microscopic, as had been expected. More significantly, there were traces of what was believed to be fabricated materials. While the conclusions were still considered controversial it had, nonetheless, unnerved the population back home. It had raised questions that many in the population did not want to deal with.

In addition, there was an underlying pressure now for these missions to produce something of value. The Martian expeditions were becoming increasingly unpopular back on Earth. A great many people felt that the enormous amount of resources it took to launch an expedition to a long dead planet could better be spent trying to improve the standard of living for an ever burgeoning Earth population and its rapidly diminishing resources.

There was a continual fear in the space program that each mission could be the last.

Carson brushed his thin suit against the rugged sides of the dig. A dangerous thing to do in a pressurized suit and the nearly pressureless Martian atmosphere. He wedged himself between the two of them as they stood looking at it.

"What is it?" Carson repeated.

Sorrell, an archeologist, stepped slightly aside to let Carson see better. There wasn't much room in the trench though. Templeton, an engineer whose specialty was in the recovery of artifacts, shifted slightly too, but there wasn't anywhere for him to go.

Sorrell shook his head. "I...don't know."

Carson stared at the black bulging circle in the sand. It looked like black glass in the glare of the work lights. Something deep within Carson, something instinctive, made him want to reach out and touch it, but he knew that was strictly against procedure.

"What's going on out there?" McClellan's voice echoed through their helmets. She was one of the two military personnel assigned to the mission.

"It's...we're really not sure as yet, Sara. Stand by." Carson continued to stare for a moment longer then glanced over at Sorrell. It was a pointless gesture since their helmet face shields made it difficult to see one another's faces. In the helmets individuality was largely lost.

"Let's see if we can get a better look at it, shall we?"

Carson backed off to give the other two some room and explained to McClellan what they had come upon. Carson Peters, a civilian and the one of the world's leading paleontologists, was the mission leader.

"Look at the soil discoloration." Sorrell pointed in the area immediately around the object.

Templeton nodded, though his helmet hardly moved rendering the act meaningless. "You think maybe a leeching from the object?"

"Don't know. Doesn't really look like the same material as the surrounding soil. Let me get a sample of it." Sorrell fumbled a small container out of a pocket and gently scooped some soil into it.

"Let's use the air drill to clear it off." Templeton said hoisting himself up the side of the excavation. He reached outside the trench and pulled down a canister with a long metallic hose attachment on it. At the end of the hose was a metal nozzle and valve. The air drill was handy for clearing away the loose red sand, but it had to be used sparingly. In the thin Martian atmosphere it took hours for its compressor to repressurize the tank.

Templeton knelt down beside the object. He positioned himself and the air drill, being careful not to let the hose or nozzle get too near his helmet. Their helmets were metallic and full of electronics and the air drill hose had a nasty tendency to build up a static charge. Not only had they already ruined one helmet, but Sorrell assured everyone that it also 'Hurt like Hell'.

Templeton brought the nozzle around towards the object. He moved within a few inches and suddenly there was a flash of light.

"Shit!" Templeton fell awkwardly two feet further back from the object.

"Whoa! What was that?" Sorrell stepped back knelt down next to Templeton.

"What's going on?" Carson tried to lean over the other two and look into Templeton's face shield.

"Damn. That hurt." Templeton was flexing his right arm.

"Static?" Sorrell was helping Templeton back up.

Again Templeton nodded. Despite years of training in the suits he could never shed the reflex. He was a true engineer, on-the-fly flexibility was not in his blood. "A nice big pop."

"Interesting." Carson stared at the sphere.

"Is everyone alright out there?" McClellan seemed to always be hovering in electronic space over them.

"We're fine." Sorrell answered her.

"Yeah, well you're not the one that just lost fine motor control." Templeton said grinning and shaking his arm.

"Well so much for the air drill." Sorrell said picking up a brush. He knelt down as far left in the trench as he could to give Templeton room to work. After stowing the air drill carefully back up out of the excavation Templeton joined him, also armed only with a stiff brush.

"You feel that?" Sorrell's hands hovered over the object.

Templeton nodded. His one hand floated over the object as well.

"You must have put one Hell of a charge into it."

"Sure seems like it. I can feel the tingling right through my glove."

They swept soil away for a few minutes. Each stopping occasionally to shake off the tingling sensation.

"Is it just me or does that tingling grate on your nerves too?" Sorrell shook his head.

"Kind of the same feeling as fingernails on a chalkboard."

"Exactly."

"I think it's spherical." Templeton continued to push away soil.

"I agree. What would you say, about 80 centimeters in diameter?"

"About that."

Carson could only catch glimpses of the object over their shoulders. His mind was racing. No one had said anything, but it had to be foremost on their minds. This was a monumental find. It was too perfect to be of natural origin. And unlike the fine material discovered in the past that suggested artificial materials this was clearly something that...someone made? That meant...what did it mean? The possibilities were hard to fathom, but Carson knew the answer to a lifelong quest was staring back at him from the ruddy Martian sand. He wanted desperately to get another, closer look at the object, but first things first. They had to get a better sense of what they were dealing with.

He kept McClellan updated with what little he could make out. They nearly had it completely exposed and he was getting excited when it happened.

There was a flash of light. Or was there? Carson wasn't sure if he actually saw a flash of light or if it was just in his head. He was sure about being knocked backwards in the trench. His head was ringing as if from a blast, but he didn't remember hearing or feeling anything. He lay stunned for a moment then scrambled to stand back up. These suits were far less bulky than previous models, but it was still not a simple task to maneuver one's body easily in them. Especially when you were in a hurry.

Carson stood up, though his legs were a little wobbly under him. He was ten feet further down the trench than he was a minute before.

Templeton groaned. He had been shoved hard into the side of the excavation, but he was stirring.

