

THE HUMBUG



A NOVEL

Author of *NEVERMORE*

HAROLD SCHECHTER

DOUGLAS PRESTON

TYRANNOSAUR CANYON

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK



NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

TYRANNOSAUR CANYON

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For my son,
Isaac.

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PROLOGUE

December 1972

Taurus-Littrow Valley

Mare Serenitatis

The Moon

ON DECEMBER 11, 1972, the last manned Apollo mission to the moon touched down at the Taurus-Littrow landing site, a spectacular, mountain-ringed valley at the edge of the Sea of Serenity. The area promised to be a geological wonderland of hills, mountains, craters, debris fields, and landslides. Of particular interest were several curious impact craters that had punched deep holes in the valley floor, spraying breccia and glass across the valley. The mission had high hopes of returning with a treasure trove of lunar samples.

Eugene Cernan was the commander of the Lunar Module and Harrison "Jack" Schmitt its pilot. Both men were ideally suited for the Apollo 17 mission. Cernan was a seasoned veteran of two prior missions, Gemini IX and Apollo 10; while Schmitt was a brilliant geologist with a Ph.D. from Harvard who had been involved in planning earlier Apollo missions. For three days Cernan and Schmitt explored Taurus-Littrow with the help of the Lunar Rover. On their first venture across the lunar landscape, it became obvious to all that they had hit the jackpot, geologically speaking. One of the most exciting discoveries of the mission, and one that led indirectly to the mysterious find at Van Serg Crater, occurred on the second day at a small, deep crater known as Shorty. As Schmitt got out of the Rover to explore the rim of Shorty, he was astonished to see that his boots were kicking through the gray lunar dust to expose a layer of bright orange soil underneath. Cernan was so startled that he lifted his orange reflective visor to make

sure it wasn't an optical illusion. Schmitt dug a quick trench and discovered that the orange soil graded down to a brilliant red.

The "Backroom" at Houston excitedly debated the source and meaning of this strangely colored soil, and they asked the two men to take a double-core sample to bring back to Earth. After Schmitt took the core, the two men hiked to the rim of Shorty crater, where they saw that the impactor had blasted through the same orange layer, which lay exposed along the sides of the crater.

Houston wanted to get samples of the orange soil from a second location. For that reason, they placed on the exploring itinerary a small unnamed crater close to Shorty, to be explored on Day 3, which they hoped would have an exposure of the same orange layer. Schmitt christened it Van Serg Crater, after a geology professor he had known at Harvard who wrote humorous pieces under the pen-name of "Professor Van Serg."

Day 3 turned out to be long and grueling. Dust fouled their equipment and hampered their work. That morning, Cernan and Schmitt had driven the Lunar Rover to the base of the mountains ringing Taurus-Littrow to examine a gigantic split boulder named Tracy's Rock, which had evidently rolled out of the mountains eons ago, leaving a trail in the soil. From there the two men explored an area called the Sculptured Hills, finding little of interest. With great difficulty Cernan and Schmitt hiked partway up one of the hills to inspect an odd-looking boulder, only to discover it was a scientific dud, nothing more than a "shocked piece of old lunar crust," which had been thrown onto the hillside by an ancient impact. The two astronauts descended the steep, powdery hillside leaping like kangaroos, Schmitt making noises as he jumped from side to side, pretending he was skiing moguls, joking, "Can't keep my edges. Shhhoomp. Shhhoomp. Little hard to get good hip rotation."* Cernan took a spectacular, low-gravity tumble, landing unhurt in the deep, powdery soil.

By the time they reached Van Serg Crater, both men were exhausted. As Cernan and Schmitt approached, they had to drive the Lunar Rover through a field of football-sized rocks blasted out of the crater. Schmitt, the geologist, thought the rocks looked odd.

"I'm not sure what's happened here, yet," he said. Everything was coated in a thick layer of dust. There was no sign of the orange layer they were after.

They parked the Rover and picked their way through the debris field to stand on the rim, Schmitt arriving first. He described it for Houston: "This is at least a large, blocky rim crater. But even it has the mantle dust material covering the

*All conversations quoted above are from the original transcripts of the Apollo 17 mission, edited by *Apollo Lunar Surface Journal* editor Eric M. Jones. Copyright © 1995 by Eric M. Jones.