

# RED DUST AND BONES

A NOVEL BY

# SANDY SAMSON

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## **RED DUST AND BONES**

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*"There is so much to love about this novel. Besides an intricate and satisfying plot, the author brings to life characters we can all recognize: quirky, sometimes inscrutable scientists, blindly ambitious bureaucrats, sniveling political administrators, and muck-raking journalists, as well as dedicated scholars, idealists, and military officers. The villains and heroes alike are three-dimensional characters, all striving for their conflicting visions of what is good. This is a satisfying story with a timely theme, and I highly recommend it."*

—Max Griffin, Author



RED DUST  
AND  
BONES



*This novel is dedicated to those extraordinary souls  
who have the courage to leave comfort and safety behind as they  
push the boundaries of their existence  
for the greater good.*

*Explorers who seek new lands,  
that humankind may enjoy ever expanding borders;*

*Scientists who weigh the risks and then move forward,  
that our storehouse of knowledge may ever increase;*

*Warriors who battle our enemies,  
that we may enjoy order and prosperity;*

*Peacemakers who confront the war machine,  
that we may not be ruled by those who turn violence into profit;*

*Artists who seek new forms of expression and challenge  
those censors who would suppress their work;*

*And let us not forget editors and publishers  
who forsake the safety of established authors  
and invite new writers to share their work with the world.*

*God bless them all.*



# Prologue

ARTHUR RAN HIS gloved hand back and forth over the top of the rock, brushing away eons of dust. The job seemed pointless, but there'd be hell to pay if he didn't come back with what they wanted. He glanced at Jenna and stepped back to let the cold Martian sun glisten on the exposed surface. "What do you think?"

Jenna flipped the magnifier into position on her faceplate and squatted so her shadow didn't obscure their quarry. She studied it with care, tracing a finger along one of the red lines that permeated the gray substrate. When her finger reached the end, she rose.

Arthur took a geologist's hammer from his tool belt and chipped away at a corner of the boulder until a piece the size of a baseball fell free. He picked it up and handed it to Jenna, who added it to the collection in the cart. "Good one, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"I think we should come back here tomorrow and dig. I bet you a back rub we won't have to dig far. They're down there."

She didn't return his smile. "Art?" she murmured.

"What?"

"I don't like this. The others must be getting suspicious."

He turned his back to her and the sun and stared out past the horizon. "Jenna, we've had this conversation before. You know I don't care, and you shouldn't either. Let them talk. We won't confirm a thing until you're ready."

She sighed. "I don't like them even talking. I think you should consider my feelings a little more."

"Listen, I'll make you a deal."

"What?"

"We can discuss it all you want tonight if we drop it for now. We need to cover more ground before we run out of air."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Which way do you think?"

Jenna flipped the magnifier away from her faceplate and replaced it with a colored filter. She was scanning the barren terrain when their suit radios crackled with the attention tone. They looked at each other, startled, as a voice, breathless and shrill, assaulted their ears.

"Arthur, Jenna. Are you there?"

"Yes," they replied in unison.

"We have an emergency here. Repeat, emergency. Return to base now."

Arthur covered the distance to the Rover in four bounds, took his seat, and looked over his shoulder. Jenna was kneeling down, gathering their tools and tossing them in the collection cart. He waved at her to hurry as a second voice came from the radio.

"Tell them not to come in." The voice was fainter than the first, the speaker apparently far from the microphone.

"What sort of emergency?" Jenna spoke into her suit radio as she sprinted toward the Rover.

"We have a fatality, unknown cause."

## Red Dust and Bones

“Fatality? Emergency? What the hell are you talking about?” Arthur’s ears rang from his shouted questions.

“Who died?” Jenna asked before Arthur’s question got an answer.

The voice at the other end said only, “Leave your suits on when you come in. We’re calling for help now.”

The sound of a few distant rustles came over the radio, and the connection broke. They stared at each other through dark faceplates, engulfed in silence.

