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Mars Girl

By Jeff Garrity

Part I

Aboard MarsDestiny

The MarsDestiny lander tore through the thin Martian atmosphere, generating a blazing miles-long trail. Under pulsating emergency lights Mirellen Garasovic staggered to the bridge and pushed the useless console buttons, at first with her finger, then slammed them with her palm until it hurt.

The ship's shudders turned violent and Mirellen collapsed onto the grated metal floor. She used a rail to pull herself to her feet and hung on as she worked her way to the window. The immensity of the planet floating below startled her.

The ship spiraled and Mirellen sprawled into the galley and onto the floor between two rows of padded chairs. She pulled herself into one of the chairs and drew the straps across her body just as she had in countless training sessions, but now her trembling hands fumbled with the latches.

Mirellen looked at the empty seats around her and heard the hiss of the retro rockets that sent the lander twisting one way and then the other. She threw off the straps and staggered toward the stacks of sleeping pods, piled like coffins three-high. She checked the display panels on each pod one last time. All were dark.

The ship bucked and Mirellen landed in her open sleeping pod. She swung her legs inside and raised her hand to touch her mother's sleeping pod, then looked at the next stack where her father and brother were sealed inside theirs, and silently said goodbye.

She pulled down the hatch and waited for impact.

Alpena, Michigan

Standing against the back wall of the overcrowded funeral parlor, Ray Barker watched a holo of his brother's well-dressed body rise from his casket and rotate so that it was upright and facing the audience. With eyes open, the holo paused to raise a hand in a solemn goodbye, and then continued its ascent toward the pine planks of the rustic parlor's cathedral ceiling. Barker

saw his mother sitting in the front row sobbing into a handkerchief. Next to her, Barker's young niece, sitting on her mother's lap, stared at the floor and fidgeted with her braids.

As the holo's shoes disappeared into the cathedral ceiling, Barker's head hummed the familiar tone of the New York MASSnews office. When the priest stepped to the lectern and began flipping through her bible to deliver the benediction, Barker slipped out the parlor's rear door and into the dim hallway. His head was humming again.

"Piper, what's up?" Barker said.

"Something's wrong with MarsDestiny," Piper said in Barker's head. "The lander's not responding and NASA thinks only one colonist is awake. We're going live with the story after 'Prelude to Destiny.' This could be big. Rindell wants you in Houston to do some weepy-relative stuff."

"I'm at my brother's funeral," Barker said. "In northern Michigan. Getting anywhere from here will take some time."

"We signed off on you leaving Chicago, not taking a vacation," Piper said. "You know the rules. Something comes up, you go to work."

"Maybe you didn't hear me. I'm at my brother's funeral." Barker saw a doorless room down the hall and walked toward it. "There must be something in my contract about family funerals."

"Let me know when you find it. In the meantime, get to Houston."

In the small room, scattered folding chairs faced a wall screen that showed short clips of his brother's abbreviated life. On the screen Barker and his brother were building a snow fort behind their home in Oak Park when they were kids.

"The closest airport is a couple hours south," Barker said.

"Then get moving," Piper said. "The lander's going to hit soon. If we're lucky we'll have live vid of the crash but it looks like it's far enough off course that we'll have to send the TractorPix to find it. We need you ready when we see bodies."

"You're sure they'll be dead?"

"Doesn't matter. Either way we've got a hit."

"Last I heard Gainsbro had Houston."

"Rindell fired her and a couple other casters middle of the week. I suggested you for Houston and he agreed."

"Commission?"

"Ray, be realistic. This is a house show. Straight time basis. Hang on a second, Rindell's buzzing me."

Barker dropped into one of the folding chairs. "MASSnews-Now," he said, and the wall screen changed to a live view from Mars, shot by a TractorPix, a bot the size of a golf cart with a camera mounted on top of a flexible wand. On the screen five glowing GreatWall MotorWorks luxury sedans in vee formation sped across Moskey Basin, the landing site for the first-ever colonial mission to Mars. Coki Peps, wearing a clingy red mini dress with a hundred holes punched in it, stood like a ship's figurehead on the hood of the lead car, her golden hair fluttering against the rusty hills west of the basin. Her bandmates pawed their instruments as they rode the hoods of the trailing cars and Coki broke into "AutoErotica," her latest hit. For the occasion the refrain was changed from "Ain't nothin' like gettin' down in GreatWall cars," to "America's stars are settlin' down on Mars."

The formation skidded through a turn and slid to a halt in front of three plastic and metal towers that formed the Gemini Cricket Family Restaurants Mars Station. A holo of a giant two-

headed cartoon cricket rose from behind the station, waving an American flag in each of its six hands and nodding its heads to the beat of Coki's song. Pipped into the lower right of the screen was a live view of the MarsDestiny lander, its long, bright tail like a tear ripped in the pale blue sky.

"I'm back," Piper said in Barker's head. "Rindell just talked to NASA. They're pretty sure the lander will overshoot the basin by at least several clicks, so that should give you time to get to Houston before the TractorPix gets to the crash site."

"Who's doing production for the 'Prelude' show?" Barker said. "I'd swear Coki was really there."

"Zimmel," Piper said. "We're lucky we still have him. DisneyNews made him an offer this morning."

"So they're raiding the sinking MASSnews ship," Barker said.

"We're not sunk yet."

"Anyone else get an offer?"

"They talked to me, too. I told them we're going to make it, and I'm not leaving New York for California anyway. I'll take an occasional flood over breathing smoke half the year."

"Anyone mention my name?" Barker said.

"Thirty-four is getting a bit old for a caster," Piper said. "Hang on a second. Rindell's buzzing me again."

Down the hall, Barker heard the funeral parlor doors open and the muffled voices of people wandering into the hallway. He considered stepping into the hall but he heard Piper's voice again.

"Good news," Piper said. "Rindell said the MASSnews board delayed their emergency meeting until Monday because of what's happening on Mars. That gives us four days to turn things around."

"I heard Jaspers paid fifty billion for the landing exclusive."

"Fifty-five billion plus twenty-five points on all advertising and spin-offs."

"There's never been a show worth that much," Barker said.

"Ray, the first colonial mission to Mars is going to crash with seventeen American heroes on board. Try to think of someone who won't be watching this. If we do it right, we'll triple our investment and double our stock price and we'll be the hot network for once. But all you need to know is that we're offering you major face time on what will be the biggest hit ever. There's not a caster alive who would say no to this."

Barker looked up at the wall screen. As "AutoErotica" rushed to its climax, Coki leapt off the lead car and landed in a puff of sparkling Martian dust. She turned away from the camera and raised her dress to slide down one side of her panties. The camera zoomed in and the screen filled with a MicroSoft logo tattooed on her right cheek.

"My brother wasn't even thirty."

"Barker, if you want to quit, just quit," Piper said. "I need to know right now. We've got a show to run."

Barker stood and stepped outside the small room. Down the hall he saw his uncle put his arm around his mother. His sister-in-law hugged a woman he didn't recognize.

"I'll head back to the airport in Bay City," Barker said. "Have someone arrange the flight. I'll need a car in Houston and tell them to send some flowers to my mom's house. I'll send the address."

"We'll handle the transportation," Piper said. "You take care of the flowers."

MASSworld Tower, New York City

MASScorp CEO John J. Jaspers sat at his desk, alone in his office atop the MASSworld Tower, a magnificent glass and steel structure that spiraled sixty-four stories above Times Square. Jaspers wore a pinstriped suit with no tie and his thin gray hair was pulled back into a short ponytail that lay on his collar. His hands were folded over his slight paunch as he stared at the silent wall screen opposite his desk. He hadn't found the courage to turn up the sound.

On the screen, Coki pulled up her panties and danced toward the lead car to the beat of "SkankyPanky," another of her chart-toppers. When she jumped onto the hood, the formation drove off toward a narrow pass that led into the rugged hills west of Moskey Basin.

Ivan Smith, NASA's media relations chief in Houston, filled the right side of the screen, and Sally Timmsley, MASSnews morning anchor, filled the left. From what Jaspers remembered of the script, after Coki showed her tattoo there was supposed to be live vid from the lander's interior as the crew braced for touchdown. The unexpected change made Jaspers' heart beat faster.

On the screen, Smith, a bearded man in his forties and sporting a backward NASA baseball cap, looked anxious and kept glancing behind him at the rows of techs who all seemed to wear the same worried expression. Smith exchanged a few words with a flight engineer who shook her head as they talked. A man standing next to the engineer looked like he might cry as he examined data on his screen.

A live view of the MarsDestiny lander was pipped into the bottom center and it was close enough to the surface that the large block letters of the MASSnews logo were visible running from top to bottom of the lander's fuselage.

Jaspers couldn't stand it any longer. "Volume-Five-Now," he said.

"Ivan, we understand that you can only confirm that one of the crew members is awake," Sally said from the wall screen. She wore a shimmering blue top and there were matching blue streaks throughout her dark hair.

