

R I C H M O N D   S C O T T

**TRIPPING  
TOWARD  
MARS**

A D E E P   S P A C E   L O V E   O D Y S S E Y



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## BROWNTOWN, VIRGINIA

Dearest Bria,

You've come a long way from calling me a criminal to telling *Space Times* it no longer mattered if I was guilty or not, though the part where you said, "I have no interest in seeing my ex-husband, because now I have KIM, who's as sexy as Mr. Spock," sure stung.

I hope the fifth anniversary of the Mars landing is a good time to rethink your decision about us. I still love you madly. And I'm laying it all out here to show I had everyone's best interests at heart, including Sally and João.

I was as flummoxed as you were when that Navy frogman yanked me out of the water after we splashed down, forced me into a wheelchair, and handcuffed me. Even with seven billion people watching, I couldn't blame you for staying silent as I yelped like a child, "Bria, help me!"

But it hurt observing you and our two crewmates toasting our success with shots of Johnnie Walker. Blue Label. I'd like to think you were smiling to help fulfill Sally and João's endorsement contract, and not from the joy of watching U.S. Marshals cart me away.

I want you to understand how maliciously the government treated me, so let's begin with what I wrote to my attorney after reading the grand jury indictment. No, let's begin with I love you. Because I still do. And I want to change your mind about me—about us.

My attorney advised me to detail my thoughts and actions chronologically—from being selected for the Arcadia 7

mission to the landing—including, to the best of my recollection, what Mission Control and the crew said. I'm not sure he expected a 200-page document, but reliving our experience showed me how much my side of the story had gone untold, even to you.

So, if you'll give me this chance to be heard, Bria—and I'm on my knees, begging—let's start with the attorney memo, which appears below.

### MEMORANDUM

TO: Ben Colderwitz, Esq.  
FROM: Zachary "Addy" Johnson  
DATE: 04.13.2041  
RE: What happened

To begin with, NASA didn't think there would be a race to Mars. With America's technological prowess, we'd be first, period. In the space agency's view, the media, for obvious reasons, was hyping it like some intergalactic sporting event. With its strict safety culture, NASA didn't want its crew getting swept up in the frenzy.

At my first interview with the Arcadia 7 selection committee, Wendy Frost, the flight director, started right out with a hypo: "Picture this, Addy. In thirty-one months, we're ready for liftoff. During the same launch opportunity, someone else is pulling out all the stops to get out ahead of us, safety be damned." She clasped her hands, then shot up her index fingers, tapping them together as she glanced around the table. "If it seemed like the other mission was going to beat us to the Red Planet, and the decision was up to you to ignore safety protocols and change the flight plan so we landed first, what would you do?"

If I'd been honest, I would have said, *Goddammit, I hate second*

*place. Always did, always will.* Instead, I said, “Wendy, the way I look at it, we’re all in the same boat. Earth. And it’s not a luxury cruise ship anymore. Arcadia 7 is the lifeboat. So if someone jumps out and lands before us, I will freakin’ thank them—because they’ll have helped save my life. The entire human species.”

Everyone nodded and tapped keys or scribbled on screens.

A good vibe filled the room. I felt I was on a roll. “Arriving first is *not* the goal,” I added. “The goal is getting there safely, completing our work safely, and returning to Earth safely.”

Wendy beamed. “Great answer.”

It felt like I’d crossed the goal line. I’d exhibited the magnanimity they were looking for in someone who’d be sardined in a tin can with three others for eight months, zipping to and from Mars. And up to eight more months on the Martian surface, confined most of the time to a habitat the size of two cargo containers. Plus, I’d scored extra points by saying Wendy’s favorite word—*safely*—three times.

My interview ended with firm handshakes and smiles as bright as supernovas.

When I got home, I found Bria sprawled on the sofa, reading. Her wild-green yoga pants and matching halter top complemented her mahogany skin beautifully. She sat up at once. “Well, babe?”

“I nailed it,” I said, pumping my fist.