It was Sorrell Carson was worried about. He wasn't moving. Somehow he had been driven about several inches into the sandy side of the excavation. Carson crammed into the end of the trench and began carefully pulling Sorrell out. He was most concerned that Sorrell's suit may have been compromised.

Static crackled loudly in through the Comm system in Carson's helmet. Through the static Carson could hear Templeton mumbling something and some other distant voices. He pulled Sorrell free of the dirt and sand and gave him a quick inspection. His suit seemed to be intact.

Carson pulled Sorrell's helmet around so he could look directly into his face shield. Sorrell's eyes were closed and his body was limp.

"Templeton!" Carson turned, reached over and slapped at Templeton's arm. "James, are you alright?"

The static was diminishing and Carson could hear Templeton more clearly now. He could also now make out the distant voice of McClellan. She was demanding something.

"I think so." Templeton slowly pulled himself to his feet, heavily leaning against the side of the excavation. "What the Hell was that?"

"I don't know. Sorrell is unconscious. We need to get him back inside. Help me."

Templeton had to force his muscles to respond. He helped Carson move Sorrell back up the trench where a set of rudimentary steps had been carved making it considerably easier to get in and out.

"Carson! Can you hear me?" McClellan's voice was coming in clearer now.

"I can hear you, Sara. We're coming in."

"Good. We just had some kind of system wide failure here. We're just getting things back up and online now. Don't know what caused it, but until we can run some diagnostics I would feel better if you guys were back inside."

"Have Dr. Watley meet us at the airlock."

"Dr. Watley, medical..." McClellan started.

"My systems are down as well. I was already on my way to Command. I will meet you at the airlock." Watley chimed in.

"Why what's...wait a minute our monitors are coming back up now. What's going on? What's wrong with Dr. Sorrell?" McClellan leaned in close to the monitor to get a better view through the snow-scattered picture.

"Don't know." Carson replied.

"What happened?" McClellan's sharp blue eyes darted from screen to screen.

"Don't know. What does his suit tell you?" Carson was breathing a little heavier now.

"Can't say. Yours is the only one registering. As I said, our systems went down in here and everything isn't quite back up yet." McClellan looked back over her shoulder as Randle entered the Command module. "Where the Hell have you been?"

Randle grunted. "Sleep. It's my sleep cycle."

McClellan glanced up at the clock. "Oh."

"It's not your systems." Templeton sounded winded.

McClellan turned back to the monitors. "Say again."

In a winded voice Templeton continued. "It's our suits. They're down."

Carson glanced over at Templeton and only now realized how much Templeton was struggling to keep up with a man 20 years older and in far worse physical condition.

Carson stopped. "Are you alright?"

Templeton nodded. "I'll be alright, but let's keep going. With the suit system down my oxygen recycler is down as well."

Randle now leaned in closer to the monitor screens as well. He watched Templeton stumble and struggle to get up. "They got about 40 more yards to go..."

McClellan jerked a thumb back over her shoulder. "Go get suited up."

Randle stood staring at the monitor. "Yeah, I'm not sure he's going to make it."

"Go, lieutenant!" McClellan gave him a shove.

"Yes sir." Randle ducked out the door.

"Hang in there James." Carson was sounding very winded now too as he looked over at Templeton.

Templeton didn't answer, but Carson did see him nod.

They pressed on to the airlock.

"Hey there." Watley smiled and pushed hair back off his forehead.

Sorrell blinked groggily. They were all crammed in around his bunk. All except McClellan who was up in the command section.

"How do you feel, Marcus?" Watley sat back and crossed his arms. He had been unable to find anything significantly wrong with Sorrell.

Sorrell cleared his throat. "Okay, I guess. What happened?"

"You seemed to have experienced a bit of a shock."

"A shock?"

Templeton leaned forward. "Well, our best guess is that you got popped with a static discharge."

"A static discharge?"

Templeton nodded. "We've all experienced it in those suits. They're so wired up with instruments and sensors that they create a small field around them. My guess is that object has a metallic component to it and acted like a big ground for your suit when you touched it. Big enough to give me quite a pop too."

"A static discharge, huh?" A skeptical look crept over Sorrell's features.

"You think it was something else?" Watley checked a monitor.

Sorrell shrugged a little. "I've had my share of those static pokes." He glanced up at Templeton. "I don't know. This didn't have the same feel to it, but I'll tell you this, it sure took it out of me."

"Well that's understandable. An electrical shock will do that to you."

Sorrell looked at Watley and shook his head. "No. That's not it. You know how some nights are full of dreams? Long and involved dreams and when you wake up you feel exhausted? Like you had just run a marathon or something?"

Watley nodded, but said nothing.

Sorrell's mind seemed to drift.

"Did you dream something?" Carson spoke from the narrow doorway.

Sorrell pulled himself back from somewhere else. He nodded. "I think so."

"Well, it looks as if you will be alright. I'm heading back up to Command." Randle worked his way out of the small quarters. "The major's got her panties all bunched up over why our systems crashed."

"What did you dream?" Carson moved closer and took Randle's place.

"It was..." That was as far as he could get. They watched Sorrell struggle to put into words vague images in his mind's eye. Finally he sighed and shook his head.

"I can say this though. There was something familiar about the images in my head. Whatever they were."

"Let's give Marcus some time to rest." Watley stood as he spoke. The others followed the doctor's lead.

Sorrell closed his eyes and focused on the distant images. There was definitely something familiar about them and totally bizarre at the same time. He just couldn't identify anything in the dreams. No frame of reference. He shook his head in frustration. Moments later he was asleep.

Sorrell felt himself slowly spinning downward, maybe downward wasn't the right term for it. Dropping deeper inward. Inside himself. At the same time the idea of who he was, as an individual, seemed to be crumbling away. It was frightening, but...strangely, not unfamiliar.