"Yes, that's right," Ivan said. "It's Vlady's kid, Mirellen. Mirellen Garasovic."

"The youngest of the seventeen colonists," Sally said.

Smith nodded. "Right. She's fifteen. We think the other crew members are still in their pods but we've lost all communication with the lander so we can't be sure." Smith turned to say something to the flight engineer. She shook her head and Smith turned back toward the camera. "The lander isn't responding. The comm links are dead. There's a lot of very worried people here," Smith said. He looked down for a moment, took a deep breath and looked into the camera again. "We're doing everything we can."

"No," Jaspers whispered to himself. "Don't do this."

Okinisee, Michigan

Barker headed south in his rented GreatWall microvan on M-23, a two-lane highway that hugged the Lake Huron shore all the way to Bay City, then dropped straight south through Flint and Ann Arbor, and on to the Ohio border.

The road traveled up a small hill, giving Barker a view of the vast lake to his left. Dark clouds hung like slabs of slate above the mouse-gray water. Ragged lines of whitecaps marched toward shore ahead of a storm blowing in from Canada.

Barker assumed he would be up through the night so he considered leaning his seat back for a nap, but the microvan began to sputter just as it crested the hill and barely responded when he pushed the accelerator. He hit the diagnostics button on the steering column and a translucent message appeared on his windshield:

Condenser Fault

Failure Estimate: 4 miles

Barker switched the microvan to manual and pulled off the road next to a cheery sign decorated with sailboats, beach umbrellas, smiling gulls and the words, “Welcome to Okinisee, It’s a Shore Thing!”

Ahead, on the edge of town, Barker saw an LED display over a small brick building that showed a tow truck hauling a car in a never-ending loop. He checked for traffic, and then crept back onto the road with the pedal to the floor. The storm’s first raindrops hit his windshield a moment later when he steered into the parking lot of Fred’s Fixit. His car sputtered to a stop on the cracked asphalt next to an ancient concrete island that once held gas pumps but now was decorated with pots of plastic sunflowers.

The Oval Office

President Shari Flanagan stood alone like a statue with her arms folded and feet apart as she stared at the Oval Office wall screen. She wore a yellow blazer over a navy blue blouse and her handsome, care-worn face was fixed in a scowl as she watched the lander’s retrorockets flare randomly and spin the ship in either direction. The crawl at the bottom of the screen read, “MarsDestiny lander not responding ... Only one colonist awake ... Others feared dead.”

There was a quick tap on the door and Bob Briter, the president’s chief advisor, stepped inside the room. Briter’s sharp nose, curly light hair and proud ears reminded the president of the etching of a Norman peasant in an art history book from her undergraduate years at Brigham Young. Briter, wearing a deep violet four-button suit, walked to where the president stood in front of the wall screen.

“Did you talk to Black Goat?” the president said, her eyes still on the screen.

“Not really,” Briter said.

“Either you did or you didn’t.”

“He’s worried about security,” Briter said, standing with his arms folded like the president’s. “He didn’t want to talk.”

“He didn’t say *anything*?” the president said.

“All he said was, ‘Everything’s good.’”

“That’s it?”

“Then he said, ‘Don’t call me again,’” Briter said. “That’s the entire conversation. ‘Everything’s good. Don’t call me again.’”

On the screen the lander sailed high above Moskey Basin. Pipped into the screen’s lower right, a three-dimensional map used red and blue lines to show the ship’s actual trajectory in relation to its planned flight path. The lander was hundreds of meters too high.

“How’d he get a codename like Black Goat?” the president said.

“I gave it to him,” Briter said. “It’s a good name for a terrorist.”

The president looked at Briter.

“Just in case,” Briter said, glancing at the president.

“Do we know if the girl’s still alive?” the president said, turning back toward the screen.

“She has to be.”

“But the others are dead?”

“I wouldn’t say they’re *dead* dead,” Briter said.

“Then what kind of dead are they?”

Briter shrugged. “I guess you’d call them brain dead.”

The TractorPix camera followed the lander until it disappeared beyond the western hills where a glowing banner was stretched between the enormous twin peaks of Olympus Mons. On the banner an animated woolly mammoth, its trunk wrapped around a toothbrush handle, stepped on a tube of Tusk Toothpaste to load the brush, and then scrubbed until his tusks sparkled.

“I’m so glad my grandkid got to see Coki’s ass,” the president said. “Whatever happened to common decency?”

“That was pure Rindell,” Briter said. “Everybody’s been talking about whose logo it would be all week. I bet MicroSoft paid forty million for that tattoo, and you know what that means.”

The president looked at Briter. “Tell me.”

“That means our take on those six seconds alone is ten million,” Briter said. “This is going to be a good day.”

“Keep telling me that. We’ve got sixteen dead . . . ”

“Martyrs for mankind,” Briter said. “Remember that when you’re onscreen. Martyrs for mankind is testing very well.”

The image on the screen jumped and jerked as the TractorPix bounded over a series of shallow craters on its way across the basin toward the western hills.

“I’m getting a bad feeling about this,” the president said.

“Listen,” Briter said, “after a few days, when the girl finally dies, we’ll have enough money to launch six or seven more missions. By midterms there’ll be more than a hundred colonists living up there and by the time you’re campaigning for re-election there will be Martian babies on everybody’s screens – all of it financed by your SponsorAmerica program. Just try to name somebody else who saved the human race without spending a dime of taxpayer money.”

Okinisee

“It’s just such a shame,” said Amber Drake, leaning back in her creaky chair and watching the large screen hanging from two hooks in a corner of the semi-tidy office at Fred’s Fixit. A half-finished game of solitaire occupied most of her large wooden desk. “But if only one’s gonna make it, I hope they’re right and it’s the girl,” she said. “She was always my favorite.”

Barker, still wearing his rain-splattered jacket, stood looking through the streaked Plexiglas window of the swinging door that led into the repair garage where Fred had Barker’s car on the lift. Fred, Amber’s husband, reached up into the car’s cell compartment to connect the second of two coiled wires feeding data to a screen on a wheeled cart. Fred wore baggy blue coveralls over his thin frame.

“They said the president’s gonna talk soon,” Amber said from behind her desk, where she handled the shop’s administrative details. “So maybe they know something. Volume-Seven-Now.”

Barker turned and saw the network’s chief anchor fill the screen.

“This is Peter Cloud for MASSnews, the USA’s top choice for news hits.” Peter smiled and winked, then shifted his gaze to another camera.

Peter had dark, gray-flecked hair and the confident look of a former athlete who might still throw a football around at the beach if there were people to impress. His dark suit and white shirt were tasteful and well tailored. His eyes matched the blue of his tie.

“In a moment we’ll be joined by our commander-in-chief, President Shari Flanagan. In the meantime we have some breaking news.”

He turned back to the first camera.

“Of course, here at MASSnews we avoid speculation so we won’t repeat the rumors already spreading about terrorist plots intended to sabotage the mission. Or as one source close to NASA and the White House said, ‘If anyone wanted this mission to fail, it’s the Chinese.’ The source went on to say that the humiliation of losing the race to colonize Mars, and its continuing proxy wars in the Middle East, give Beijing ample motivation to sabotage the MarsDestiny program. Predictably, the Chinese ambassador denied that Beijing-controlled terrorist cells were involved.”

An electric guitar soared through the opening line of “Hail to the Chief” and the president, standing in front of her desk, filled the screen.

“Welcome, Madame President,” Peter said from the lower left pip as the music faded, “I’m sure, like everyone, this is a difficult moment for you.”

“Yes, of course,” the president said with a somber smile. “I trust that all Americans are keeping the colonists in their prayers.”

“Of course,” Peter said. “Madame President, if our worst fears are confirmed, what will that do to your commitment to the MarsDestiny program?”

“Excellent question,” the president said, pausing to gather her thoughts. “In moments of crisis I look to history for guidance. If terrorists had attacked the first ships that brought colonists to these shores more than four hundred years ago, would no ships have followed? Would the New World have remained the Unknown World? Of course not. When we say that our destiny is to take human civilization to Mars, no one should doubt that we will succeed. The USA is the only nation capable of accomplishing this vital mission, and we have always taken our responsibilities seriously. We are one deadly asteroid, one catastrophic terrorist attack, one rampaging virus, one ecological disaster from the end of human existence on this planet. Whatever the fate of the first MarsDestiny mission, we will – *we must* – persevere. I promised this great nation that we will create a sustainable Martian colony and that there will be babies born on Mars before my first term expires. And most important, I promised that my SponsorAmerica program will pay for it all.” The president stiffened her spine. “Peter, I intend to keep my word.”

“Beautifully spoken, Madame President,” Peter said. “Thank you.”

The president smiled and nodded. “Peter, if I may, I’d like to lead the nation in interdenominational prayer.”

“Of course.” Peter said. “That would be wonderful.”

The president clasped her hands below her chin and bowed her head.