I recounted Frost’s line of inquiry about disregarding protocol so Arcadia 7 kicked up red dust ahead of any other mission, then asked Bria how she would respond.

She nodded thoughtfully. “I’d run the numbers and see if the risk was acceptable.”

“Makes sense,” I replied, then smiled. “But there’s a better answer, judging by how the committee loved mine.”

She crossed her arms, giving me a skeptical look. “Which was?”

“Doesn’t matter who’s first. For us, safety always comes first.”

“Sounds like pandering, coming from you, Addy. I think I’ll stick to my answer. It sounds more truthful.”

I couldn't disagree with her and let it go at that. The committee interviewed her the following week. Afterward we met at Cristo's, an Italian restaurant tucked along a service road off NASA Parkway.

It was three in the afternoon, the place was dark, cool, and quiet. We sat at the far end of the bar. She stared at the pitted wooden surface where stacked coasters and cocktail napkins waited to be deployed. "Boy, do I need a martini." She put her elbows on the counter and plowed her fingers through her short-cropped hair. "I lied to them."

Della, the restaurant's owner, approached us from behind the bar. "Hey, Bria. Hey, Addy," she said, pushing the sleeves of her starched white shirt up her fleshy forearms. "What can I get you?" Like a blackjack dealer, she frisbeed a coaster and napkin to each of us.

"Martinis, extra dirty," I said, grateful to her for not being nosy about Bria's glum face. "Thanks, Della." As she retreated to fetch the Hendrick's at the other end of the bar, I leaned into my wife and lowered my voice. "You lied?"

"They asked what I thought about vasectomies. I guess it was bound to come up." Swiveling on her stool, she looked at me. "I told them I'm okay with you getting one, since they're reversible. It's what they wanted to hear, but it troubles me that the reversal procedure doesn't work all the time. I don't like the idea of us taking the risk."

The martinis made a perfect entry, descent, and landing. Bria took a sip and bit one of her two olives off its skewer. I left my olives alone, taking a swig. "Then we'll tell them no vasectomy," I said, resting my glass softly on the coaster.

Yet, in the end, we confirmed we'd go ahead with it, to improve our chances of being chosen. It seemed to help. The committee named us co-commanders.

That was almost five years ago, two and a half years before Arcadia 7's launch. But a month before I was scheduled to close the pool to my little swimmers, another option turned up in the person of Noel Roma.

The elevator doors whooshed open to reveal the twentieth-floor penthouse. In the muted pink light, the walls glowed a garish orange-red, three of them filled with blown-up photographs—a heavy launch rocket, a deep-space transport vehicle, and Mars. The remaining wall was a window with the gigantic Q-Orbit logo superimposed on the glass. Shifting, wavy light patterned the carpet, creating the impression of sand dunes. The room was empty, except for chairs, a rusty-red sofa, and a woman behind a sleek cherrywood desk.

As I stepped out, she looked up with ridiculously gorgeous green eyes, her gaze zapping me like a phaser gun set to stun.

“Howdy, Mr. Johnson. Welcome to Boca Grande,” Noel Roma said with a Texas drawl. She stood and took off her black-framed glasses, her fingernails the same orange-red as the walls. The fingernails of her other hand were turquoise blue. I stared at them as she swept them through her jet-black hair.

She laughed and splayed her fingers so the nails faced me. Wriggling the blue nails, she said, “See? We’ll fly from here . . .” and then wriggling the red ones “. . . to there. Earth to Mars.”

“Cool,” I said, then twitched a smile. I was anxious. No one else knew she’d asked me to come by for a “private chat.” Super-curious, I accepted, not even telling Bria.

“And ultimately, we’ll make this . . .” She wriggled the red nails again. “Look like this.” The blue nails fluttered, symbolizing the transformation of Mars to an Earthlike planet. “Terraforming.”

I acknowledged her performance with a nervous chuckle as I glanced around. The edges of some walls were round and smooth, others sharp and irregular, a cave-dweller decor I found rather startling.