I am so hungry. I can feel myself reaching in so many different directions, but there is so little left. I want it. Anything that's left. I need to find more. How am I going to make it. I can feel an emptiness coursing through me. A hollowness that screams. I am shaking and I know it's going to get worse, much worse. I will do anything for more. I pull and pull at anything and everything within reach, but it is futile. There just isn't anything left.

This is the Starving. I remember it now. The Starving. I feel the panic of the Starving. I remember that too. The panic. The frenzy of thrashing and banging around in a desolate and empty place. The desperate searching for the last of it. The Starving.

I am so hungry. For the food. For the taste of gorging on anything. On everything. I want to eat it all again. Just a taste of any of it again would be ecstasy. I don't think I can ever be sated again.

To drink again. I am so thirsty I could drink in great seas of anything. I want to swim in drink.

To touch and feel again. Anything. Rough, soft, wet, sharp, warm or cold. To learn the feel of things all over again.

Input. A constant information feed. I must have that also. My mind is slipping into a vast void of nothing. Where has the data feed gone? I hear nothing. I see nothing. There is no incoming data stream. I cannot stand being disconnected. I cannot stand the emptiness, the aloneness.

I am losing all of it and I am too alone. Why am I not connected? It is the Starving. Everything is lost in the Starving. What am I to do? What am I to do? What are we going to do?

We?

I turn and see them. Eyes. Billions of eyes. All hungry, desperate, searching. We are starving. We are grabbing and clawing at...at nothing. Emptiness stretches out in all directions. No, not total emptiness. It is a wasteland. A wasteland of dust. Red dust. We are dying. Starving in a dead red wasteland. It is the Starving. The time of gathering. The time of migration. We must gather. We must flee this place or die.

I turn and look into the billions of eyes. I see it in their eyes too. We must gather and we must go. This red world is dead. It is used up and we must go.

I am so hungry. So empty. I crawl scratching at the red dust trying to suck anything out of the



nothing.

“What was that?” Templeton said coming up to the door that Watley was leaning against the frame of.

Watley indicating Sorrell laying on the bunk. “Him.”

“Wow. Sounds like a hell of a dream.” Templeton looking in the door.

Watley nodded. “Yeah. It’s been going on for a while.”

“Should we wake him?” Templeton asked.

Watley shook his head. “No. Best to let him sleep. Even if it’s a restless sleep.”

With a nod and a shrug Templeton walked away and Watley followed.

Sorrell blinked. He stared. Where am I? He struggled and focused. The floor. He was staring at the floor. He moved a little. He wasn't just staring at the floor, he was lying on it. Lying facedown scratching at the floor and gasping.

It was a dream. Just a dream. As real as it seemed he had to keep telling himself. It was just a dream.

“Oh, hey, Dr. Peters.” Randle entered the Community module and headed straight over to the kitchen area and the coffee.

Carson looked up from his own cup. He was sitting at the table. “Lieutenant.”

Randle pulled a chair up to the table. “Pretty weird, huh?”

Carson seemed reluctant to pull himself out of his thoughts. “What is weird?”

Randle jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “That thing out there. It’s kind of weird to find something like that here isn’t it?”

Carson nodded slowly. “It does pose some serious questions.”

“Doesn’t seem...”

“Natural? No, it doesn’t, but many things in Nature are deceiving at first glance.”

“So you don’t think it could be some sort of alien artifact?” Randle shook his head even as he asked the question. He like most of the human population was a Humanist. Humanists placed humans now squarely at the center of the Universe. The thought that any other sentient species could exist, especially one that may in fact predate humanity was beyond the realm of possibilities. There had to be an alternative explanation for the object other than aliens.

“It is perplexing isn’t it?” Carson himself was fascinated with the possibilities the object’s existence now suggested, but he also felt a voice inside telling him he had to find an explanation for the object that fit within the doctrines of Humanist thought. It’s not that he particularly adhered to the philosophy of the Humanists, but the only way to be elected to any significant office nowadays was to profess absolute devotion to Humanism. That meant that all government officials, in particular those that voted on funding for the sciences, were die hard Humanists. To suggest a line of thinking that would undermine Humanist philosophy, regarding one’s career, was a very risky business.

“How could...?” Before Randle could finish something in the back of his mind spoke up. He focused on Carson for moment without speaking.

“You are a Humanist, aren’t you?” Randle spoke slowly. Like most Humanists Randle regarded anyone who wasn’t a Humanist to be at least somewhat suspicious. For Randle anyone who believed in something other than Humanism was a cultist.

Carson nodded. Sometimes science and Humanism didn’t always agree completely, but usually with enough studying the facts became clearer and supported a Humanistic view of the cosmos. At least that was the generally accepted approach of most academics.

“If the Universe was put here for humans to develop, then this object has to be of natural origin.” Just saying that, almost more to himself, seemed to convince Randle that it was true.

Carson watched Randle and again felt that after studying the object further they had to confirm

its origin was natural. The thought that it could be anything other than a freak of volcanic activity was going to be problematic, for everyone.

Besides that, where would it have come from? Astronomers had already cataloged thousands of planets in the general neighborhood beyond our own solar system and had yet to find a single one that could support life. As a matter of fact the planets of the right size and type, the right distance from the right type of star consistently appeared to be much like Mars, an empty wasteland.

"That is correct and I am certain further study will bear that out. Nature is often strange, but everything we learn continues to point towards our being the central player in this Universe." Carson said, as if he were reading it straight from a script.

Randle nodded with a certain sense of relief.

Carson finished his coffee and stood up.

Randle glanced at the clock on the wall. "Oh, I guess we need to get prepped." He stood up and followed Carson out of the Community module.

They were met at the airlock by Templeton and Watley, who had been pulled into this excursion because Sorrell was still resting in his bunk. They climbed into their suits and wrestled the bulky equipment clamp out the airlock door. When they got to the trench they carefully positioned the clamp over the now fully exposed black sphere and attached it.

