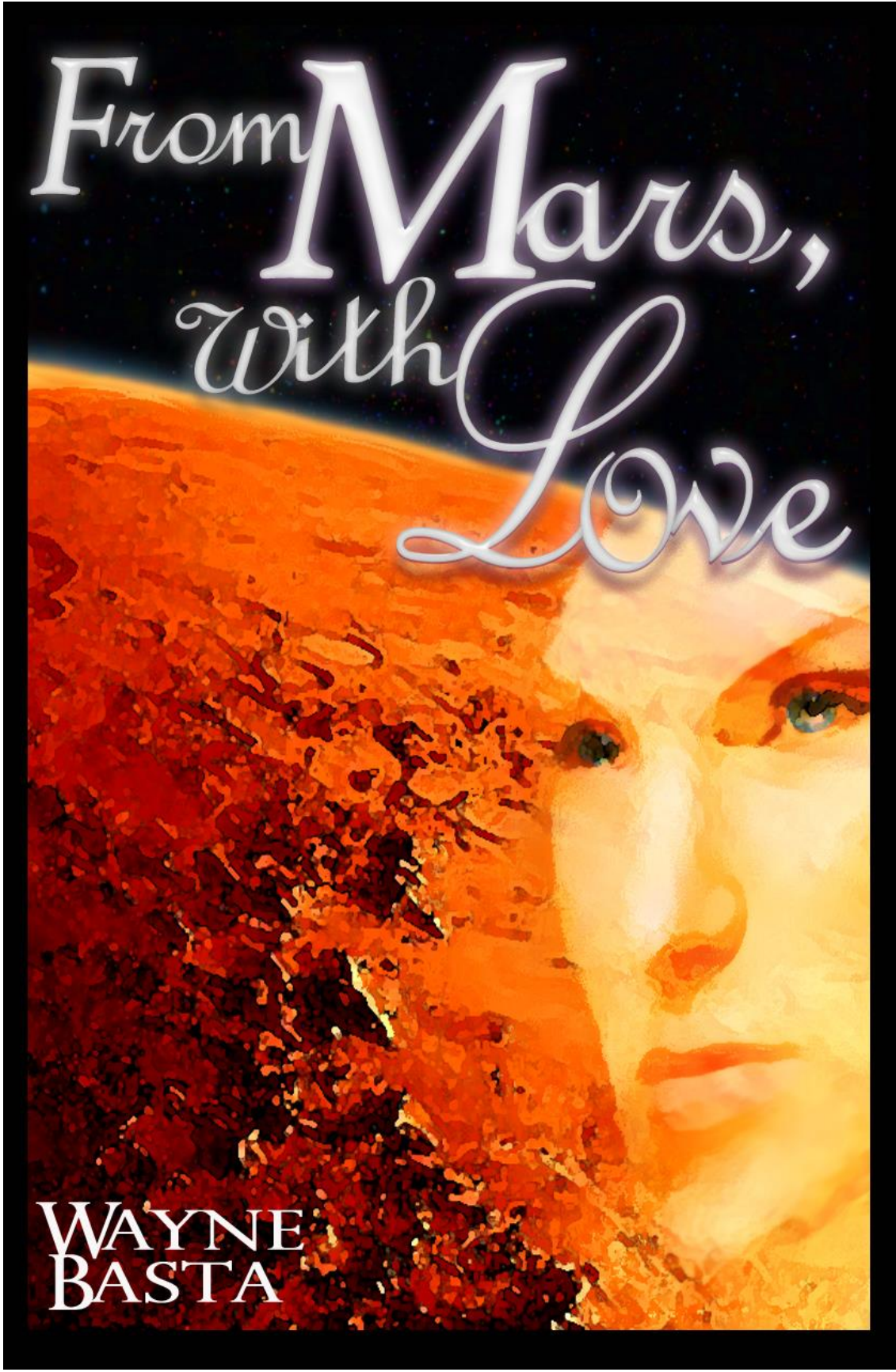


*From Mars,  
with Love*

WAYNE  
BASTA



**From Mars With Love**

Michael Coburn stared at the alarm clock. It was not set to go off for several more minutes, but he had already been staring at it for over an hour. Today was the day he had been dreading for years. He'd always known it might come, but until very recently, it had seemed like something that would always stay safely in the future.

Looking beside him, Michael watched his wife, Jennifer, sleeping soundly. Seeing her lay there, with her mouth open slightly and a trickle of drool on her pillow, made him smile. She would have found it ghastly to see herself like that. He found it cute, and it reminded him how much he loved her.