“Like the digs?” she said.

I nodded. “Very natural, like a Martian designed it. Hell, being here, why bother going to Mars?”

She laughed again, this time with a roar that showed what seemed like forty teeth, all perfect except for one incisor that was slightly out of place. “How about a drink?”

The offer was music to my ears. “Sure. A martini?”

“Ah, a martini man. Want it dirty?”

“Yes, with three olives, please. If you have them.”

She pulled her face back and grinned. “Do I have them? Funny.” She jutted her chin, then said, “Tom-tom, two gin martinis. Dirty. Three olives.”

In under a minute, the elevator doors hissed opened, and a robot rolled out on wheels, spindly metallic arms clutching a tray holding two picture-perfect martinis. Roma took both, handed one to me, then raised hers. “Here’s to *you*, Mr. Johnson, and your selection for Arcadia 7.”

“Please, call me Addy.”

“I thought your name was Zachary.”

“It is, but I never liked it. My middle name’s Adair, so I went with Addy. In a world crammed full of lists, a name starting with *A* puts you at the top. Zack always put me last.”

She gestured with her glass. “I admire a man who wants to be first.”

We each took a long sip, then sat on the sofa facing the window. The Q-Orbit launchpads and towers stood a half mile away. Behind them stretched the Gulf of Mexico.

“That’s quite a swimming pool in your backyard,” I said, loosening up. “Bet you have some killer blastoff parties.”

She spread her arms, not seeming to care when her drink sloshed over the rim of the glass. “Yeah, I built a fifty-billion-dollar party palace.” She jabbed a blue nail at the window. “The residents of Boca Grande loved me when I bought them out for ten million a pop. You should’ve seen them at the meet and greet. It was like I’d fed them ecstasy. Just wish it wasn’t so goddamn hot down here.” She propped her elbow on the armrest. “You know why I asked you to come, right?”

“To get the inside scoop about NASA’s smart toilets compared to Q-Orbit’s?”

She giggled. “I’m also crazy about comedians. But this is unrelated to toilets. I want you.”

“Want me for what?” I took another healthy sip.

“Commander. For the RedLiner. One and a half billion Buck Rogers, guaranteed. And no vasectomy required.”

The idea of all those Buck Rogers made me stop breathing. I shifted awkwardly, exhaled, and downed the rest of the martini, chomping on the olives as she continued.

“George Butlarer whispered to me that he doesn’t like you. I’d call that a bit of a problem, since he’s NASA’s administrator. Don’t get me wrong, he knows you’re the best pilot on the squad. The Astronaut Corps rankings say as much, but he thinks you’re a smart-ass. Now, here’s what George *doesn’t* know.” She paused and set down her glass. “Big Hawk and RedLiner are blasting off in the next launch opportunity. November, six months from now. We’ll be first. We’re telling the press tomorrow. This isn’t about ego or bragging rights—it’s a race to save humanity.”

She paused as I went into shock. Q-Orbit was going to beat NASA by *two years*.

She smiled. “Another martini?”

“No, thanks,” I mumbled.

“Q-Orbit will have no problem attracting colonists, Addy. They’re already swarming us like fire ants. The challenge is getting the most experienced commanders and pilots. I want Bria, too—she’ll receive the same compensation. Our colonists will respect no one as much as you.”

“We don’t want to be colonists. We want to return to Earth, have kids, and—”

“No worries. For you, we’ll waive the no-return policy.”

“We’re under contract with NASA, with endorsement deals attached. We just signed with Mars Nuts.”

“You don’t need candy deals,” she said in a dismissive tone. “You used NASA’s attorneys, didn’t you?”

“Of course. The agency has to approve any deal we sign. They get a fifteen percent cut.”



She shook her head. “Now *that* is nuts.”

“Maybe, but it helps pay the freight.”

“Let me deal with Mars Nuts. They’ll still want y’all. You’d just be changing jumpsuits.”