# Chapter 1

JOHN'S MIND WANDERED down the same wearisome path it had traveled over and over for the last two weeks. *Is this fair? She tells me she's so proud, so happy they asked me. And I think she really is. She's that kind of person, bless her. But does that give me the right to risk everything, our future, our happiness, our lives together? I could have said no. They gave me the choice. But of course, I had to say yes.*

"What are you thinking about, honey?"

Marie's softly spoken question brought him back to life. The moonlight filtering in the bedroom window illuminated her face and sent shimmers dancing along her hair.

"I'm thinking how lonely I'm going to be without you." It wasn't a total lie. He slid his hand up the side of her body, savoring every curve. When he reached her neck, he slipped his fingers under her hair and slowly raised his arm. A cascade of gold rained down and fell across her face.

She laughed as she brushed the hair away from her eyes. "If this is the last time I'll be seeing you for a while, at least you can let me get a good look at you."

"There's still tomorrow."

"But not here. Not like this."

"No, not like this." He threaded his arm under her waist and pulled her close. They held each other in a strong, silent embrace, knowing it might be the last they'd ever share.

TOM DORAN ROSE from his chair as an orderly directed John into the office. "Good morning, Colonel," Tom said cheerfully.

"Good morning, sir."

"Forget the sirs today, John. How's Marie?"

"Too happy, sir. Too excited. Makes me worry she knows something I don't."

Tom laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "You done good with her, John. But remember, I always know when you're lying. How is she, really?"

The corner of his mouth twitched before he answered. "Scared as hell. What do you think? She just covers it up well."

"I don't think Marie gets scared too easy. A little jealous, maybe."

John's nervous grin vanished as he cocked his head in thought. "Jealous? Are you kidding? She trusts me."

"Trusts you? Huh?" Now it was Tom's turn to look confused. "Oh, you mean you being stuck up there with all those women? Hell no. That's not what I meant. I meant I think she wishes she were going. It's hard for someone like her to sit down here and wait while the rest of you get to have all the fun."

"She knows her part's right here."

"Of course she knows that. But knowing something and accepting it are two different things, especially for a get-it-done lady like her."

"I don't think she's jealous at all. She's never even hinted that she wished she were going."

"Course not. She knows it can't happen, so she keeps her mouth shut. What's the point? Besides, she's got too much class to let it show. How'd you ever manage to land someone like her, anyhow? It's not your looks, that's for sure."

John didn't laugh. A muscle under his left eye twitched as he answered. "Listen, this is no joke. I never planned for things to work out this way. I made good money, and I saved every dollar I could. I figured I'd retire at forty-five, pick up a little part-time work. Marie could write books, or do whatever she wants. We'd spend the rest of our lives raising a couple of kids in the country. Or maybe goats. Whatever we felt like. I never thought I'd be a year from retirement and going off on a rescue mission. A mission we might never come back from."

Tom raised his eyebrows. "I don't believe it. You're scared. This is a first!"

"Damn right I'm scared! Not about me, though. You know what I'm afraid of?"

He shook his head.

"I'm afraid of hurting the best thing I ever had. I made promises to her, Tom. I promised that in another year we'd buy a little farm in the country. I promised that, pretty soon, I'd never fly again. She's counting on me keeping my word. What if I can't? What if I don't come back?"

"You'll come back. You're the best there is. That's why we asked you."

"Yeah, but look at the facts. Three missions have gone up so far. The first crew crashed and burned when they tried to land. The second did okay. They built the station and returned as heroes. But now the third called for help and went silent. That's not a good record."

“Those guys up there aren’t lost yet. You’ll bring them home. And the first was a freak accident.”

“I hope so.”

“Enough of this. It’s time to get you down to medical, get started on the G-Prep.”

“Listen, do me a favor.” He lowered his voice, even though no one else was in the office. “Take care of Marie while I’m gone. Check on her every now and then. Make sure she’s okay. And if I don’t come back, see to it that she’s taken care of. Please.”