Normally, when something on his mind kept him up at night, he would wake Jennifer up and talk to her. She wouldn't always be a coherent conversationalist, but she would always listen. Just having her listen was usually enough. Now, she was the last one in the world he could talk to.

Today was the day Jennifer found out if she would be selected to be part of the crew for the first manned mission to Mars – a three-year trip that Michael could not join her for. She had been training her entire life for this chance.

The alarm clock suddenly sounded, filling the peaceful quiet with its ear-shattering sound. Jumping out of bed, Jennifer slammed her hand down on the alarm, silencing it. She then stumbled to the bathroom. Michael knew she wasn't really awake yet, so he said nothing. Getting up himself, he walked to the kitchen to start the coffee and feed the dog.

Half an hour later, Jennifer walked into the kitchen, freshly showered and dressed for work. Michael had laid out cold cereal for her along with her coffee, while he browsed the web for the morning's news. She kissed him on the forehead as she passed. Despite it being summer and him having no history classes to teach, or grad students to supervise, and therefore no reason to be up this early, they still continued this morning ritual.

They ate in silence for a while, though Jennifer mainly poked at her food. Finally Michael, looking up from his screen, said, "Something wrong with your Cheerios?"

"No. Just not very hungry. And kind of nauseous."

"Maybe you're pregnant," Michael joked. They had considered having children a few years before. That had been before the Mars mission had become a real possibility.

"Not funny," she said, pushing her cereal away. "Well, I shouldn't put this off any longer."

Standing up with her, Michael gave her a strong hug. "Give me a call when they make the announcement?"

"You can count on it," Jennifer said, still looking sick.

After she left, Michael didn't have much to do. He found himself putzing around the house, doing some odds and ends, cleaning, turning the TV on without watching it. Very soon, his wife would be calling him either in tears or exuberant that she would be leaving him for three years. He knew it wasn't as crass as that, and that the separation would be difficult for her as well, but he couldn't help but think it.

When Michael had met Jennifer, they had both been grad students. Immediately captivated by her, she had held her apart, despite the initial signs of mutual attraction. Her

passion for going to space had driven her to obtain multiple science and engineering degrees. This had left little time for a social life. It took a while, but eventually he found a way to get some of that passion transferred to himself.

From the very beginning of their relationship, she had made it clear that her priorities lay with getting to space: Mars, preferably. At the time, space exploration had been in a deep lull. When they had both been teenagers, America's manned flight ability had come to an end with the termination of the space shuttle program. By the time they finished school, there still was no replacement vehicle. Despite that, Jennifer signed up to be an astronaut. While other astronauts and potential astronauts were looking for work with many of the new commercial space companies, she wanted to work with NASA. She had always wanted more than just going into orbit, and she firmly believed NASA would be the way to do it.

Despite knowing he would never want to be apart from her for years, Michael had accepted this condition when he asked Jennifer to marry him. It had not appeared remotely possible that she would ever get the chance to go to Mars, so he didn't think he would ever have to face it. Her passion for it was part of what he loved about her, so he also had no desire to be part of squashing her dreams.

Now the world had changed. What had once seemed only a distant and impossible dream was now a very real possibility, and it terrified him. On the other hand, it wasn't a sure thing yet. Being this close to achieving her dream and then failing would devastate her. As much as he didn't want to be apart from her, he thought it might be even worse to see her go through that.

When the phone finally rang, Michael's heart stopped briefly. Taking a deep breath, he picked up the phone and then sighed. It was his mother calling, undoubtedly to find out the news and to comfort him either way. Deciding he really didn't want to talk to her, he let the call go to voice mail.

A minute after the phone finished ringing it, it rang again. Grumbling, Michael assumed it was his mother trying again. She did that sometimes when she thought he should have picked up the phone. When he finally looked at the phone, Michael was momentarily shocked to see that it was his wife calling. He froze for a second in panic before finally accepting the call. Tentatively, he said hello.

"I'm in!" came Jennifer's squeal of glee. "You're talking to the primary engineering specialist for the Mars mission!"

Michael felt his heart sink. "Honey, that's great," he forced himself to say. He knew his voice lacked enthusiasm. Fortunately, Jennifer, in her excitement, didn't notice. He was able to push his feelings of loss down, and focus on being excited for her.

Michael spent the rest of the day feeling sorry for himself. He was happy with their life. Aside from occasional training sessions outside of Houston or the rare missions to the ISS, he always had Jennifer beside him. Those few missions she had been on had rarely been longer than four months. That had made them difficult, but tolerable. By contrast, this mission would be more than two years in space and almost another year of quarantine and prep time.