“Dear Lord,” she said. “Like Jesus before them, the men, women and children of MarsDestiny left their world to create a new one for us all. And like Jesus, their mortal lives may have come to an end. We pray that this is not true, but if they have become martyrs for mankind, and if it is your will, the mission they so proudly accepted in our name must live on.” The president kept her head bowed but raised a palm toward the camera. “No matter what has

happened, this is not the end of a journey, but the first step toward ensuring our future without nailing ourselves to the cross of burdensome taxes.”

“Amen,” Peter said.

“Amen,” Amber said, crossing herself.

Barker turned back toward the swinging door's window and saw Fred unhooking the coiled wires from underneath the microvan.

“You know what I think?” Amber said, lowering the screen's volume with her assistant.

Barker half-turned toward her.

“This kind of thing,” Amber gestured at the screen, “maybe it's good for us. Sorta brings us together, you know? It's about the only time we're all thinking the same thing. Sometimes good comes from bad. I wouldn't stand there if I was you.”

Barker wasn't sure if the last bit was directed at him, but just as he turned his head to take another look through the window, the swinging door flew open and hit him hard above his right eye. The force knocked him stumbling backward onto a vinyl loveseat that toppled over when he landed and left him on his back with his legs dangling over the seat cushions.

“Told ya,” Amber said.

MASSworld Tower / The White House

Jaspers stared out his office window, absently watching tourist boats cutting white vees in New York Harbor. His assistant hummed the first few notes of “God Bless America” and he pulled it from his pocket.

“Briter, what the *hell* is going on?” Jaspers said.

“Quite a show, huh?” Briter said.

“They're all dead!”

“How do you know?” Briter said. “Maybe, maybe not. The best shows are mysteries.”

“This is *murder*.”

“Jaspers, I don't want to hear that word, and stop confusing facts with reality. We're saving the human race. Be happy.”

Jaspers took a few unsteady steps to an overstuffed chair and leaned against it. “You people are monsters. I'm voiding the contract.”

“If you say that again we'll have a thousand fingers pointing at you,” Briter said.

“I had nothing to do with this and you know it,” Jaspers said.

“You'd have a hard time convincing me of that,” Briter said. “You were so desperate to save your dying network that you promised us the world so you could get the landing exclusive. We've got audio of you saying you'd make something very special happen on Mars. I can see how people would be awfully suspicious. Even me, now that I see what's happening to the lander. Plus, you're the one making all the money.”

“We paid you a fortune for the exclusive,” Jaspers said. “And you're getting a piece of everything – placements, commercials, spins.”

“We'll put our share into more MarsDestiny missions so we can guarantee the survival of the human race,” Briter said. “You're a greedy corporation trying to squeeze every last dollar out of this terrible tragedy. Who are people going to believe?”

Okinisee

Amber rolled her chair away from her desk, stood up, straightened her short knit skirt and ambled to where Barker lay on his back in the toppled loveseat. Fred and Amber met when Fred's family moved to Okinisee from Detroit before his junior year of high school. She still had the pleasant smile and unflappable attitude Fred had fallen in love with three decades before.

"You okay?" Amber said, standing over Barker.

Barker closed his eyes against the pain and raised a hand to his wound. He felt blood on his fingers.

"Toss me one of them rags, willya, Fred?" Amber said.

Fred still had one hand on the door and held Barker's failed condenser under his other arm. Fred picked a stained but clean rag from a canvas bag hanging by the door and walked it to Amber. She dropped the rag on Barker's chest and he held it to his forehead.

"Didn't see you there," Fred said to Barker. "Sorry."

Fred offered his hand to help Barker up, then righted the loveseat and Barker sat down, keeping the rag to his head.

Fred walked to the front of the office and looked out the window near the door. Across the street a row of red pines bowed in the wind at Okinisee Township Memorial Park. Thunderheads sent guttural rumbles rolling across the brooding lake.

"This is one hell of a storm," Fred said. "Liable to blow us all away."

Amber rolled her eyes. "Hun, The David says just some wind and rain. Don't get all worked up about it." She looked at Barker, his face hidden behind the rag. "Honestly, he gets like a scared puppy every time we get a little weather. How's your head?"

"Sore," Barker said.

"Closest emergency room's at the hospital up in Alpena," Amber said. "You just say the word and I'll take you."

"I'll be all right."

Amber lifted the loose part of the rag from Barker's face to see if she could get a glimpse of the gash but Barker held it tight to his wound. "You look familiar," Amber said. "You come up here summers?"

Barker shook his head. "No. How long until my car's fixed?"

Amber looked at Fred, still at the window watching the storm. "Fred?" she said. "The gentleman would like to know when his car will be ready."

"Part'll be here in an hour," Fred said.

"I need to get to Bay City as soon as possible. Any ideas?"

"Driving's the only way anymore," Fred said. "Buses stopped running years ago. I put a hurry-up on the order. Usually doesn't do any good, though."

"If you're hungry there's a nice little restaurant down the street," Amber said. "Cozy Corner Café. Ceci'll fix you up. When you get back we'll have your car all ready. Right, Fred?"

Fred turned toward the screen and said, "The-David-Now." The screen changed from Mars to the local weather report.

"I was watching the crash show, hun," Amber said. "I already told you The David says it's just a little rain storm."

Barker used his little finger to pull the rag away from one eye so he could see the screen. The David, appearing in front of a satellite map of Alpena County, wore a bright blue suit and a permanent grin. Barker had seen better, but he was surprised that a place so far from anywhere had a high quality weather bot with such smooth motions and finely inflected speech.

“Hi folks,” The David said from the screen. “Thanks for checking in with WUPM, where we do weather before it does you. This Mars thing is getting crazy isn’t it? Did you hear NASA is changing its name? It’s still NASA but the letters mean something new: ‘Need Another Seventeen Astronauts.’”

The David rapped his head with a knuckle and sounded a perfect rim shot. As he floated toward the lower left of the screen, his left hand swung down along the Lake Huron shoreline. The camera zoomed in far enough to show individual houses and cars, and then zoomed in farther.

“We’re getting some big winds and we’ve got some trees down along the shoreline. Here’s Lorelei and Wynton Harsen’s place out near Big Rock Point. There’s Wynton cussin’ up a storm. That big maple missed his house but didn’t miss his boat.”

Lorelei Harsen came out the front door hugging herself in the strong winds. She shouted something to her husband and pointed toward the sky. Wynton looked up into the clouds and gave a weak wave.

“Hi, Wynton,” The David said. “Good thing you’re not wired. This is a family show.”

“Kind of a strange weather bot, huh?” Fred said to Barker. “They got him from a comedy club that crashed over in Traverse City. They put a weather proggy in him but left the comedy code. Cracks me up sometimes.”

“Those dark clouds you see rumbling through the county are the result of two fronts colliding like sumo wrestlers just back from a Mexican buffet,” The David said with his permanent grin. “The heavy rain’s on its way and we can already hear the thunder boomers.”

“See? Just a thunderstorm,” Amber said. “MASSnews-Now.”

The screen changed back to a live view of the MarsDestiny lander sailing high above its target.

Fred stared out the window at the lurching trees in the lakefront park across the street. “I don’t like the looks of this,” he said.

MASSworld Tower

“Answer your damn head, Marquelson,” Piper said to herself. She sat at her desk in the center of the MASSnews sales floor, holding her assistant to her ear and waiting for the production chief to answer. Piper could barely hear the ring coming from her assistant over the noise of thirty-two sales reps taking orders as fast as they could from marketers who knew a good thing. Sitting in open-fronted cubicles surrounding Piper, the reps would occasionally check the whirring digits of the ScreenTrend monitors facing in four directions above her desk.

Piper gave up waiting for Marquelson. She considered putting on the double-heeled pumps she’d kicked under her desk but instead walked shoeless to the elevator.

“Good morning, Ms. Lane,” the elevator said as she stepped inside.

“Sixty-one,” Piper said, closing her eyes and leaning back against the elevator wall so that her body arched from her feet to her blonde hair, which just reached the collar of her gray business suit.

“Are you sure you’d like sixty-one?” the elevator asked. “You usually choose one, fifty-nine or sixty-two.”

“Sixty-one, sixty-one, sixty-one, sixty-one,” Piper said, and the elevator launched itself skyward.

Piper was younger than half the people she managed, but no one doubted that she deserved the job, and few others would have survived a week working under Rindell.

“Sixty-one, MASSnews Production,” the elevator said. “Have a pleasant day, Ms. Lane.”

Piper walked across the hall to the eyescan and looked into its bright light until she heard the door pop. The production floor, filled with rows of workstations stretching the entire length of the building, always seemed too dark to Piper.

She walked to Marquelson’s office but it was empty. She wandered past several stations where faces glowed in screen light, and found Marquelson, with rolled up sleeves and no tie, in the conference room talking to a dozen designers seated around an oval table. When Marquelson saw Piper, he excused himself and walked to the door where she stood waiting.