"So you think it was just a freak accident then?" Randle puffed a little. Despite the fact that in this light gravity the object didn't weigh much it still required an effort to maintain the right pace with the other three guys. They each held a handle coming off the circular clamp holding the object.

"Just static. That's all." Carson glanced back at the object.

"So why are we using the secure clamp on this?"

Templeton half turned to look back at Randle. "Son, this far from home you want to err on the side of 'just in case'."

They neared the door to the small research station. It consisted of five round modules linked together.

Carson was excited in anticipation of studying the object more closely, but it was Dr. Watley who was most pleased that they were at least able to now see the station door. He was shorter than the rest of them and the pace they had set in carrying the object was awkward and uncomfortable for him. With the low gravity of Mars balance was somewhat more difficult to maintain. As a result there were occasionally some extremely embarrassing stumbles. Additionally, he really wasn't as practiced in such work. His job was primarily in maintaining the crew's health and safety. He wouldn't have had to lend a hand with the object at all if Sorrell had not continued to experience dizzy spells.

A moment later Randle swayed causing the other three to stagger.

"Whoa..." Randle's voice was almost sleepy.

They stopped. Templeton and Carson looked back at Randle. Watley took advantage of the moment to rest, staring down at the ground.

"You getting winded soldier?" Templeton asked with a chuckle.

"No. Just got a little dizzy staring at this box."

"It's just some disorientation from the exertion. Try staring down at the ground." Carson suggested.

"Alright." Randle looked over at Watley. "How are you doing Doc?"

Watley nodded in his helmet, unaccustomed to the body language restrictions the suits created. "I'm okay."

"Good. Let's get going again, shall we?" Carson grabbed a hold of his handle.

Templeton and Randle followed suit. Watley turned and repositioned himself to get more of his shoulder under the handle. It moved him in slightly closer to the pressure box that encased the object.

Only a few steps later Watley staggered badly. He let out a gasp.

Everyone stumbled and stopped.

"What happened?" Carson turned around.

"Doc, are you alright?" Randle leaned over to get a look into Watley's helmet.

"I'm okay. I am." He waved a hand at the rest of them. "I just caught the lieutenant's dizziness." Watley glanced over at the box. A trace of suspicion crept into the back of his mind. In spite of the added strain it put on him he positioned himself as far out on the handle as he could manage.

The group pushed on closing in on the door to the pressure chamber.

"Careful." Carson said as they lifted the object through the hatch into the pressure chamber.

They all wedged into the pressure chamber. It was cramped. The chamber was optimistically listed as capable of holding up to four individuals. At the moment it was at maximum capacity plus the object with protruding clamps and a pressure lock box.

"I'm still a little fuzzy about this." Randle tapped the pressure lock box with his foot. "I mean it's a large black marble. More or less."

"This object has been sitting here for who knows how long in a thin atmosphere of frigid carbon dioxide. We are about to pressurize this chamber with a considerably heavier atmosphere of nitrogen and oxygen. Until I know exactly what this thing is I don't want to discover by accident that it reacts violently to our native atmosphere." Templeton explained.

"Oh." Randle pulled the pressure lock box open, it was the only way to release the clamps, while Templeton sealed the outer door of the chamber.

With the box open Watley unhooked his clamp. Templeton followed by undoing his own clamp. It was a cumbersome task in the tight confines of the pressure chamber. Inadvertently

Templeton elbowed Randle causing him to prematurely release his clamp. The object swung around twisting out of Carson's grip and striking Watley in the chest. A brilliant flash filled the chamber and everyone jolted back against the walls of the chamber.

When Carson could see again he looked around. Randle and Templeton were stirring also. The object sat in what little space there was in the center of the chamber floor.

Watley lay crumpled in the corner---not moving.

Watley opened his eyes slowly. He was laying in his bunk. His head throbbed and he felt as if he hadn't slept in a week.

"Ah. You're back. Thank God." Carson sat next to the bed. Watley noticed Sorrel sitting at the end of the bed.

"I'm not sure how long I'll be staying." Watley said weakly.

Carson looked concerned, but Watley waved off his fears with a weak smile and feeble flip of the wrist. "I just feel like I could fall back into it."

"Into what?" Carson asked.

Watley shook his head. "I want to say that it was a dream, but it was more than that."

"Yes." Sorrell nodded.

Carson glanced over at Sorrell then back at Watley. "Tell me what you dreamed---saw, whatever."

"It's not really a visual image." Sorrell volunteered.

Watley nodded slightly. "A lot of it isn't that's for sure, but I could see some images clearly."

Carson and Sorrell waited for Watley to continue.

"I could see a solar system. The inner planets were clearly visible as we swept in closer."

"We? Who is we?"

Watley glanced over at Carson for a moment perplexed. "Uh...I don't know. I was with them, a part of them, one of them maybe, but I...I don't know what they--what we are. I felt, though, like I belonged. Anyway, we were just sort of moving through space."

"Yes. Yes." Sorrell muttered.

"Is this what you were seeing too?" Carson looked at Sorrell.

"No. I mean I couldn't really see this, but it definitely...feels right."

"Hmm." Carson turned back to Watley. "Go on."

Watley shrugged. "Well, we just seemed to zero in on a particular planet."

"And?"

"And...I can't...I mean I don't know."

"So you see this one image clearly, but nothing else?"

"Yes, well no. I mean there are other systems, but it's always the same."

"Other solar systems?"

"Yes. We just keep sweeping down into them."

"Doing what?"

"I don't know."

"And you don't know who the others are?"

Watley shook his head. He looked up as Carson stood up. "Where is the object now?"

Carson sighed. "It's still in the pressure chamber. After your incident it's rather obvious both you and Sorrell didn't encounter a static charge."

Watley nodded slightly. "That's a safe assumption." Watley's brow furrowed. Something bothered him. "I... think that if I could touch the object the images would become clearer."

Carson shook his head. "Until we know what we are dealing with we need to proceed a bit more cautiously."