Tom grasped his friend’s hand in both of his own. “I’ll take care of Marie like she’s my own. I promise. Now let’s go.”

John took one final look around the office, pushing aside the macabre thought that this might be his last time in it. The flag bearing the insignia of the Planetary Exploration Command held his attention. Decades had passed since the first primitive spacecraft landed on Mars, tantalizing its creators with crude photographs of the surface until it died of exhaustion. Politics decreed that many more years would pass before a manned mission was attempted, and the disaster of that journey meant that half a decade more would go by before man summoned the courage to try again. *How ironic*, he thought. *Just as the Evil Empire that was the old U.S.S.R. spurred America to send a man to the moon, now the Evil Empire of Tensien is pushing us on to Mars, whether we’re ready or not. Three brave men died as the result of nationalistic zeal. Six more might be dead on Glenn Station now. And tomorrow morning, another eight follow in their footsteps. Three manned missions, and only one came home. God, I’m too old for this. I’m losing my nerve.*

“John, are you ready?”

The insistent tone lifted him from his somber reverie. Seeing that he had gotten his friend's attention, Tom led the way out the office door and into the main corridor of the command center building. The two men walked briskly down the hall, bustling with more than the usual activity. Nearly everyone who passed acknowledged them in some way, smiling or informally saluting. They forced confident smiles as they walked.

"Colonel Hellman!"

John stopped when he heard his name and looked in the door they were passing. A middle-aged woman got up, walked around her desk, and stood before him. "God be with you, Colonel."

He smiled and started to give a cheerful reply when he saw tears welling up in the corners of her eyes. On impulse, he put his arms around her and pulled her close. Any other time he would have expected her to timidly shrink away from such inappropriate behavior. Today, she rested in the comfort of his embrace. "We'll bring him back, Marge," he whispered.

John's stomach twitched as he entered the prep room. He could ride the Vomit Comet longer than any of his peers before succumbing to its inner-ear torture and spilling his guts, but that didn't mean he was made of steel. For him, it was the smell of the infirmary that turned his stomach. It shouldn't have, for it was a clean smell, the smell of soap and disinfectant, with the air subtly tingling from the ionization that kept it germ-free. Maybe it was the sterile atmosphere itself that got to him, every surface either pure white enamel or gleaming stainless steel. Or maybe it was the memories of the unpleasant things that they did to him here. Fiendish devices of every size and shape exploring places nature never intended them to be. Sometimes pain-

ful, sometimes merely uncomfortable, but always unnerving. Infinitely worse than sitting at the controls of an untested aircraft.

*Control. Who's in control?* "I want control." He unconsciously mumbled the words aloud.

"What?" Tom asked, turning to face him.

"Nothing." John closed his eyes, trying to relax. He sank back into the reclining chair, far too much like a dentist's chair for true comfort, no matter how good its design. The subtle smell of chemicals aggravated the queasiness that had tormented him for days. Closing his eyes didn't help. He opened them and looked at Tom. "Where's Marie? I thought they said she could send me off."

Tom turned away again. He paced to the door, turned, and paced back, his hands clenched behind him.

"What's wrong, Tom? She's coming, isn't she?" He struggled to sit up, fighting the chair that forced its occupant to recline. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine." He paced up and back once more.

John gave in to the chair and slumped into its gentle but firm embrace. "So, is she coming?" He paused. "I need to say goodbye."

Tom unclenched his hands and strode to the chair. "Don't worry. She's coming. I just wanted to say something to you first." He leaned over John, placing his hands on the armrests of the chair and bringing his face close to John's ear. "I've lost a lot of sleep thinking about whether I should tell you this. It took until right now for me to make up my mind."

"Yeah," John mumbled, still trying in vain to relax.

"They'll burn my ass if they find out I talked. Understand?"

John turned his head and looked up at him, startled. Tom didn't usually sound this serious. "Sure," he answered.

"Only one other person on your ship knows what I'm about to tell you, and that's Commander Carpenter."