“We need those mountains moved right now,” Piper said. “I’ve been trying to call you.”

“I haven’t been answering my head,” Marquelson said, rubbing his bleary eyes. “Things are too crazy. We’re getting a flood of orders and I’ve got almost a hundred placements and banner ads in queue. We’re struggling to keep up.”

“Get used to it,” Piper said. “We hit a vein and I’ve got thirty-two reps digging with everything they’ve got. I’m not telling them to slow down just because you’re feeling a little stress.”

“It’s just a matter of what’s possible and what’s not,” Marquelson said.

“Before long the sun will be right behind the banner,” Piper said. “We’ve sold a boatload of banner spots that no one will be able to see. We need it done *now!*”

“It’s not as easy as you think,” Marquelson said, scratching the top of his head, his fingers disappearing into his thick black hair. “We need to synch the shadow angles with the planet’s rotation and we need to match the colors. The hills west of the basin are more of a burnt orange. We planned for something closer to russet, like at the basin.”

“Marquelson!” Piper took a deep breath to calm herself. “I want the banner fifty degrees north and if it’s not done in the next ten minutes I’m going to put you on a rocket to Mars so you can move the damn mountains yourself. And Rindell’s going to hear about it the next time you don’t answer your head. Clear?”

Marquelson shrugged. “All right. But it’s not going to look right.”

“Make things pretty when you have time. If advertisers complain, send them to me.”

Piper spun around and walked back toward the elevator. On her way she stopped at Barton Zimmel’s station outside Marquelson’s office.

Zimmel slouched in his chair watching the glowing bottle of ForceCola on his screen rotate against a palette of colors found in the hills west of Moskey Basin. His heavy fingers flitted across a piece of black fabric draped on his thigh and his other hand was half submerged in a bag of CornDoggers resting in his lap. Zimmel, a large man with a shaved head, looked more like a prison guard than the MASSnews production closer, but no one knew more about making product placements pop. Everything crossed Zimmel’s desk before going live.

“Things all right, Zim?” Piper said.

Zimmel turned his head far enough to catch Piper in the corner of his eye. “No one would want to work with these colors on purpose,” he said. “Mars is a rotten pumpkin.”

A banner ad for GrassFast Implants appeared on Zimmel’s screen. The ad featured three children playing on a perfect lawn while dad napped in a hammock.

“There’s no shade of green that looks good with rotten pumpkin,” Zimmel said.

“Do your best and it’ll look great,” Piper said, and headed for the door.

Cozy Corner Café, Okinisee

Barker sat at a four-top in the middle of the Cozy Corner Café, sipping the last of his coffee, a rich and hearty brew that reminded him of the dark roast at the pastry shop near his apartment on Chicago's north side. The walls of the bright and clean café were painted a motley mix of pastel colors and the tables and chairs randomly repeated the scheme. Barker assumed that a local artist had painted the black and white abstracts hanging on the café's walls. Each had a price tag, but no artist's name. The only other patrons were two retired farmers at a big round table in the back.

Barker had eaten his BLT and occasionally stabbed at the few remaining home fries on his plate. On the café's wall screen the TractorPix bounced across the rugged Martian terrain on its search for the lander. The bot had made its way across Moskey Basin and as it approached the western hills a small squad of glowing dune riders glided down a sandy hill on their thin boards and brandished bottles of ForceCola for the camera as they zoomed past.

After he ordered he tried to reach Piper to let her know about his car troubles but she was in a meeting, so he called her deputy, Flip, and told her the problem.

"She's not going to like that," Flip said.

"I'm sure you're right," Barker said. "But I can do a show from here. I'm in this little town so maybe I can round up some kids and get them to talk about what's happening on Mars."

"I don't think she'll like that much either," Flip said. "There's no way you can get to Houston?"

"I'm two hours from the nearest airport and my car won't be fixed for another hour."

"She's not going to like that," Flip said.

"Have her call me, okay? Over-Now."

"Refill?" The smiling server stood next to Barker's table and held up a coffee pot.

"Sure," Barker said, sliding his mug toward her.

"I hope you don't want anything else. The cook's daughter went home sick from school so I told him he should go home too. What happened to your head?"

Barker started to reach for his wound but stopped. "It shows, huh?"

"Hard to miss."

She leaned closer and Barker felt a satisfying wave of body heat. Her nametag was a foot from Barker's nose but all it said was "Your Name Here."

"You could go to emergency in Alpena to get it stitched up if you've got a few hours. Or I could try closing it up with a butterfly."

"Sure," Barker said.

"All right, give me a minute," the server said, and walked toward the two retired farmers in the back.

Barker pulled his assistant out of the pocket of his damp jacket lying over the back of the chair next to him. He thumbed a few buttons to find the latest ScreenTrend numbers and saw that nearly ninety percent of the nation's population fourteen and above had already spent at least an hour watching the landing show, now called "MarsDestiny: Dead or Alive?" The domestic numbers were huge across all demographics and the international numbers were only slightly lower. He'd never seen anything like it. No one had.

"Hi Piper," Barker said when his head hummed.

"Where are you?"

"My car broke down. I'm still in Michigan."

“Damn it, Barker,” Piper said. “You should be halfway to Houston by now! I’ll get Brandle in Phoenix. We wanted you but we can’t wait on this.”

“Did Flip mention my idea?” Barker said. “I can put some small town kids onscreen to talk about what’s happening on Mars. It might work as relief from the tragedy, and I was thinking about that workshop last year about using poignancy to add numbers. I’m thinking fifteen, twenty minutes, or maybe two or three minute chunks spread throughout the show.”

“You’ve got a FloatPix?”

“Bocelli said he could get one here in plenty of time.”

“Set it up, but no guarantee. I’ll tell Bocelli to get flying.”

“Works for me. Over-Now.”

The server returned with a tackle box and put it on a small table by the large windows at the front of the café. “Why don’t you move up here so I can see a little better,” she said as she fished through the tackle box. Each of the tables at the front of the café had lights hanging above them.

Barker slipped his assistant back into his pocket and walked toward the front of the café. Through one of the windows he saw a lightning bolt flash miles offshore and change Lake Huron’s water for an instant from gray to a milky blue.

“Looks like one hell of a storm,” Barker said.

“We get some good ones,” the server said, picking a butterfly bandage out of the tackle box. “They seem worse every year. You should sit down while I do this. I’ll need to pull pretty hard to close it up and you seem like the squeamish type.”

“Nerves of steel,” Barker said, returning her smile. “Do your worst.”

“Maybe you should tell me your name,” she said, peeling the backing off the bandage. “Just in case this goes horribly wrong and I have to notify your family.”

“Barker. Ray Barker. Have you done this before?”

“No, but my mom was a nurse.”

“Is your mom here?”

“Just relax.” She stood over Barker and leaned his head back.

MASSworld Tower / Capitol Hill

“While the MarsDestiny search continues,” Peter said, “let’s turn our attention to the political implications of the crash and the difficult decisions that will have to be made in the coming hours. Joining us is Senate Minority Leader Harv Straley. Welcome Senator.”

“Thank you,” the senator said as he snapped a tiny microphone into place on his lapel. “Glad to be here.” The Senator, a large, balding man with a double chin, wore a pale green suit and behind him the studio background slowly adjusted to the same shade of green. The lighting on his side of the anchor desk changed from warm to bright, making his face appear pallid.

“Senator, your party has kept a low profile since the crash,” Peter said. “Most of us expected to see some pretty strong words from your side of the aisle, especially since you and your party have done everything you could in a vain effort to derail the president’s popular and successful SponsorAmerica program, which will bring taxes to their lowest point in more than one hundred years.”

“It’s clearly way too early to claim success for the president’s sponsorship program,” Senator Straley said. “The fact that she somehow extorted a huge fee from MASSnews for the MarsDestiny exclusive doesn’t make the program a success.”

“Perhaps you haven’t heard about the program’s latest achievements,” Peter said. “FlyRight Airlines has agreed to sponsor passport printing, and Starbucks is sponsoring sign maintenance on the entire length of I-80.”

“I am aware of both of those,” the senator said. “I added up the cost savings from those programs and it’s less than one-hundredth of a cent per family. And the Starbucks agreement means that the federal government will take revenue from businesses that rely on advertising dollars.”

“A hundredth of a cent saved is a hundredth of a cent earned,” Peter said. “But let’s talk about MarsDestiny. It’s still looking a lot like a foreign terrorist attack, and the Chinese seem to be the leading candidates.”

“It’s extremely reckless to assign blame for the crash right now,” Straley said. “We simply don’t know what happened.”

“I guess we could say that once again your party doesn’t seem to know what’s going on.”

“That’s unfair and you know it,” Senator Straley said. “Until we have all the facts, no one knows what or who caused the crash. Speculation is irresponsible.”