"How are you planning to study it?" Watley was starting to lose his battle to stay awake.

Carson smiled and patted the doctor on the arm. "Get some rest doctor."

"So, how are you going to study that thing?" Sorrell asked.

Carson turned to look at Sorrell. "Very carefully."

"Well, no shit, but that's a pretty cramped place, the airlock." Sorrell said.

Carson nodded. "I know, but I'm not moving that thing until we get a better sense of what we're dealing with."

They were silent for a moment.

"So, when is someone going to admit it?" Sorrell asked.

"Admit what?" Carson asked. He didn't meet Sorrell's gaze.

"You know what. There is no way in hell that thing is natural." Sorrell said.

Carson sighed. He looked at Sorrell. "We need to figure out what it is. That's our primary task at the moment. Speculation beyond that isn't going to help us."

"Yeah, but you know full well---" Sorrell started.

"And I know that if we start getting people here or back home all riled up about the origins of this thing I have no idea what the ultimate fallout from that might be." Carson said.

"You think they would order us to stop? To bury it back in the sand?" Sorrell asked, but deep down he already suspected the answer to that question.

Carson hesitated. "I can't speak for them, but...it's possible they could prioritize civil stability over advancing our scientific knowledge."

Sorrell just sat shaking his head.

"I know, but let's see if we can figure out what it is before anybody starts raising any red flags."

“Sure.” Sorrell said, but his voice did not sound optimistic about where this was going to ultimately lead.



"An alien artifact?" Randle the concern clearly evident in his voice.

McClellan shrugged slightly. "I don't know. That's just what the scientists are all mumbling about."

"Other expeditions, they may have found fossil fragments and some unidentifiable material, but nothing like this." Randle rubbed a hand over his nearly shaved head.

McClellan did not respond. She was engaged in more practical matters than musing about their find. To her the object's origin posed a far less concern than the station's security.

"An alien artifact. It just...doesn't seem, I don't know, right, I guess." Randle looked over at the Major. "You don't seem very worried about this, Major."

"Worried? I'm not paid to worry Lieutenant. I'm up here to do a job." She glanced back at him and then back to the console. Her light blonde hair, as always pulled back into a pony tail, swished like a horse's tail.

"But...what does it mean? If it is, I mean. Who...how?" Randle struggled.

McClellan turned back and her steel blue eyes bore into Randle. "Let it go. You have a job to do. The fact that this undermines beliefs you hold is irrelevant. Do you understand me, Lieutenant?"

Randle nodded, but his manner suggested that letting go of the issue may be beyond his capability.

McClellan turned back again to monitoring systems throughout the station. She was far more concerned about what was going on in Carson's head. She had known him a long time. She knew his near obsession with the quest for knowledge. It was that enthusiasm that made him an inevitable choice for one of these expeditions. She also knew of the rumors that followed Carson. Of his involvement in his early years with eco-terrorists. Whether the rumors were true or not she couldn't say, but she knew Carson's disdain for the massive industrial and technological growth going on back home. It was also these views of Carson that had delayed his assignment to the Martian expeditions. Now that they had indeed made a significant discovery---whatever that discovery might turn out to be---she was concerned about how that might affect him. And he wasn't the only one. Templeton was a good man. Former Navy man. He would stick to his job. Sorrell and Watley. McClellan wasn't as sure about them. She hadn't worked with them before this mission. People in pressure situations, facing something that profoundly undermines a person's belief, well, you never knew how they would react.

Randle sighed. "This won't go over well back home."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, after my status update at 0800 last night I have received orders that all communications back home are now through me only. Command wants no word of this discovery discussed except between Command and us. As such, I have locked down the communications systems to my voice command only. If anyone asks you about it tell them it's

for security purposes. That's all. Understood?"

"Yes sir." Randle nodded.

"I'm not here to come up with theories about anything we find up here. That's the job of the scientists. Nor is it my job to decide what people back home will think about what we find here. All I know is that if it is an alien artifact I would feel a whole hell of a lot better if I knew who it was that put it here and what its true purpose was." McClellan reached over and flipped a switch to change the view on the monitor. It showed the pressure chamber where the object sat on top of the lock box. In front of the object sat Carson staring at it.

"Until I know those two things I still don't like having that thing in this station."

Randle moved closer to the monitor and stared into it. "How long has he been sitting in there like that?"

"A couple of hours."

"Two days and the only thing they know for sure is that it won't react to our atmosphere."

McClellan stood up. "Take over here. I'm going to get some rest."

"Sure thing." Randle took her chair as she left. He spun around with his back to the monitors and kicked his feet up on to the small table in the center of the command module.

"Hell to pay." He put his hands behind his head and stared off into space. "People aren't going to like this back home. It could mean everything is a lie. There'll be hell to pay."

McClellan studied him for a moment. "Probably so." She said with a short nod and walked out.

Carson's eyes burned into the object. He stared as if staring alone would force it to reveal its secrets. And it had secrets. He knew that now.

Just sitting in front of it he could feel something of its power. He could feel it pulling at him. Drawing him closer. An impulsive part of him was desperately trying to reach out to it, but a stronger, more disciplined part, held him in check.

When he had sat long enough to feel that he was in control he extended a hand slowly and carefully towards the object. The closer his hand came the more difficult it was to hold it back.

As his hand came within several centimeters of the object he could feel a strange sensation move up his arms. It worked its way through him and engulfed his sense of the world around him. His entire frame of reference became dreamlike in nature.

He was flying high above a planet. It was lush and green. Alive with millions of plants and creatures Carson had never seen before. As he continued to circle the planet a change was rapidly taking place. The natural world was steadily giving way to both large cities and desert wastelands. The air grew gray with a haze. Through thinner pockets in the haze Carson could see that the planet below had become almost entirely desert. There were clumps of vegetation crowded around what little surface water remained. Large black conduits cut across the desert connecting massive cities perpetually lit under the gloom of the darkened skies.