John swallowed hard. *Commander? Shit! Civilians shouldn't command a rescue mission, not even doctor civilians. Hell, civilians probably shouldn't even be on a rescue mission. Especially not women civilians. Take that back. Sarah's not a woman. Just looks like a woman. Curves, maybe. No five o'clock shadow. But I bet if they checked her genes...*

"John! Are you listening?"

"Sorry. I've got too many things on my mind right now."

"Well, think about this. Are you concentrating?"

"Yeah."

"It might be biological. Or something like that."

"Huh?"

"The white coats think this isn't another equipment failure."

"What do you mean?"

"It might be a disease. An infectious agent. Probably some kind of bacteria, or whatever passes for bacteria on Mars."

"But we've been analyzing that dirt ever since the first Lander got there decades ago! The place is sterile. Nothing grows there. Nothing ever has. I thought everybody knew that."

"Everybody did know that. Until now. Now they think they were wrong. Maybe."

"Marie never said anything about this! *She would have known, for God's sake. She heads up the whole lousy team that looks at that kind of stuff. She never told me anything about a disease!*"

"She has the same secrecy orders I do. The only difference is, by telling you this, I'm violating those orders. She didn't."

John struggled against the chair again. "She knows I'm taking a crew into some kind of plague?"

"Shhh! This is supposed to be a secret, you know."

"Why? Why is this a secret? Shouldn't the poor slobbs going out there know what they're getting into?"

Tom looked down at his hands, unable to meet John's eyes. "Would it help if they knew? Should they have a chance to back out? Do you think any of them would refuse to go, run away, if they knew?"

"No, of course not. But at least they could...well, they could..."

"Could what, John?"

"Could take precautions or something. I don't know. I'm not a doctor."

"That's why a doctor's commanding this mission."

It suddenly made sense. He had assumed that Sarah Carpenter was going along because it was a rescue mission, with possible casualties. She was the best there was when it came to low-G and space problems, so she should be there. Fair enough. Maybe. But commanding! That was too hard to swallow. Now it became clear. *They must be pretty damn sure it's biological if they put a civilian doctor in command.*

"John, there's one more thing I want to tell you before I send Marie in. By the way, don't let on you know anything about this. It's my ass, remember. I'm serious. I'll be flipping hamburgers the rest of my life if this gets out."

"It won't get out. But why are you spilling secrets to me?"

"Two reasons. First, I think they made a mistake keeping this from the whole crew. Mostly, they were afraid of a leak to the media. Panic in the streets, you know the line. I

don't buy that. But I don't make the rules. I'm telling you because I think someone else needs to know. Just in case something happens to her. You never know."

"Thanks. That makes me feel a lot better."

"The second reason is Marie."

"Marie?"

"Remember I said she was jealous? Well, I wasn't guessing. I have inside information. I happen to know she is jealous."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this is the biggest thing to hit her field since penicillin. She was ready to sell her soul to come along on this one. She fought like hell to try to get a spot on this mission."

"I'd never let Marie come along. Especially if I knew what we were going into."

"That wouldn't have been your decision to make, John."

"I'd like to think I'd have some say in it."

"Well, anyway, it doesn't matter. She's not going. She's too important to risk right now."

"Damn right, she's too important! Not just to me. If this really is an alien bug, she's our best shot at handling it. You know that. Too bad she's gonna have to work on it from here, though. Makes it hard when you're so far from the real action. But she'll do it."

"John, you don't understand. That's not why she's important. We can't do much but tinker from here. It's got to be done out there. At the source."

"I don't get it. What do you mean?"

"I mean that she's our fallback if this thing turns out to be really nasty. If you don't make it home, she'll be on the team we send up to figure out why." He let the implications sink in a few moments before saying, "I'll send them

in." He took John's hand, clasped it tightly, and said "Good luck, old buddy." He turned and left.

A minute later, the door opened. Marie entered, followed by Doctor Pritchard. The doctor walked to a cabinet and began assembling equipment. Marie stood over him as he reclined, still trying to relax, but failing now even more than before. She stroked his forehead. He blinked and turned his head aside. She turned his head back and gazed into his eyes, as if to read his thoughts, but they were too tangled for even him to decipher.