“Still, your party, which is known for its stridency, has been largely silent. That reinforces the idea that there is a lack of leadership and therefore a lack of credibility.”

“What you call stridency is merely a response to feeling shut out of the national debate,” Senator Straley said. “Especially by live news channels like this one. When’s the last time MASSnews sent anyone to a press conference on the Hill, or covered any hearings? And you’ve never done any kind of useful investigation of the SponsorAmerica program. The American people are being left in the dark. We need to ... (Scrolling text appeared across the bottom of the screen: *Senator Straley was one of 47 from his party who voted in favor of reducing NASA’s budget by \$62 billion. Did these cuts undermine MarsDestiny safety? A large ‘Y’ appeared in the lower left, a large ‘N’ in the lower right*) ... reengage the public so that we can at least *have* a debate about important issues. You and the others who call themselves journalists are becoming increasingly marginalized because you’ve turned news into a three-ring circus. Or I should say two-ring, since MASSnews and DisneyNews completely dominate the others.”

“Yes, we’re at the margins with nearly five billion screens worldwide right now.”

“They’re watching a train wreck,” Senator Straley said. “They’re gawking. If it’s not sensational, you ignore it. You run from everything ... (the votes were coming in and the tally at the bottom of the screen showed that more than thirty-seven million people thought that Straley’s party had undermined MarsDestiny’s safety, fourteen million disagreed) ... of any substance or complexity and you ignore issues that profoundly affect ...”

“Our polling data says that the American people think you and your party are responsible for the crash on Mars,” Peter said. “If there are survivors, would you support a rescue mission?”

“A minute ago you blamed the Chinese,” Straley said. “And you don’t do legitimate polling. You feed people a bunch of garbage and then ask them to spew it right back at you.”

“Again you won’t answer the question.”

“I answered your question,” Straley said. “I said that it’s too early to make a decision. That’s a responsible position on a difficult and emotional ...”

“Sorry to interrupt senator, but, as we reported earlier, Mirellen Garasovic is the only colonist confirmed to have been revived before NASA lost contact with the lander. We’ve managed to track down someone who knows her very well. With us now is Mr. Albert Crandall, Mirellen’s long time piano teacher. Albert, thanks for joining us.”

An elderly man standing in front of Ronald Reagan Elementary School in Cherry Hill, New Jersey filled the screen.

“Hi, Peter,” the smiling man said.

Okinisee

Barker reached up to touch his newly bandaged wound but decided against it and let his arm drop back to the table.

“What’s your name?” he said. “Your nametag doesn’t help.”

“Cecilia,” she said. “Cecilia Westraek.”

She sat down opposite Barker at the small table by the big windows and looked past him toward the café’s wall screen. On the screen, the TractorPix traveled toward a rock wall that wore a glowing image of the new all-terrain Toyota two-seater. “Do it Tonite in a Toyota Sprite” was written above the car in red letters that seemed embossed on the wall.

“I usually can’t stomach all the nonsense on the live news networks,” Cecilia said. “But it’s pretty hard not to watch a show like this.”

Barker turned to look at the screen. The bot steered away from the wall and toward several boulders. Sitting on top of one of the boulders was an over-sized box of AgPro CornDoggers. The crunchy little snacks flowed out the top of the box and popped in the air. As the TractorPix passed, the smoke created by the bursting CornDoggers spelled out “Taste Explosion!”

“That’s what I do for a living,” Barker said when he turned back. “I’m a caster for MASSnews.”

Cecilia laughed. “No offense.”

“I’m supposed to be on my way to Houston right now. New York wasn’t too happy when I told them my car broke down.”

“So, instead of sitting here with me, you could be talking to millions.”

“If it was just millions it wouldn’t be such a big deal,” Barker said. “If you add in international screens it’s billions. I walked out of my brother’s funeral up in Alpena a couple hours ago so I could get to Houston. I thought some face time on a hit show would help my chances when the MASScorp board shuts down MASSnews.”

“MASSnews might disappear?”

“It seemed pretty certain the board would eliminate the news division,” Barker said. “But with a hit like this, who knows?”

They both looked out the window at the approaching storm.

“Did you say your brother died?” Cecilia said.

Barker sighed. “He was diving some shipwrecks in the bay off Alpena with two friends. He blacked out underwater and they couldn’t save him. The tank seemed fine so no one knows for sure what happened.”

“You just stood up and walked out of the funeral?”

“Pretty bad, huh? I was feeling pretty bad about it and then my car broke down and I got whacked on the head so I figure we’re almost even.”

“Even? With who?”

Barker shrugged. “The universe?”

“Interesting theology.”

“Whatever gets you through the night. Hey, I pitched New York on the idea of putting some small town kids onscreen to talk about MarsDestiny. Is there a school close by?”

“There’s an elementary school just up the hill,” Cecilia said, nodding toward the back of the restaurant. “The principal stops here for coffee every morning and today she said all the kids were gathering in the cafeteria to watch the landing.”

“They should be there now then.”

“I assume so,” Cecilia said. “I kind of like the idea. It might be good for kids to hear other kids talking about what’s happening on Mars.” Her eyes went back to the screen above Barker’s head. “I bet this is all pretty scary.”

“Maybe you can go with me and point out a few kids who’d do well onscreen.”

Cecilia considered the notion and looked out the window again. “I don’t have a cook right now and everybody’s watching the crash show anyway. I guess I could close up for a couple hours.”

Their eyes locked. Barker studied Cecilia’s face. It was between pleasant and pretty. Possibly beautiful.

She looked away at the wall screen. The TractorPix slowed to a stop on top of a rocky ridge and scanned the hills and valleys in the distance. Just over a hillock several clicks to the northwest, the TractorPix caught a glint of bright metal reflecting in the midday sun. The TractorPix zoomed its powerful lens and filled the screen with the MarsDestiny lander, grainy and jittery because of the distance, lying on its side with its blunt nose stuck into a rusty hill.

“There’s the lander,” Cecilia said, pointing at the screen.

Barker turned to look. The TractorPix zoomed in a little more and Barker could see that dusty gravel had spilled down the hill and onto the ship, obscuring the “M” in the MASSnews logo.

New York City

Piper hadn’t eaten since she dug an energy bar out of her desk drawer when she arrived at the office just after four o’clock that morning. Now that the TractorPix had found the lander, and the boulders and escarpments surrounding the crash site were saturated with placements, she had a small window of opportunity to escape the pressurized sales room, refocus and get some real food.

She took the elevator to the ground floor and weaved across Times Square traffic to the BlueOrbit Deli. On any other day the deli’s customers would be edgy and rushed, and the staff would bark commands at each other. But on that day, patrons waited patiently as they stared at the double-sided screens hanging from the ceiling throughout the deli, watching hopefully for the first glimpse of survivors as the TractorPix neared the lander. The deli’s staff went quietly about their business and stole glances at the hanging screens when they could.

Piper took her cinnamon scone and mint ChockaChino to a small table by a window with a good view of one of the screens. The TractorPix came over a rise and filled the screen with the MarsDestiny lander, lying on its side with its nose in the rusty hill. Other than a few gasps, the deli came to a silent standstill when Mirellen Garasovic appeared in the lander’s window and peered outside. Someone dropped a ceramic mug, shattering the silence, but no one looked away from the screens. All were transfixed by the girl staring back at them through the lander’s window. Mirellen wiped a tear from her eye and tucked her long brown hair behind one ear and then the other. The sun bounced a sharp glare off the ship just above the window so the

TractorPix moved a few feet to the side until the glare was gone. When Mirellen saw the bot move, she raised her hand and gave a tentative wave.

She turned away from the window and unfurled a flexible ReadWrite screen the size of a placemat onto a ledge behind her and used her finger to write a message. When she turned back toward the window she held it up: "I'm Alive, Are You?" She signed it "M.G." She stared at the TractorPix as she held the sign in the window and the TractorPix filled the screen with its message.

Barker appeared in the screen's lower right pip, kneeling next to two young girls wearing spring dresses. Bocelli hovered the FloatPix just off the school cafeteria floor to show the colorful MarsDestiny lander drawings on the wall behind the kids. Barker asked the girls what they thought Mirellen's message meant.

The girls looked at each other, and one finally said, "I think it means she wants to know if we can see her."

"And M.G. stands for Mars Girl," the other one said.

"Bull's eye," Piper said. She gulped half of her ChockaChino, picked up her scone and raced back to her office.

Okinisee

Barker stepped inside Fred's Fixit and leaned the dripping umbrella he borrowed from Cecilia against a wall.

Amber was at her desk, leaning back in her creaky chair and dabbing her eyes with a tissue. "The Mars Girl Show" was on the screen.

"Isn't it just awful?" she said. "All alone up there, a billion miles from everything." Amber blew her nose into a fresh tissue. "I saw you onscreen. You looked good. Couldn't hardly tell that Fred busted your noggin. You didn't tell us you're a celebrity. I thought you looked familiar."