They would, at least, be able to communicate via time-delayed video chat for most of her trip. He knew this would ease the loneliness. But it just wasn't going to be the same as having her there with him.

By the early evening, he was feeling so grumpy that he almost didn't turn on the official announcement. When he did, he saw Jennifer sitting behind the table next to the NASA director, along with the other selected astronauts. The look of pure joy and excitement on her face finally broke through his shell of grumpiness.

By the time Jennifer got home later that night, Michael was ready to celebrate like any happily married couple should: by skipping dinner and going straight to bed. After several hours of passionate love-making and intimate cuddling, Jennifer broached the topic of how he felt about the news.

Now that the decision was made, and he had come to accept it, Michael felt more comfortable with being honest. "At first, *at first*, I was sad. You know I don't like the idea of you being gone for three years. A lot can happen in three years. And going to another planet -- that does not lack for risks."

Jennifer gave him a slight frown as he spoke, but Michael continued before she could raise the usual argument. "But that was just me being selfish. This mission is your dream, and I am happy, genuinely happy, that you're getting to achieve it."

Nodding, Jennifer hugged him. "I know this won't be easy on you. And I wish there was a need for history professors onboard. But I'm glad you understand."

"Well, it's a historic mission, after all. Maybe they *should* bring a historian. I could always take someone else's seat. What does a space mission need with *scientists*?" Michael said with a cheesy smile, which Jennifer returned with a reluctant laugh.

The next few months passed in a whirlwind. Jennifer was often away for long periods undergoing intense training. The fall semester started, and Michael went back to

teaching history to bored undergrads. With his wife going to be gone for much of the next three years, he finally pushed himself to apply for a research grant that would send him to be buried in old libraries across Europe.

On the night before Jennifer would begin her period in quarantine, they together in bed. Despite this being the last night they would spend together for three years, neither appeared to be in a romantic mood. An awkward tension hung in the air.

“You know I love you, right?” Jennifer said quietly..

“Of course,” Michael said, as he stroked her hair.

“I don’t want to leave *you*, you know?”

“I know.”

Very quietly, Jennifer said, “When I get back, we should have kids.”

Michael smiled. They both knew that NASA would not send the same astronauts off-planet again, which made kids a real possibility after this trip. He had been hoping for kids for a long time and had been disappointed to have had to put them off. They would be older than he wished to be as new parents, but people were living longer these days. When their kids graduated high school, he wouldn’t be *completely* falling apart... just *mostly*.

“That would be great.”

Quiet resumed for several minutes. There seemed to be something hanging in the air unsaid. Michael considered asking, but he knew that if he said anything, it wouldn’t get him anywhere. Jennifer would only talk when she was ready.

After a while, she finally said, “I’ve been trying to decide if I should tell you this or not. But I don’t think I can go without telling you.”

The cryptic statement confused Michael. Hundreds of different possibilities raced through his head. Mundane things, like that she didn't actually like dogs as much as she claimed. Old insecurities that he hadn't had for years, like that she had been unfaithful, flashed through his head. He dismissed all of these stray thoughts and waited for her to continue.

"Remember when, right before they announced the crew, you joked that I might be pregnant?"

"No, not really," Michael answered, truthfully. He didn't remember much of that day aside from the annoying mix of worry, guilt and excitement.

"Well, I wasn't, then. But about two months ago, during a routine exam while I was at Edwards, the flight surgeon told me that I was pregnant," Jennifer said. That simple statement shocked Michael. He was still trying to decide if he had heard her right, when she continued, "I had a choice right then. I could keep the baby and drop out of the mission or get an abortion. Since Texas still won't allow them, I had to do it before I left California."

The news that Jennifer had had an abortion without telling him left Michael feeling dizzy and unable to speak. Unlike the majority of Texans, Michael had never had any problem with abortions, particularly early-term ones. In theory, at least, an abortion was a woman's choice, and an early one was nothing more than killing a few cells. Now, the news that he had almost had a child made him suddenly question that acceptance.

Jennifer continued talking, tears running down her cheek onto his bare shoulder. "I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to tell you, knowing how much you want kids. I was going away from you for years, and to do so I would have to kill our future



child. But I was selfish. I didn't want to give up my dream, and I didn't want to have to tell you."

Michael lay there in silence for a long time. Inside, he wasn't sure how he actually felt. She had opened up to him, and while he didn't like what she had said, or the timing, he kept telling himself that it was better that she had told him. He was a firm believer that secrets in a relationship would surely kill it.