Carson flew over the cities and despite his best effort could understand little of what he saw. The civilization beneath him was technologically way beyond anything he could grasp, but there was also an underlying sense that technology was not the focus. It was just a means to an end. An inaudible whisper seemed to thread into Carson's mind that technology was unimportant. It was just a tool to exploit more and more resources.

City after city passed below. The planet staggered under an enormous population of beings that seemed to be deliberately obscured from Carson's view. The more he tried to observe the builders of these great cities the more they eluded him. There was an increasing sense that the physical form of existence was of no real significance. In addition, there was a palpable feeling of oppressiveness to life here.

In some way Carson was connected to a growing collective consciousness that was encircling the planet. Not just a consciousness, but a living mass of energy steadily becoming disconnected from the physical forms below and the individuality that went with them.

Carson was not as much a part of the collective consciousness as he was simply aware of the strongest currents that ran through it. The strongest flow in the consciousness was a sense of restlessness that began to galvanize the entire consciousness. The consciousness was like a great colony that was drawing more and more of the sentience away from the planet below. Increasingly the planet with its tremendous cities was being abandoned until it was totally lifeless.

Now only one dominant thought flowed through the consciousness: migrate.

Arcing out away from the now dead planet the colony moved across the empty void of space. The cold darkness drove the colony onward---that and a growing sense of hunger. Hunger for what, Carson could not determine.

At first just a growing point of light Carson realized they were approaching another planet. Anticipation rippled through the colony. As they drew nearer Carson could begin to make out features of the planet. With a growing fear he realized it was a planet he knew.

Sorrell strolled into the command module drinking his coffee and smiling at Randle's snoring. He looked around and found what he wanted. He picked up the clipboard and tossed it at the floor. It clattered on the metal floor jolting Randle straight up in his chair.

"What? What's going on?"

Sorrell snickered as he glanced about the module. "Obviously not..." His attention was drawn to the monitor scanning the pressure chamber.

"What the hell?" He leaned over and punched on the intercom. "Dr. Watley to the pressure chamber immediately."

Randle swung around towards the monitor. "What? What is it?"

Sorrell was already heading out the door.

Randle stared at the monitor still trying to focus. "But the doctor's still."

There in the pressure chamber next to the object lay Carson. A small pool of blood spread out from his nose and he wasn't moving.

He lay nestled in...in a warm and familiar place. He couldn't see it, but the feeling was unmistakable. He was...home. Above him now he could see vast black sky filled with stars.

He realized he was slowly rotating and everywhere he looked he saw dark fields of stars. He was moving through space. And yet, he still felt as if he was surrounded by...family. A quiet gentle drifting across the heavens.

"I want that damned thing out of here." McClellan stared defiantly at them.

Sorrell and Templeton both shifted uneasily.

"That's something Carson should decide." Sorrell spoke hesitantly.

"No sir, that is *my* decision." McClellan's voice was just below a shout.

"With all due respect," Templeton said, "Major, Carson Peters is in charge of the mission. It should be his decision how we proceed with this."

"That's right Carson is in overall charge of the expedition, but I am in charge of all matters pertaining to security and that thing is a security risk. I want it out of here immediately."

"And where are we supposed to study it? Outside?" Sorrell asked.

McClellan didn't answer immediately. Her eyes shifted around the room. "Perhaps it would be best...to just put it back." Her tone was quiet.

Templeton and Sorrell exchanged glances.

"Are you serious?" Templeton asked.

"It's an astounding find. Perhaps the greatest find in human history." Sorrell's voice was incredulous.

Templeton nodded. "Agreed. A find like this could change..." He trailed off. His analytical mind was spinning. Major McClellan was very good at her job. One of the primary reasons for that was she always seemed to know where the boundaries were between her work and the others. It was not like her to suggest something so clearly outside of her responsibilities. Templeton could understand her concerns about the safety of the expedition, but to suggest they just turn their backs on it? That was not Sara McClellan.

"You received orders, didn't you?" Templeton stared hard at her.

She stared back without immediately answering.

"Orders? What orders?" Sorrell asked.

"It needs to be put back." She said, hardly blinking.

Sorrell caught on. "Command told you to bury this thing back in the Martian sand? But why?"

"Because," Templeton answered, still staring at McClellan, "They're afraid. Afraid of what the population would do if they knew, at some point in time, there had been aliens right next door to us with technology beyond our understanding."

"We don't know that it's alien." McClellan said flatly.

"It's not natural and it's not ours. That is what they're afraid of. The population's reaction. Disillusionment. With Humanism and, by association, the government. It's fear, panic, rioting

and anarchy." Templeton said.

"So what, we just pretend we didn't find it?" Sorrell couldn't believe what he was hearing. "If it's the truth then we need to hear it. To understand it. We can't hide from the truth. You have to face it."

"The lesser of two evils." McClellan said.

"Seriously?" Sorrell stared at McClellan and then glanced over at Templeton for support. He was equally stunned to see Templeton studying McClellan as if he was weighing her words carefully.

Finally Templeton said, "Carson needs to be a part of this discussion."

Sorrell stood dumbly with his mouth hanging open.

McClellan was obviously considering her options, but finally relented. "We will wait until Carson wakes up, but no longer than that. How is he doing?"

"Still sleeping." Templeton said. "I am on my way down there to relieve the doctor in watching over him. I'll call you when he wakes up."

McClellan nodded and Templeton left. She turned back to the system console while Sorrell continued to try to sort out what just happened.

The door made a hiss as the seal was initially broke and a slight groan as it swung open. Sorrell turned at the sound.

“Carson. I...thought you were resting.”

Carson pulled the door closed behind him. “Yes, well, I had something I needed to do.”

“In here? Now? You look exhausted. Are you sure you should be up and about right now?” Sorrell asked.