"Sorry." Barker saw through the swinging door's window that his car was still on the hoist. "He's still working on it?"

"Part's not here yet," Amber said. She leaned toward her desk screen, tapped it a few times and leaned back again. "The delivery van's just a couple miles south so it should be here real quick. Had to come all the way from Oscoda. Won't take five minutes for Fred to slap in the part."

Fred entered through the swinging door carrying a large piece of plywood and a hammer. He held a half dozen nails in his teeth and nodded at Barker as he walked past. "Part's nearly here," he said through his clenched jaw. He put the plywood on the floor by the front window, dropped the nails into his hand and looked up at the wall screen. The lander's window was empty. "Anything new?"

"Seems like it's just her," Amber said. "Nobody else has come to the window so everybody's saying the others must be dead. Poor girl. Can you imagine how lonely she is, with her dead family right there?" Amber shuddered.

"I've been thinking about this," Fred said, holding the plywood up to the window, then leaning into it with his shoulder to keep it in place. "She needs H₂O, right? I mean, you can go for a couple months without eating, but you gotta have H₂O." He gave a nail a few whacks, driving it into the top center of the plywood. "She's got what she needs to make it right there. They couldn't have used up all the H they're carrying for fuel and there's definitely some O in

the tanks or she wouldn't be breathing." Fred pounded in another nail and looked at Barker. "Hydrolysis. She makes some water and she can stay alive for a good long time. Too bad the comm links are down or somebody could teach her how to combine the H and the O. And for food, there's those sixteen dead people. Wouldn't be the first time someone had to ..."

"Oh, you're awful!" Amber would have none of it. "She's not gonna eat ... oh, that's awful!"

"She's gotta survive five or six months," Fred said. "Bodies'll stay fresh in those pods. They're saying maybe a rescue could get there faster in one of those new space sails, but she's still gotta eat."

Amber glared at Fred as he started on another nail. "Mars Girl will find a way to get to the station and she'll be just fine," Amber said, raising her voice above Fred's pounding. "End of discussion."

"They're saying she'll never make it to the station," Fred said, turning toward Barker. "Not with the comm links dead. Plus she'd have to figure out all the station's systems. One mistake and she's a goner. But she's got what she needs right there if she can learn how to make some water. And if she gets hungry enough ..."

A delivery van's brakes squealed outside the front door.

"She's gonna be just fine and she's gonna come home a big hero," Amber said. "End of story."

"People might look at her kinda funny when she gets back to Earth," Fred said to Barker. "Especially if she'd been eating kin. But she'd be alive."

"That's e-nough!" Amber said.

MASSworld Tower

Leaning against an overstuffed leather chair in front of Jaspers' desk, Mary Belle Mivers, MASScorp director of special operations, gestured at the wall screen across the room where Mirellen was at the lander's window wearing a T-shirt with the words "Kiss Me I'm Dying" written in sloppy letters.

"I guess we owe you an apology, JJ," Mary Belle said. "Who would've thought this would happen?"

Mary Belle was dressed in a dark power suit, sans tie, and wore her short-back-and-sides hair parted in the middle. Her high heels matched her bright red lipstick.

"You've got the guts of a thief, JJ," said Brandon Khul, MASScorp VP for marketing, sitting in an upholstered chair turned to face the wall screen. He thumbed a few buttons on his assistant and, seeing the latest numbers, shook his head. "We hit the jackpot."

Brandon favored colorful suits and on that day wore a turquoise double-breasted number with pleated pants and jacket. His blond hair had the tight curls of a Michelangelo statue and his elongated face, dished out cheeks and round tortoise shell glasses gave him the look of a Modigliani dandy.

On the screen, Mirellen turned her back to the window to write a new message on her ReadWrite. Next to her on the shelf was a glowing box of Zap 'n' Zerve Chicken Littles. A dozen miniature chickens wearing lacy cabaret dresses marched out from behind the box and performed a few can-can steps to a barroom honky-tonk. After the rousing, big-kick finale, the chickens flew up and disappeared into the box and the TractorPix camera zoomed out to show the entire ship.

“I thought we were gonna put the ‘M’ back in our logo.” Jaspers said.

“Rindell’s call,” Mary Belle said.

“He says it’s comic relief,” Brandon said. “And he wanted the buzz. The talk shows have been all over the ASS. So to speak. There’ve been proctology jokes, donkey’s flying through space ...”

“Did you hear what CoolMan Luke said on ‘WhatNow?’” Mary Belle said, grinning at Brandon. “He said Peter Cloud’s finally working for the right network.”

Mary Belle and Brandon turned to share the joke with Jaspers but he didn’t smile.

“I’ll tell Marquelson to fix it,” Brandon said.

“Any pirating so far?” Jaspers said.

“DisneyNews knows they’ll be invaded by an army of lawyers if they even dream of violating the exclusive by putting Mars Girl onscreen,” Brandon said, thumbing buttons on his assistant. “Spins are a different story. A district judge agreed with Disney’s claim that the name ‘Mars Girl’ was created spontaneously by the public so no one can own it.”

“The caster didn’t script the little girl’s comment?” Mary Belle said.

“Apparently Barker never scripts his shows,” Brandon said.

“We paid fifty-five billion for the exclusive and we’re giving up twenty-five points on everything, but we don’t own her name?” Mary Belle said. “That’s criminal.”

“Maybe we were too quick going with the name Mars Girl,” Brandon said. “Rindell warned us, but it tested great.”

“What spins do we have so far?” Mary Belle said.

Brandon thumbed his assistant again. “We’ve got six plants pumping out Mars Girl dolls. We’re taking screen orders now and we’ll deliver at least four hundred thousand dolls to major market MASSmarts in the next five hours. All stores will have them before midnight. Another half million units arrive tomorrow by air from Kenya. Mini dolls will be in all BurgerLands before breakfast. We’ve got a dozen music and vid projects available or in the works. ‘I’m Alive, Are You?’ should chart by mid-afternoon and we made a deal with CosmoGirl Network to call the band Randi Rescue and the CosmoGirls. They’ll do a feature on the band as soon as we cast its members and shoot some vid. I’m told they’ve got bios done already. We’ve licensed a clothing line and the first item is a T-shirt with ‘Kiss Me I’m Dying’ in the same script as the one Mars Girl is wearing now. We’ve got a quarter million screen orders for the shirts already and they’ll be in all MASSmarts in the lower forty-eight and most of Canada within six hours. The first draft of a screenplay will be done today and there are three thousand Mars Girl wannabes waiting in line to audition at an auditorium we rented in Midtown. By tomorrow we’ll have little pink coffins for the dolls coming off lines in Cuba. Intelligence says we’ll need those within three days.”

“Coffins?” Jaspers said.

“Isn’t that a little ... too?” Mary Belle said. “And what if she survives?”

“Survives?” Brandon said. “Doubtful. The coffins tested well, especially in Texas. When Mars Girl’s dead we’ll get some psychobabblers to convince everyone that we’re providing a public service. Something about how the little pink coffins for Mars Girl dolls will help provide closure for America’s emotionally distressed children. We’ll start shipping the coffins when her eyes get glassy.”

Okinisee

Barker was disappointed when he saw the “Closed” sign in the Cozy Corner’s window but he parked his car on a side street anyway and trotted through the rain to the front door with Cecilia’s folded umbrella in his hand. The strong wind blowing off the lake held the door shut until he pulled hard, jangling the bells attached to the door.

Cecilia came out of the kitchen. She had taken down her ponytail and her hair hung to her shoulders. “I’m glad you came back,” she said.

“Had to return your umbrella,” Barker said, holding it up and smiling.

“Someone left it here so it’s not really mine. Keep it if you want. You might need it. Thirsty? Coffee? Lemonade? It’s on the house.”

“Lemonade sounds great.”

“Splash of vodka?”

“Perfect.”

“Two splashes?”

“Even better.”

Cecilia had turned toward the kitchen but looked back. “Better than perfect?”

“Perfecter.”

Cecilia disappeared into the kitchen. Barker hung the umbrella and his wet jacket on hooks by the door and the lights went out. He walked toward the kitchen in the dark but banged his knee into the salad cart. “You all right in there?” he said, rubbing his knee.

“Let there be light,” Cecilia said, backing through the swinging kitchen doors with a lit candle in each hand. “Grab a plate for the candles and I’ll get the drinks.”

Barker picked up a pie plate from a stack on the salad cart and took the candles from her. Back at the table, he tipped one of the candles and made two small pools of melted wax, then stood the candles upright on the plate.

Cecilia arrived with a pitcher in one hand and two wine glasses in the other. “I bet you didn’t expect drinks by candlelight,” she said as she poured.

Barker held up his glass for a toast. “To power failures.”

“Cheers.”

They touched glasses and took long drinks.

“It wasn’t really a power failure,” Cecilia said. “I turned off the emergency cell. Why waste it?”

“To the perfectly timed flip of a switch.”

They toasted again.