"I understand why you did it," Michael said, trying to keep the anger out of his voice.

The hurt look that crossed Jennifer's face made it clear that he hadn't been very successful. Irritated that now he was the one who had to comfort her, he reminded himself that, regardless of anything else, he still loved Jennifer, and this would be their last night together for a long time. He knew she wanted him to forgive her, but right now, he was not capable of that.

Michael touched her cheek and said, "I may not like it, and I'm not happy that you didn't talk to me first, but I do still love you."

It wasn't forgiveness, but it appeared to be enough for Jennifer. She leaned in and kissed him, and then squeezed in very close. They spent the rest of the night in silence, eventually falling asleep in each other's arms.

#

The next morning, Michael tried to forget about the abortion revelation. Jennifer was leaving for Johnson Space Center early and he focused his time on just being with her. She appeared as if a great burden had been lifted from her, and he didn't want to put another one in its place by renewing her sense of guilt.

The departure was difficult, but after several last-minute hugs, they finally got into the car. It was quiet during the drive to JSC. They weren't much for public displays of affection, so their goodbyes once there were brief. Once he was outside the gates and back on the road, Michael could hardly hold back the tears. Fortunately, the drive to their house was short.

Waiting for him at the door was their dog, Ares. Michael was grateful not to have to come home to an empty house. Sensing his emotional state, the big mutt refused to go outside, instead trying to keep herself close to him. Finally giving into the dog and his feelings, Michael dropped to the floor and let himself cry into Ares' fur.

The next month passed quickly. Michael started preparing for his research trip to Europe. Getting the house ready to sit empty for a year took up a lot of his time, and then he had to take Ares to his sister's. He and Jennifer talked every night over video chat or on the phone. Those conversations had never been anywhere near as good as talking in person, but he knew he should get used to them.

When launch day arrived, Michael flew down to Florida. As a spouse, he got front-row seating. Seeing the kids of some of the other astronauts reminded him of what he had missed out on. Fortunately, he was surrounded by people, many of them his friends, and he didn't have time to dwell on it.

Today's launch would take the Mars crew up to the ISS. There, the Mars ship *Challenger* was docked. Too massive to be launched whole, the ship had been built in orbit in a recent expansion to the ISS. Parts were already being loaded into rockets so that construction of a second ship, *Columbia*, could begin construction as soon as the space

was clear. The two ships had been named in honor of the two shuttles that had been lost in terrible accidents. Michael hoped the names weren't prescient.

Being with the crowd filled Michael with a sense of excitement. Humans were about to launch for a new world for the first time - a world that, unlike the moon, could not even be seen with the naked eye as anything more than a dot in the sky. And his wife was going to be one of the first humans to walk on another planet. That sobering thought filled him with a sense of pride that overshadowed any lingering sadness or worry.

As the rocket prepared for lift-off, the crowd eagerly began counting down. In their excitement, they frequently got ahead of the launch control official. There was almost a full second's difference between the crowd's excited shout of 'one' and the official time. With eager anticipation, Michael and the crowd watched a sudden flash of smoke and steam obscure the launch vehicle before it became visible again in the air, riding on a stream of fire.

There were hugs and tears all around, the family and spouses of the space-bound astronauts comforting and congratulating each other. The incredible roar of the engines sent some of the younger children into tears, which only added to the mix of emotions. They were there in the hot, humid, Florida sun long after the rocket was no longer visible.

#

Michael's flight for Europe was scheduled for the next day, so he could not return to Houston to be in Mission Control when *Challenger* actually left orbit, but he didn't mind. Compared to the launch from Kennedy, the departure of *Challenger* from orbit would be anti-climatic. There was some impressive video footage all over the web as the

great ship undocked from the ISS, but that was almost a day before they actually broke orbit.

By the time *Challenger* left orbit, Michael had arrived in Europe at Heidelberg University in Germany. In addition to granting him the honor of doing research at such a historic institution as Heidelberg, the grant had allowed him to select two grad students to assist him. From the host of applicants, he had finally settled on Kristina and Julian. Both were young and excited to be digging through old texts looking for lost references to the Holy Roman Empire.

For Michael, his world shrank down to a small area there in Germany. Until he found an apartment, his room at the Arthotel was within walking distance of the University Library. Kristina and Julian tried to get him to spend some evenings with them exploring the old town, but he declined. The time zone there made the evenings the ideal time to try to contact Jennifer.