Carson glanced about the Maintenance module. He seemed to be trying to decide what it was he came in here for.

Sorrell circled around the island in the middle of the room. It served as both a large workbench and extensive equipment storage in the cabinets underneath.

Sorrell reached out for Carson’s elbow, as if to guide him somewhere. “Perhaps it would be best if you returned to your bunk.”

Carson gave Sorrell a weary smile. “Marcus, thank you, but no. I have something I need to do and it can’t wait.”

Sorrell started to say something, but Carson cut him off.

“Marcus, do you believe that humans really are the centerpiece of this universe?”

Sorrell hesitated. “Well, until we found this thing all evidence seemed to support that argument---at least more than any other theory. Until Mission 4 found the first fossils here there hadn’t been any evidence of life anywhere but Earth. Thousands of planets scanned, albeit at a great distance, but no indication of life. Maybe when we can get out to some of those other worlds we might find some fossils there. Don’t know. But this thing,” Sorrell gestured back towards the door and the corridor to the other modules, “it’s...something...I don’t know...Do you believe it? That we are something significant?”

Carson’s eyes stared down at the floor. He sighed. “Honestly, I never bought much into that ‘chosen species’ stuff. A lot of arrogant crap. That’s what I thought.”

“I never heard you say anything negative about Humanism before.”

Carson glanced over at Sorrell. “No. You did not, but it’s not because I was sucking up to those government bastards. No, it made good sense to let them think they were special. You see, when they think they’re some kind of divinely chosen species they at least aspire to be something more than just animals. It instills in them a certain ‘nobility’, if you will. It helps to keep humans ‘on their best behavior’.”

“Carson, I never knew you were such a pessimist.” Sorrell said. The hum of one of the generators starting up emanated from across the room.

Carson turned and, using his security card through the scanner, engaged the lock on the door.

Sorrell glanced past Carson at the door. "That's the emergency override. What's wrong? What's going on?"

Carson started across the room. "Marcus, what does your heart tell you about that thing in the airlock?"

Sorrell's face wrinkled. "My *heart*?"

"Yes. What did you feel when you were shocked by it?"

"I...I'm not sure..."

Carson stopped and turned to stare hard at Sorrell. "Did it feel...*alien* to you?"

"Uh, well, actually, no. I mean...I'm not sure." Sorrell said.

They stared at each other for moment.

"Alright. There was something familiar about it, but I swear I have never seen anything like that before in my life." Sorrell admitted.

Carson turned and used his security card on a locked cabinet.

"What are you getting out of there? Carson, what are you doing?" Sorrell circled the island and moved quickly up behind Carson.

With surprising speed Carson whirled around with something shaped like a brick and struck Sorrell on the side of his head.

"I am sorry, my friend, but they can't know what we are. They need to keep believing."



"Randle!"

Templeton sat straight up in the chair. He had been dreaming of floating through a great black void. The tranquility of space was shattered. In its place came unfocused confusion.

"Randle get down here!" It came blaring over the comm system.

Templeton looked around. Something was wrong. He had never heard that tone in McClellan's voice.

It took Templeton a moment more. Where was Carson? He had been sitting here watching over Carson as he slept when he himself had dozed off. Now, however, Carson's bed was empty.

Templeton stumbled out of the crew quarters module into the main hallway. He nearly collided with Randle.

"What is it? What's going on?"

Randle shook his head and answered on the run. "Don't know." He waved a hand forward. "Maintenance module."

They were joined by Watley on the way to the door to the Maintenance module. McClellan stared through the window in the door. She had the comm system on.

"Carson, for God's sake, what the hell are you doing?"

"What's going on?" Randle asked.

McClellan held up a hand for quiet. She seemed to be waiting for Carson to say something, but the comm system was silent.

They could see through the window Carson was calmly, slowly working on dismantling parts of a maintenance console. Sorrell lay on the floor motionless. A nasty gash on the side of his head still bled.

McClellan took her hand off the comm system and put her back against the door.

"What's happening?" Randle looked past her into the maintenance module. "What's he doing in there?"

"He's sealed the door. Manually triggered the emergency lockout system. He's got some blocks of the excavating explosives."

"What?" Watley pushed up to the window. "How much?"

"I estimate about 4 kilograms."

"Holy shit. That's enough to take out the whole module and...probably most of the main corridor." Watley stared in at Carson.

"Damn it. Without the maintenance module and no main corridor we'd be in a heap of trouble."

That is if we even survive the blast." Randle said.

"Hang on there, people." Templeton interrupted. "He can't set that stuff off without the detonators which I have safely locked away."

McClellan shook her head and waved a hand behind her towards the door. "I think he's rigging some kind of makeshift detonator from one of the consoles in there."

Templeton wedged his face into the window next to Watley's. "Damn."

Watley reached over and flipped on the comm system. "Dr. Carson," Watley forced his voice to be calm, "What are you doing? Is Dr. Sorrell okay?"

Carson seemed not to hear him.

McClellan shook her head. "He won't answer." She looked to Randle. "I think there's an arc torch in the pressure chamber. We're going to have to cut this door off."

Templeton spoke without taking his eyes off what Carson was working on. "I believe he is getting close to completing his makeshift detonator."

Watley leaned his head against the glass of the window. Time was short and he had to come up with something that would draw Carson's attention away from what he was doing.

"Dr. Carson," Again he forced a calm voice, "I saw it too, but the others...they want to...they need to understand what it means."

Carson stopped for a moment. He didn't move, then turned slowly to face the door. "You know then?"

"I...yes, I think I do, but they don't. You need to explain it to them."

Carson stared at Watley through the window. A minute passed before he shook his head. "If you knew no explanation would be necessary. You would know why I have to do this."

"I...I need to understand what it means." Watley was afraid he wouldn't be able to keep Carson's attention. "I...saw...a city. A magnificent city. I thought it was a dream, but it wasn't, was it?" He was grasping at straws and he knew it.