They both looked out at the road. It was raining harder and large drops splattered on the pavement. The streetlights were on, even though it was late afternoon.

“You really helped me out today at the school,” Barker said.

“I enjoyed it. I’ve never been in front of billions of people before. It was kind of a thrill.”

“I thought they were going to pull the plug in New York when I let you interview the principal, but you did a great job. You’re a natural. I owe you one.”

“You want to pay me back? I need to check on my boat to make sure she’s tied down good and tight. Wanna help?”

“Love to,” Barker said.

“Wait here a minute. I need to make a call and then we’ll go.”

After she went into the kitchen the lights came on and so did the wall screen.

Mirellen, wearing her spacesuit, climbed the small hill above where the nose of the ship had penetrated. As she climbed her feet occasionally slipped in the loose, gravelly soil. When she reached the top of the hill she scanned the landscape in all directions while the TractorPix, following behind, positioned itself on a small knoll a few yards away.

Mirellen turned in a slow circle as she studied the horizon, then walked toward the TractorPix and put her visor against its camera so that her face filled the screen. With slow, exaggerated pronunciation, she mouthed the words: "The station. Where is the station? Take me to the station."

The Oval Office

The president sat at her desk staring at an untouched croissant on the plate in front of her. Briter sat in a chair facing the president's desk and drummed his fingers on the briefcase lying across his lap.

The president's eyes were closed and she laid her palms on either side of the plate. Briter could see veins and tendons on her neck that he had never noticed before. She clenched her fists, opened her eyes and then relaxed her hands. She reached out to straighten a picture of her and her husband, taken on their first trip to the moon when she was a junior senator. In the background of the photo there was a billboard proclaiming the future site of the Lucky Luna Casino and Resort. As chair of the NearSpace Subcommittee she had championed the SpaceVator to get people and freight to the moon at affordable prices. Its completion during her second term in the senate spurred a lunar economic boom and her foresight won national attention that led to her selection as a vice presidential candidate two years later. When her running mate died of a massive heart attack three months before the election, she was suddenly at the top of her party's ticket.

"All I know is that we've got to do something or you're going to be in the mid-twenties by dinnertime," Briter said. He looked at his assistant and shook his head. "Your compassion numbers suck."

"I went onscreen and prayed for the little shit and people don't think I care?" the president said. She pushed the croissant away and gazed across the room at the wall screen showing a three-dimensional map of Moskey Basin and the surrounding hills with possible routes Mirellen could take from the crash site to the Gemini Cricket Family Restaurants Mars Station.

"Actions," Briter said. "We need actions not words. I say we take her to the station."

"Let's not panic," the president said. "We need to stick with the plan." She twisted the top off a bottle of MochaMint Iced Latte Frappé and took a drink.

"Black Goat wants to kill her right now," Briter said.

"No," the president said. "Not while my numbers are down. He can do it when my numbers are back up."

"Then we have to let her go to the station," Briter said. "People want her to have a chance."

"You've been telling me all along that if she gets to the station, they can get to her head and find the crash code," the president said.

"Yes, but only if the comm links are working when she gets there," Briter said. He put his briefcase on the floor and scooted up to the edge of his chair. "Listen, the Goat's in this just as deep as we are. If it looks like they might get to her head, I think he'll take care of her. He's done everything we've asked so far. The guy's a wizard. Once she's dead, they can't get to her head. She's wired, but she's not hard wired."

The president took another drink from the bottle. “What do you mean, ‘I think’? I want a guarantee that the Goat will take care of her.”

“He’s never failed us before,” Briter said. “And just imagine the numbers MASSnews will get while she treks across Mars. All we have to do is sit back and collect twenty-five percent on everything they sell. We’ll be able to send so many breeders to Mars NASA will have to double the size of the station’s nursery before the next election. I say we let her go.”

The president recapped the bottle and looked across the room at the wall screen. Mirellen was in the window wearing her “Kiss Me I’m Dying” T-shirt. The word “Dying” had been crossed off and replaced with “Dead.”

“All right, all right,” the president said. “She goes.”

Okinisee Marina

Arm in arm, Cecilia and Barker leaned into the driving rain as they walked the short distance from the café to the marina.

When they arrived at the boat, a white, twenty-eight foot sloop with “The Somewhen” written in script across its transom, Cecilia hopped onto the deck and disappeared down the companionway steps into the cabin. She reappeared wearing an orange slicker and handed a blue one to Barker. He put on the jacket over his soaked clothes and watched Cecilia’s sure-footed maneuvers across the wet deck. The wind pressed her jacket against her body and fluttered her hood.

Barker looked across the harbor and noticed that the lake, the dock, the clouds, the boats, the buildings – everything – was bathed in pale green light.

Cecilia shouted to Barker to get a couple tires from the shed on shore. He returned a minute later with the tires and held them in place while Cecilia lashed them to the dock’s wooden posts. When the tires were secure she danced along the boat’s edge, retightening the ropes to snug it against the tires.

After Cecilia had double-checked everything, she motioned toward the cabin door and Barker followed her down the companionway steps. The sound of the wind and rain was muffled only slightly when he closed the door.

“Green’s not good,” Cecilia said, rubbing her wet hair with a towel. “This isn’t the best place to be right now but this is where we are. We’re all right unless there’s a tornado, and I don’t even want to think about a water spout.”

“What’s a water spout?”

“Trouble.” She tossed the towel to Barker. He caught it in his teeth because his arms were busy behind him trying to pull the slicker sleeves off his wet clothes. Cecilia grabbed the towel from his teeth and gave his hair a quick rub down. She tossed the towel toward the sink and nudged Barker onto one of two padded benches that met in a V, with a table between. Barker watched Cecilia’s dress rise higher as she reached into a cabinet above the sink.

“Scotch? Gin? Cognac?” Still reaching up, she turned to face Barker.

“We’re at sea,” Barker said. “No rum?”

“It’s a lake and we’re tied to a dock.” Cecilia looked over her shoulder. “Scotch all right?”

“Sure.”

She put the bottle and two tumblers on the table and sat next to Barker.

The rain sounded like a stampede of tiny horses on the boat’s deck. Heavy gusts of wind whistled through the rigging and strained the mooring lines. The hull squealed against the tires.

“The good thing about a boat is that it doubles as a coffin if you sink,” Cecilia said, after they’d both taken a drink.

“I think we need to get our minds off death,” Barker said.

He knocked back the rest of his Scotch and she took the empty glass from him. Cecilia put both glasses and the bottle on the shelf behind her and slid closer to Barker. He put his hand on her knee and slowly worked it up her thigh as they kissed.

“This would be easier if we stand up for a minute,” Cecilia said. She pulled the seats up so they were the same level as the table and pulled a pad from a storage bin above their heads to complete the bed. They took turns taking off each other’s clothes, kissing when there weren’t arms or clothes in the way. Outside the boat, the wind strengthened and the whistling grew into a low moan that turned into a deep growl and built to a roar that shook the boat. One of the ropes snapped and the boat jerked violently.

Barker looked up from between Cecilia’s legs.

“Tornado,” she said between heavy breaths. “Terrifying. Isn’t it? God, don’t stop.”

A metallic screech pierced Barker’s eardrums and he paused again.

“It’s just the mast,” Cecilia said. “Keep going for God’s sake.”

Fred’s Fixit

Amber and Fred huddled next to each other under Amber’s desk. Fred had taped a flashlight to its underside so Amber could play solitaire on the floor as he worked his way through a bag of roasted peanuts. There was a pile of peanut shells next to him on the worn linoleum. The storm sounded like a jet landing outside their door.

“The David missed this one,” Fred said. “This is bad. Real bad.”

Amber gathered up her cards and got up on her knees to peek over the desk just as the front windows shattered and the plywood Fred nailed there broke free and flew into the room. The board hit the front of the desk hard enough to shove it back a foot. Amber ducked under the desk and covered her head with her hands.

“You okay?” Fred shouted.

Amber pulled one hand free and reached out for Fred. “I’m okay!”

Okinisee Marina

Barker lay on his side with his elbow stuck into a pillow and his palm supporting his head. His other hand traced the contours of Cecilia’s back and shoulders. The boat lay still against the dock and through one of the narrow windows he could see the sky had brightened. A distant siren stopped abruptly, and another one started.

“Damn it,” Barker sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Cecilia said, rolling onto her back.

“My head’s humming,” Barker said. “New York. They’ll have to wait.”

“Wired, huh?”

“Professional mandate.”

“Same thing happened to me,” Cecilia said.

“Because you own a café?”

“No, but I worked for Penn-Wright in Detroit for eleven years, right out of college. Remember the ‘Just Add Water’ campaign for the Ford Helix?”

“I never liked that one,” Barker said.

“Those three words made me a partner. When everything went to instant media buys they wanted me wired so I’d be available twenty-four/seven. I wish I hadn’t done it, but I was pretty ambitious back then.”