During the journey to Mars, the excitement expressed by Jennifer kept Michael engaged. Using the plasma VASMIR engine designed by a former astronaut, the trip was a mere forty days – miniscule, considering the distance. Mission plans had once called for a journey of six to eight months. The new engine allowed for a journey not much longer than it had taken Europeans to cross the Atlantic when they were first exploring the western hemisphere. While orbital mechanics still made the shortest distances between the planets occur every two years, the new engine allowed most of that time to be spent on Mars instead of traveling to or from it.

The final arrival on Mars and the undocking of *Challenger*'s landing craft was a unique time. The whole world became consumed by anticipation. Despite *Challenger*

being a primarily American plan, the entire world had contributed to its funding, design, resources, and crew. Of the fifteen-person crew, only four were American, including Jennifer. There were three people from the European Union, three from China, one from India, one from Brazil, two from Russia, and one from Japan.

As the husband of one of the crew, Michael was a minor celebrity at the university. He received several invitations to parties to watch the live stream of the first landing. He brushed all of them off, including Kristina and Julian's plans to watch from a party at a biergarten. He was hoping to watch from the quiet of his hotel room. If something tragic happened, he didn't want to be around people. But when the head of the faculty of philosophy and history invited him to his home for a viewing party, he couldn't refuse.

At the party, many people talked about comparing this to the first moon landing, though it was so long ago that no one there remembered it. Michael's parents had only been infants when Apollo landed on the moon, so they had never had any insight to give him on comparing the two events. He had never thought to ask his grandparents, who were dead now, what it had been like to watch that milestone unfold before them.

The anticipation and excitement in the air as the images streamed back to Earth were almost palpable. As the mission's primary engineer and expert on the ship itself, Jennifer was not one of the first ones to actually walk on Mars' surface. That first honor went to mission commander John Kelly. She would get her chance, though; unlike poor Michael Collins during Apollo 11, no one would be left orbiting Mars alone for the next twenty months.

After the initial excitement of watching the first people walk on the surface of Mars, Michael was able to slip away from the party. He returned to his apartment and sent a congratulatory message to Jennifer. She was undoubtedly very busy, so he was not surprised that he did not get a reply that night.

#

Over the next few months, Michael spent more and more hours working with Kristina and Julian. They finally convinced him to join them for an evening out. As Earth and Mars got further and further apart, the conversations he had with Jennifer devolved into brief messages. When replies took forty minutes -- twenty minutes for a message to get there and twenty minutes for the response to get back -- it made actual conversations impossible. Instead of sitting around in his hotel room exchanging multiple messages, Michael started to just send a single message each evening and then go join his grad students.

As the time delay continued, frustration at the difficulty of talking with Jennifer developed, and their conversations grew shorter. The messages Jennifer sent him became less excited as they got more into the monotonous work of running experiments. His messages to her grew shorter as the routine of research gave him little to talk about.

During this time, Julian started dating one of the local students, which meant Michael and Kristina started spending a lot of time alone together. For her part, Kristina refused to get close to any of the locals, telling Michael she had to focus on her studies. He found it ridiculous; Jennifer had been the same way until he had shown her there was more to life. But he said nothing to Kristina. His role was as her educational advisor, not life coach.

By the time New Year's Eve came, it had been more than a year since he had last seen Jennifer in person. Michael spent the evening at a fellow professor's party. When midnight rolled around, he found himself beside Kristina. Unexpectedly, she leaned over and kissed him.

The kiss should have been an innocent tradition, but they held it for a few seconds too long. It had been a year since Michael had any intimate contact with another human being, and it felt good. The slight flush in Kristina's cheeks told him she had felt something, too.

After that supposedly innocent kiss, Michael found himself having highly inappropriate daydreams about Kristina. After meeting Jennifer, he had never really been attracted to any other women. Sure, he still found them attractive to look at, and there were still fleeting fantasies. But that was all more subconscious than conscious. This was different.

One night, as Michael was preparing to send his daily message to Jennifer, he found himself thinking more about Kristina than about his wife. Doubt and lust clouded his thoughts, and he wondered if he really loved Jennifer anymore. She certainly couldn't really love him. She had aborted their child without talking to him, all so she could go to another world without him.

He contemplated leaving his apartment and going down the hall to Kristina's room. *It would be just to talk*, he told himself. She had invited him over for drinks. There was nothing wrong with having drinks with a friend. As he sat there, he tried to summon some courage. He was never sure, later, if the courage he hoped for was to help him go or to make himself stay.