"I'll miss you," she whispered. "Do your job and come home. I'll be waiting for you."

Doctor Pritchard waited for a polite time before he discreetly coughed and approached. "We should begin," he said.

Marie turned to him. "Can I say one quick thing to my husband before you start? In private? Please."

The doctor smiled indulgently and left the room.

"I have something to tell you," she said. "Something very important."

He nodded.

"John, I know Sarah Carpenter has a reputation for being, well, difficult."

He smiled.

"It's probably hard for you to accept that she's commanding this mission."

"Mine is not to question."

She leaned over him and whispered. "Can I tell you a little secret? Just between you and me?" She grinned sheepishly as she said it.

"Whisper it in my ear. Slowly." He smiled back and turned his head.

She put her mouth to his ear and whispered, "I think she's a brass-balled bitch." She stood up as he snorted, and continued out loud. "But you know what? Some very bright people picked her, and I think they picked the right person for this job."

"Could be. After all, they had only two weeks to put a crew together. Real commanders don't grow on trees."

"John, this is important. I'm serious. You may not understand. Just please believe me."

He nodded his head in agreement.

"She's in charge of this mission. You're at the controls, but she gives the orders. It's important that you follow every order she gives. You may not always understand why she's doing something, but you need to do what she says anyway, no matter how you may feel about it. Do it for me, okay?"

He swallowed. "She's the commander. I obey orders. That's my job, right? Besides, if that's what you want, that's what you'll get. I'll do it for you." He squeezed her hand as he said it.

She leaned over him one last time and kissed him on the lips. Then, she whispered, "I love you. Come home soon." She turned away, walked to the door, and invited Doctor Pritchard in. He wheeled a cart to its position beside John's chair. Marie followed and held her husband's hand as the doctor inserted a needle in his arm.

"You've been through this before," the doctor said, "but I want it to be the last thing you hear before you go under."

"Go to it."

"When the flight computer wakes you up, you'll be sixty hours away from final orbit. Don't try to do a thing. Eat, sleep, and pee through the tube. That's it. Lay there and enjoy the ride as long as you can."

“Thanks for caring, doc.”

“It’s not just caring. Only a few people have done this much time of high-G under G-Prep before. You’re more than a pilot. You’re a guinea pig. As long as you’re in that flight suit, the sensors are recording everything your body does. All we know for sure is that waking up is the worst part. Stresses the hell out of the body. We want as much info on how you wake up as we can get. Once you climb out of that suit, the info stops. Help us out. Help out the next crew. Don’t try to show off by seeing how quick you can get up and walk around.”

“That’s my job. I’ve spent my whole life helping out the next crew. Remember?”

Doctor Pritchard ignored the comment. “You’ll be extremely weak and dizzy. Don’t get out of that chair until you’re sure you can stand. You’ve got lots of time. If you’re still not ready when you make orbit, the computer will lock you on track, and you’ll orbit until you turn it off. Take your time. Between the G-Prep serum and three months of high-G flight, you’ll feel like shit.”

“I know. I did this a week ago.”

“That was a quick test run, to give you a taste of what it’s like. You were out one night, and no high-G. This time you’ll be out three months at high-G. It’ll be infinitely worse. Count on it.”

“Thanks. You have a real bedside manner, doc.”

“That’s what they tell me. The computer will awaken you and Commander Carpenter a day before everybody else to give you a head start on whatever needs doing. Might as well let the rest of the crew enjoy their beauty sleep as long as possible.”

“Will they be ready to go when we need them?”

"They should be. Sarah Carpenter will make that decision. Listen to her, John."

"Why the hell does everybody think I won't listen to her?"

The doctor winked at Marie. "I didn't know it was everybody."

"Shut up and do it."

"Yes, sir." The doctor pressed a key on the console. "Nighty-night, Colonel. Bon voyage."