“Why don’t you get the wires cut?” Barker said.

“I’ve thought about it. But I don’t like the idea of someone noodling with my noodle again. I change my connects every time I get my period. Seems to keep the traffic down.”

“Why’d you leave Penn-Wright?”

“They offered me a lot of money to quit after the big advertising panic.”

“The Heffernan Report?”

Cecilia nodded. “We were making commercials nobody was watching. I got out at the right time, but things never got as bad as everyone thought they would. The live news boom saved a lot of my friends’ jobs. So I guess your network is good for something.”

“How’d you end up here?”

“I sold my share in the business and with that, plus the parachute, I bought the café and the boat. My husband visits most weekends. He’s not really my husband anymore. We have a limited partnership now. He’s a lawyer in Detroit.”

“So you escaped,” Barker said.

“Escaped isn’t quite right. We used to come up here summers when I was a kid. Childhood friends still live here. Seemed like a good idea.”

“Was it?”

Cecilia turned her head and looked past Barker through the porthole at drifting white clouds. “Yes, it was. I have to put in my time at the café but I live on my boat four days a week in the summer. I travel and ski a lot in the winter. I have good friends. Suits me fine. There’s more to it but those are the headlines.”

“No kids?”

Cecilia hesitated. “Almost. Didn’t make it past three months.”

“Sorry.”

“Jim said it was the stress of working too hard for a dying company.” She looked up at the ceiling. “I think about it quite a bit.”

Two wailing sirens headed north toward Alpena.

“Things don’t sound good in town,” Barker said.

“I wonder if anyone’s dead,” Cecilia said. “I wonder if my café’s still there. I wonder if Jim’s coming up today.”

Barker brushed the hair out of her eyes and wondered if she was serious about the last one. The boat dipped toward the dock and a man yelled, “Ceci?”

MASSworld Tower

“The data are consistent in every market,” Brandon said, sitting in front of Jaspers’ desk and teasing apart a Mars Girl doll’s hair to check its density. “Their doll is outselling ours by double.”

Jaspers was across the room staring out his big window.

“I could understand if theirs had extra features,” Brandon said. “Theirs are smart dolls but no smarter than ours, and you have to buy expansions for theirs.” He took off the doll’s sneakers

and ran a finger along the bottoms of its feet. “Big, heavy seams. Our quality is better too.” He turned it upright. “Must be the breasts.”

“What?” Jaspers said, turning away from the window.

Brandon lifted the doll’s shirt so Jaspers could see.

Mary Belle, out of breath, slipped through Jaspers’ office door. “I just heard about the doll.”

“It’s Disney,” Brandon said.

“Any numbers yet?” Mary Belle asked.

“Projections say theirs will sell double ours, and early figures support the estimates,”

Brandon said. “We’ve stopped production until we figure it out.”

“Double?” Mary Belle said. “How’d that happen?”

“Big tits,” Brandon said, lifting the doll’s shirt again.

Okinisee Marina

Barker and Jim, Cecilia’s limited partner, sat on the dock just past The Somewhen’s bow. The sailboat’s mast, bent horizontal but still attached despite the twisted and torn metal at its base, lay on top of a cabin cruiser moored across the dock. Barker’s clothes floated on the other side of the sailboat where Jim had thrown them. Barker wore Cecilia’s faded red terry cloth robe. Cecilia had gone into town to see what damage the tornado had done and offered to bring Barker’s car back if it wasn’t crushed under a tree.

“You’d think I’d get used to this.” Jim said, looking off toward town through the pale young oak leaves that would grow to block the view in another week. He could see ambulances and police cars surrounding the half-destroyed First United Methodist Church on the other side of M-23.

“Get used to what?” Barker said.

Jim leaned back, propping his barrel-chested torso with his thick arms. Above his mildly pockmarked but squarely handsome face, the breeze tousled his dark, well-manicured hair. He had driven north directly from work but left his suit coat and tie in his car, parked at the end of the dock.

“Guys like you.”

Barker looked out at the lake. He could just see the outline of a distant freighter but couldn’t tell which way it was heading.

“I guess I should just let her go,” Jim said. “We’re not even married anymore. And it’s not like I can’t find someone else. I’ve been nailing this secretary at work, but it’s not the same.” Jim looked at Barker. “There’s something about Cecilia.”

Barker’s shirt and pants drifted into view past The Somewhen’s bow. “Sure,” he said, looking around for a pole or stick he might use to retrieve his clothes.

“I think she still feels something for me,” Jim said. “We still have a good time when we’re together. It’s not the same as it used to be, but it’s not the same as it used to be for anyone.” Jim pulled a splinter loose from the wooden dock and tossed it into the water. “But this shit drives me crazy. When I saw you two in bed all I could think about was how much I wanted to tear off your fucking head. That idea’s still hanging around.”

Barker could feel Jim’s eyes on him as he watched firefighters climbing over the piles of bricks that used to form the north wall of the church. The tornado had torn off a large part of the roof and Barker wondered how the rest of the building was still standing.

“You know what’s funny?” Jim said. “Cecilia called me earlier today from the café to tell me I shouldn’t come up because of the storm. I didn’t say I wasn’t coming. You two could’ve planned this better.”

“We didn’t plan anything,” Barker said. “My car broke down here.”

“Great,” Jim said, shaking his head. He looked at Barker. “So now you’re leaving.”

“Fred fixed my car before the storm,” Barker said. “No telling what shape it’s in now.”

“Going where?”

“I live in Chicago.”

Another ambulance headed north from the church with its siren blaring.

Jim stood and took a few steps down the dock toward the parking lot, his arms swinging slow and wide like a gunslinger. He pulled Barker’s jacket off a post and looked back over his shoulder. “This yours?”

Barker didn’t respond.

Jim tied the jacket’s sleeves into a knot and threw it as far as he could into the harbor. He looked back at Barker and then continued walking down the dock toward his car.

Cecilia drove Barker’s microvan down the marina’s gravel drive and parked next to Jim’s car. She stepped out and waited for Jim. When they spoke neither one looked away. A minute later Cecilia walked onto the dock toward her sailboat and Jim reached inside Barker’s car and popped open the back hatch. He grabbed Barker’s suitcase, walked to the dock and heaved it into the harbor, sending a pair of gulls up into the light breeze. The leather case bobbed on top of the surface for a moment and then sank.

MASSworld Tower

Piper stuck her head inside Rindell’s spartan office. “You wanted me?”

Still wearing the clothes he wore when he arrived at work the previous morning, Rindell sat at his desk and held his broad chin high. His bloodshot eyes seemed locked on the ceiling. His tie was loose and the sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up past his hairy forearms. He lowered his eyes to Piper, then shifted them toward a chair near his desk.

Piper shut the door behind her and sat down in the armless, padded chair. “What’s up?” she said.

“We’re going mobile sometime tomorrow,” Rindell said, looking toward the far side of the room at his wall screen, the only decoration in his office other than a silk and plastic plant. On the screen Mirellen stared out of her window wearing her “Kiss Me I’m Dead” T-shirt. “She’s going to try for the station like some cute little kitty trying to cross a busy highway.”

“NASA is dead set against a trek,” Piper said.

“NASA can’t stop her,” Rindell said. He took a drink from a ForceCola bottle on his desk and shuddered. “God, this stuff is awful.”

“Don’t drink it.”

“It keeps me going.”

“When’s the last time you slept?”

“Sleep is for the weak.” Rindell took another drink and grimaced.

“If you’re right about her trying for the station, we’re in for another huge spike,” Piper said.

“That’s tomorrow. We’ll never get anywhere thinking about tomorrow.”

Rindell rubbed his eyes and Piper noticed a pink tomato sauce halo on his shirt near the pocket.

“It’s tonight that’s on my mind,” Rindell said. “People will get tired of watching her stare out her window, and she’s got to sleep sometime. We need something strong tonight to take advantage of all the eyeballs she brought us.”

“We can preview the trek and fill a lot of time with replays,” Piper said.

“We lose numbers when people can’t see her live,” Rindell said. “We need something new we can tease the hell out of while we’ve got the eyeballs.”

“You mean you want to leave Mars Girl?” Piper said. “We’ve never had a show like this. Seems crazy to walk away from it.”

Rindell took off his tie and tossed it onto his desk. “Yeah. Well maybe I’m nuts.”

“Your call, but I’d say we’ve got a pretty good bird in hand,” Piper said. “A golden goose.”

“Put out the word that we’re doubling casters’ commissions on new shows until midnight Eastern,” Rindell said, rubbing his eyes again. “This is gonna be somebody’s lucky night.”

Continues ...

*The above sample is about fifteen percent of Mars Girl. [Click here to buy the Mars Girl ebook](#), available at Amazon.com. To contact Jeff Garrity, [visit jeffgarrity.com](#). You’ll also find more of Jeff’s fiction at the web site, including short stories and the novella *Barker Must Die*, the follow-up to *Mars Girl*.*