The call that came in while he debated was the scariest of his life, but he later decided it was the best thing to have ever happened to him. The call was from his friend Jose at NASA.

“You’re working late, Jose,” Michael joked, knowing full well it was still only the early afternoon back in Houston.

There was a noticeable pause on the phone that made Michael think he had lost the connection. After a moment, Jose said, “Michael, I don’t want to alarm you, but I wanted you to find out from me before you heard about it on the news.”

Despite Jose’s best intentions, Michael was immediately alarmed. “Heard about what?”

“There’s been an accident on Mars. We’ve lost contact with the landing module.”

A cold chill gripped Michael’s heart. All along he had assumed that if something was going to go wrong with the Mars mission, it would be during entering Mars orbit or landing on the planet. Everything had been fine yesterday, and the crew would have been doing nothing different today.

“What happened?” Michael managed to ask.

Jose sighed over the phone. “Unfortunately, we don’t know. We are still receiving telemetry from *Challenger* in orbit. But nothing from the surface.”

Then, with more reassurance in his voice, he said, “We don’t think it’s anything major. Probably just a glitch. Sit tight, and I’ll call you when we know more.”

“Okay, thanks, Jose,” Michael said and hung up the phone.

Michael wasn’t sure how long he sat there, but it wasn’t until he had booked tickets that he realized he had decided to fly back to Houston. There was nothing he



could do in Houston, and he wouldn't be able to learn anything more than he would be told while in Germany. But he had to do *something*.

During the flight, the news reports spread out. All contained more speculation than fact. Stories abounded; some said it was a simple communication system failure, while one story said that the entire crew had been killed when *Challenger's* plasma engine had misfired and driven the ship into Mars, stranding the crew.

Once in Houston, Michael learned that Mary Kelly, the wife of *Challenger's* captain, had opened her doors to all the crew's families. He went straight there, joining the large gathering. Even though not all of the crew's families lived in Houston, quite a few did. Michael had been the only local to leave, all the others having kids in school.

Conversations with the other families were quiet and superficial. No one talked about Mars. Michael spent most of his time playing games with the younger kids, keeping them away when their parents started to lose their outward calm.

Playing with the children reminded him that while his wife was on another world, these kids had a mom or dad missing. Missing three years in the life of a small child was significant. That realization made his anger at Jennifer over the abortion seem stupid. Would he have wanted his child to spend his first three years without a mother?

After more than a day of worry, word finally came out of NASA. Contact with *Challenger* was reestablished, and the crew reported that the accident had been minor. The communication system was now repaired, thanks in no small part to Jennifer's skill, Michael assumed. The sense of relief he now felt, and shared with the other families, wiped away all of the negative emotions that had been tormenting him.

After a few days, he returned to Heidelberg. Shortly after arriving at his apartment, a knock came from his door. Opening it, he saw Kristina, dressed in a sweater that was too tight across her chest and a skirt that was too short for the current weather. Surprisingly, Michael found that, aside from a basic appreciation for her beauty, the sight of Kristina did not stir any other emotions in him.

“I was happy to hear that your wife was okay,” Kristina said, genuine sympathy in her voice. “I -- we were all worried about you.”

“Thank you, Kristina,” Michael replied flatly, not sure what else to say. It was not her fault he had been acting like an idiot before. He didn’t want to give her the cold shoulder, but he wasn’t sure how else to give her the message that whatever had been developing between them was done.

Fortunately, the moment of awkward silence appeared to do the trick. Kristina left with an assignment to let Julian know that he was back and that he would meet both of them at the university library the next morning.

#

When Michael returned to his research, he found that the excitement he had once felt at being in one of Europe’s oldest universities, only the third university founded by the Holy Roman Empire, had vanished, just like his feelings for Kristina. The daily discoveries became boring research. Had any of those emotions been real? Like his suppressed love for his wife, he remembered his hatred of research.

As the monotony of digging through dusty library shelves started to wear on him, Michael realized he missed teaching. The brief visit back to Houston reminded him that he missed his friends. And he also missed his dog. His sister’s kids were enjoying having

Ares living with them, but he decided he should return home before they started to think it would be permanent.

Ending his research at Heidelberg early, Michael returned to Houston in time to get some classes on the schedule for the fall semester. He had enough data to write his planned book, and Kristina and Julian had enough to start their thesis, so he marked it down as a successful trip.

After the scare, he found things improved with Jennifer as well. The time lag for their messages was now on the decline, making it easier to communicate. Before too long, the mission was starting to wind down, and they were packing up for the return to *Challenger*, which was waiting for them in orbit. By the time the mighty ship had restarted her engines, the round-trip time lag was under twelve minutes.