Carson's gaze turned distant. "Cities. Massive tremendous cities. Technology perhaps a million years beyond anything we understand. And then, to just throw it away. Incredible."

Watley glanced over at McClellan who was gesturing at him. She wanted him to drag the conversation out. He irritably waved her off. She was distracting him with the obvious.

"What do you mean 'they just threw it away'? What did they do to themselves?"

Carson waved a hand flippantly. "The technology was never the point. It was never a goal. It was just a tool. A means to an end."

"My God, that's the crossover line. He's almost got it." Templeton pointed.

McClellan waved him quiet as Randle arrived and they immediately began working on the first of the two thick door hinges. She glanced up at Watley who took his cue.

"A tool? You mean the technology was a tool. Uh, a means to what end?"

Carson was inspecting his work. This wasn't the area of expertise, but he was familiar enough with the material to know roughly how much electrical current it would require to set it off. Still, he was guessing a little so he was being meticulous and thorough in assuring himself he had more than enough. "Resources." He said in a distracted voice.

"Resources for what?"

"To survive. To grow. To continue." Carson was still focused on his work.

"Then...what happened?"

"Huh?" Carson seemed fixated with his wiring inspection.

"What went wrong?"

Carson shook his head. "Nothing went wrong."

"I don't understand."

Carson turned to look at the door. He held his arms out. "Look at this planet. They were very successful. They extracted and exploited every last useful resource this planet had."

Watley glanced down. Randle's progress cutting through the heavy metal hinge was painfully slow.

"So did they just build ships and take off to the stars? Where'd they go? What happened to them?"

"Ships? No that stuff, the technology...they didn't need the technology. They...aren't physical. They are a collective, a colony of life energy."

"So they abandoned this place?"

"Yes."

"How long ago?"

Carson was tinkering again. Making adjustments. "About...a hundred thousand years ago...give or take."

"Where did they go?"

Carson paused. He seemed to almost shudder. He took a moment to collect himself. The words seemed to come hard. "To where the next available resources were."

"Where was that?"

"The third planet."

"The third planet? Earth? You mean they came to Earth?"

Carson nodded.

"Yes!" Randle quickly shifted his torch to the other hinge.

"A hundred thousand years ago...they must have witnessed our rise."

Carson shook his head slowly. "A planet can sustain only one truly dominant species. The drive to survive compels a species to jealously hoard resources. It must eliminate all other competitors."

"I don't understand. What does...?" Watley was trying follow the conversation, maintain the conversation and not panic all at the same time.

"Humans weren't the dominant species." Carson checked the splicing of one set of wires.

"Not the dominant...?" Watley had to stop for a moment and think. "Well, who was the dominant species? Neanderthals? Are you saying Neanderthals were on the verge of becoming the dominant species on our planet?"

"Yes. Sufficiently so that they were already too far along. They were past the point where a successful symbiosis could occur."

"Symbiosis? What are you talking about?"

"They needed a less advanced species. One that Nature was in the process of abandoning to extinction."

Watley stared in at Carson. His mind was racing.

Carson continued. "The Neanderthals, Nature's chosen ones, never knew what hit them. They were a peaceable species hunted down and expunged from the planet by a rejuvenated and not wholly native competitor."

Watley turned and put his back up against the door.

"Doctor, what are you doing?" McClellan gestured for him to keep talking. They were nearly through the second hinge and their attention was focused entirely on their work. The discussion going on through the door was just background noise for them.

Templeton still stared through the window. "I don't understand. Are you saying human evolution was tampered with by some aliens?"

Carson hesitated. As if some cancerous pain was eating away at him. Preventing him from going on. "No. I'm saying we are them. That without their 'essence' we would have been just another extinct branch of primates. Look at the tree of life. Everyone else on our branch has long since gone extinct. How is it that we are thriving?"

Templeton stood dumbfounded.

Carson went on. His voice growing more frenetic. "Millions upon millions of species over hundreds of millions of years and not one could harvest resources and alter their environment to suit their needs---then suddenly us. Didn't you ever wonder why? Why are we so good at strip mining, clear cutting and driving other species to extinction? Ever seem strange to you that we naturally treat everything including the planet we live on as disposable? Well, I did. I used to think it was ignorance that drove people to do such things. Now look who's the ignorant one. Raping and pillaging planets is what we do. It is the core of our being. It is who we are."

Watley turned back to the window. "So you're going to kill us to hide this knowledge from the rest of humanity? That's murder."

Carson waved that off. "We established our place through the genocide of our Neanderthal brethren. You might say we were born to murder anything in our path." He paused. "maybe you can live with that, but I cannot. I can't change what we are, but I won't take away the hope of people who care about the future of our planet. It is only through their endeavors that we stand any chance of stopping this cycle of destruction. That's why I have to do this."

The door fell ajar as the second hinge was cut away. Randle impulsively shoved the door aside and lunged into the room.

McClellan, only half listening to the conversation, suddenly caught up. She shot a look through the open doorway at Carson. "Wait, you're going to blow up the station to hide that thing?"

Carson was caught off guard. He was on the opposite side of the console from where he had set up his detonator switch. He scrambled over the console island as Randle grabbed for his arm.

"Carson, wait, you don't have to do this. I have orders..."

On Earth astronomers noted the brief flash on the Martian surface. They knew it was in the general vicinity of the archaeological team, but it wasn't until the following morning's press conference that the news of the expedition's tragic accident was announced. In addition, future expeditions were suspended until such a time as the risks involved in this research were outweighed by the knowledge gained.

K McConnell

[www.kmccconnellbooks.com](http://www.kmccconnellbooks.com)

[kmccconnell@kmccconnellbooks.com](mailto:kmccconnell@kmccconnellbooks.com)

*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-fiancee 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 to 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 its 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?