An old familiar feeling of anticipation and excitement began to build inside Michael. He recognized it as how he had felt before he had picked Jennifer up for their first dates, and how he had felt on their wedding day. The feeling stayed with him, growing constantly during the entire time *Challenger* made her return journey to Earth.

Before long, they were able to hold only slightly delayed conversations. He could tell Jennifer was feeling the anticipation, too. She was sad to see Mars receding behind her, but she was also excited to be coming home.

If Michael had thought the previous two years had been agony, the final month proved to be the worst. The Mars crew returned to Earth and was immediately isolated. They had not experienced Earth-level gravity for over two years. Much of that time had been spent on the surface of Mars, which, at 62% of Earth's gravity, had depleted their

strength. The long-term effects of exposure to the radiation of deep space was also an unknown that the doctors needed to study.

Having Jennifer back on the same planet was nice, but still not being able to be with her was almost overwhelming. Finally, after several weeks of rehabilitation, the astronaut crew of *Challenger* was allowed to return to their families. Tests were still being run and physical therapy would continue for months, but they could do those on an outpatient basis.

Waiting outside on the grounds of Johnson Space Center, Michael chatted idly with the other families. Kids were running around, unable to contain their excitement at being able to see their absent parent again. When the doors to the medical facility opened, conversations stopped, but the noise skyrocketed as all the kids unleashed squeals of joy, or in the case of the younger ones, startled crying because they didn't quite understand what was going on.

All of the noise vanished for Michael. He greeted those crew he knew well as they came out, but merely out of polite habit. His eyes and attention were focused solely on Jennifer.

Even though he had seen her on a daily basis over a video link, he had not appreciated how much she had changed. Her hair was cut shorter than usual. He liked her long hair, he but found the new style cute. Her walk was still unsteady, but she looked more trim and fit. The daily exercises she had done had kept her in shape.

In comparison, Michael felt like a balloon. Without her around, he had eaten more beef and fewer vegetables than normal. Germany hadn't exactly been kind to his diet,

either. Fortunately, he didn't think Jennifer noticed, because the wide smile on her face matched the one on his.

Their first hug and kiss were hesitant and muted. Neither liked displaying much affection in public, but amongst the other families enjoying their own reunions, they probably could have stripped naked, and no one would have noticed. Giving only basic notice to anyone else, Michael and Jennifer left the scene and headed home.

Once home, Michael felt more strangely awkward. When they finally made love, it almost felt like their first time all those years ago. There were all hints of something familiar, but long forgotten.

During that first night they shared more than intimate touches. Michael finally decided that he should confess what had almost happened with Kristina. He had avoided mentioning it before, simply because it was not a conversation to have over a video call from a million miles away. At least, that was what he had told himself.

After he explained how he started to have feelings for another woman, and how he had kissed her at a New Year's party, Michael couldn't bring himself to look at Jennifer. Minutes passed in agonizing silence. When she finally spoke, he kept his eyes averted, not wanting to see the hurt he knew would be in her eyes.

"You kissed her just that once?" she asked.

Worried that looking away would make him appear to be lying, Michael forced himself to look up. There was evident unease and fear on Jennifer's face. All Michael wanted to do was answer yes and say that it had been meaningless. But he knew that was a lie.

“Yes, but I thought about doing it again. If that communications failure hadn’t occurred, I might have. I would have regretted it, but at the time, that might not have stopped me.”

Jennifer sat there, her lips pursed in thought. Michael could see emotions competing inside her. Finally, she said, “I understand. You were alone for so long. I can’t be mad at you for having thoughts about another woman. But you still love me, and that’s what counts in the end.”

They talked for another few hours, but by the end of the night, he thought it really did come down to that statement. He did still love her, and she him. He was surprised by how Jennifer seemed to completely understand the emotions he had felt.

#

Things were a little uncomfortable at first, but they both managed to put the turmoil of the last three years behind them. Jennifer had stopped taking her birth control during the quarantine period, and they both decided they still wanted to begin trying for a baby. Life started to return to a degree of normalcy.

Six months after her return to Earth, Michael noticed Jennifer looking worried and distant. The last time he had seen her like this, she had just gotten a secret abortion. Not wanting to wait a month for her to decide to tell him what was wrong, he confronted her more doggedly.

Nervously, she said, “I have a gynecologist appointment tomorrow.”

Unsure why that would worry her, Michael said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

“I want to get some tests done,” she said. “It’s been six months since we started trying to have a baby, and yet nothing.”

Her words matched worries Michael had been keeping to himself. Six months without becoming pregnant was not normally something to worry about. Jennifer was past prime baby-rearing age. But more than two years away from Earth’s protective atmosphere could have all kinds of unexpected consequences.

Sensing her unease, Michael tried to sound confident. “I’m sure it’s nothing. But just to be on the safe side, let’s get some tests. I’ll even get some myself, to rule everything out.”

Jennifer nodded nervously. They made an appointment for him the next day, and she scheduled some tests for herself when she saw her doctor. Michael thought the ones for him were unnecessary and highly embarrassing, but he did them anyway, in hopes of distracting Jennifer from worrying about any problems being all her fault.

When the results finally came back, they hit Michael like a punch to the stomach. Jennifer was no longer capable of getting pregnant. What surprised him the most wasn’t the news, but their reactions to it.

Jennifer sank into a deep state of depression. She stopped wanting to do anything or talk to anyone. At home, she sat on the couch, not watching TV. She slept late, even on work days, and went to bed early.

As for Michael, he thought he was fine. It was disappointing news, sure, but he had known this could happen. Radiation could do weird things, and even though *Challenger* had been shielded as best they knew how, you could only do so much and still keep the ship light enough to fly.

Their friends and family suggested adopting. His mom, desperate for more grandchildren despite the three his sister had, told them that adoption would be a simple matter for them -- Jennifer was a world-wide hero. Michael ended up snapping at her and hanging up after she mentioned it one too many times.

After he hung up, he found Jennifer staring at him. Defensively, he said, "She keeps harping on the idea of adoption. I didn't want to listen to it anymore."

Jennifer shrugged. "I know. My mom's the same way. But I didn't realize how angry you were until now. Michael, I think we should go see a counselor."

Michael growled, "I'm not angry. Just annoyed at people who won't leave me alone. And why should I go see a counselor? You're the one who killed our one chance to have a baby."

The crushed look in Jennifer's eyes made Michael regret his words, but not enough to take them back. It felt good to say out loud what had been pestering him at the back of his mind. Steeling himself for a good, loud argument, Michael was surprised when Jennifer turned and left the room without another word.

Over the next few days, Michael found himself spending more time on campus to avoid being at home with Jennifer. They seemed to spend less time with each other than they had during the Mars mission. Michael even found himself regretful that Kristina had graduated and moved on to another university for post-doctoral work. If she were there, he could show Jennifer what it felt like to have someone make a unilateral decision that ruined both their lives.



Some part of him could admit that his anger was ridiculous. His mother was right -- adoption was still a viable option. Jennifer had returned safely from another planet. They should be happy just to be together again.

But the fact that they weren't happy, even though they should have been, just added to his anger. Plus, every time he would convince himself to try to fix things, Jennifer would do or say something that just pissed him off again. Logically, he knew that this was more his perception than anything she was doing on purpose, but that proved no consolation. He started to wonder if divorce might be better for both of them.

One morning, as he left for work, Michael saw something in Jennifer's eyes as she said good-bye. There was sadness there, like there usually was. But today he caught a glimpse of familiarity, the old love that had been missing. As he drove to work, his mind lingered on her eyes.

Their first date came to his mind. He had spent months flirting with Jennifer, getting nothing concrete in response. They had ostensibly been friends, despite his flirtation. When she had finally suggested they go out on an actual date, it had made him giddy.

From there, his mind ran through every moment they had spent together. Their first time making love had been in a hotel in Boston. Michael had gone with Jennifer to an interview for a summer fellowship.

When he had proposed to her during a vacation to DC, he had dropped to one knee in the Smithsonian, right next to one of the Apollo modules.

Even then, he had known they wouldn't have a marriage like his parents. She would become an astronaut and fly the solar system. He had always known he wanted a regular family, but at that moment, he had known he had wanted Jennifer more.

Suddenly, Michael found himself turning the car around. Without a thought to anything else, especially traffic laws, he raced back home. Rushing inside, he surprised Jennifer as she was getting out of the shower. With a sense of urgency that he had not felt since her return to Earth, he kissed her. All of his doubt and resentment disappeared completely in those precious seconds. Afterwards, he felt stupid that it had consumed him for so long.

Their relationship finally began the slow return to the happy state Michael had not experienced since before the plan for the Mars mission had been revealed. It didn't happen overnight -- that kiss was the catalyst, not the cure. But they had the rest of their lives together, on the same planet. Everything else was just part of the story.

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