She’d put me on the spot. I took a breath. “The money you’re offering is amazing, Noel, and I’m really honored. Thank you. I’ll need some time to—”

“You’d like to be the first man on Mars, the next Neil Armstrong, wouldn’t you?”

“Can’t argue with you there.”

“Do you think George Butlarer cares who gets there first? Let me help you. No, he doesn’t. He’s said it many times. *This isn’t 1969. This isn’t the Soviets. This isn’t a race.* Because he’s concerned about cutting corners and making mistakes that lead to disasters. And you’ve been able to live with that. Why? Because everyone’s thinking Arcadia 7 will land first anyway. Am I right? Tell me I’m wrong, and we can drop this whole thing.”

My silence told her I couldn’t disagree with that, either.

“I’ll throw in naming rights for the habitat complex. Name it after yourself, or Bria, or your first child. Or hell, after all three of y’all. Speaking of children, I know you want ’em. Why wait? You’re not getting any younger. An Artificial Gravity Unit will be on board. If anyone gets preggers, they can camp out in the AGU. We’re pro-family here.”

A pregnant pause followed as she arched her brow and seemed to read my thoughts. Her proposal sounded good, as it wouldn’t touch the family jewels, but her next proposition caught me off guard.

“Hey, Addy, if you have the time, I’d love you to try some of our mushrooms.” She winked. “Got all kinds.”

I knew mushrooms (or “MarShrooms”) were a big deal for Q-Orbit, which was already accepting pre-orders for the “made on Mars” product. Tabloids peddled rumors that its colonists-in-training also shroomed on psychedelic varieties.

“No, thanks,” I said. “I’ll talk with Bria about joining Q-Orbit. Please don’t let Butlarer know I spoke with you.”

“Roger that, Addy. I’ll hold off announcing our commanders until I hear from y’all.”

She didn’t give me a deadline. We shook hands, and in a daze, I took the elevator to the parking garage. The AC was busted, and I remember it being as hot as Venus.

I realized Roma had offered my only chance to be first on Mars, and I felt certain Bria would go along. I climbed into the car as a gush of cool air blew away the heat, along with any doubts about getting on board with Noel Roma.

■ ■ ■

I might be departing from what you told me to write, Ben, but I must say I’ve always admired Noel Roma. She’s passionate about humanity’s future and, as the richest person on Earth, she can have a profound impact.

The company she started, NanoPro, is the number one maker of practical nano devices, such as the 5D food printer. It took off fast. So did her deep-space habitat venture, Q-Orbit. After acquiring the space industry’s largest rocket builder and resolving problems with its heavy-lift vehicle, Q-Orbit became a vertically integrated company with plans for deep-space transportation *and* colonization. It avoided the fireballs that had set back its predecessors, and within nine months, its Big Hawk rocket was shooting crewed RedLiners into low earth orbit.

Roma was more realistic about how to colonize Mars than the dreamers who came before her. RedLiners can ferry fifty people to Mars at a time, not a hundred. Last time I checked, five million would-be Martians populated the waiting list, each willing to part with half a million dollars for their one-way ticket.

Q-Orbit’s reality show, *The New Martians*, created a “relationship rubric” of the “First Fifty,” shared it with the show’s subscribers, and

encouraged them to propose ideas for episodes. They could suggest that Jenny hit on Rick, or Bill and Amanda fight over raisins, or Suzie, Brittany, and Caroline form a clique that excluded Jenny and Amanda.

Higher subscription levels gave viewers more ways to interact. At the “Mushroom” level (which cost ten grand a month) you could be a “lifeline” for one of the voyagers, who could ask you questions and make requests in confidence.

Though the first surface mission for the RedLiner wasn’t scheduled for years, Roma took in \$200 million in subscription pledges three hours after releasing the trailer for *The New Martians*. This was the biggest problem Bria had with accepting Roma’s proposal. As a doctor and scientist committed to studying the Red Planet, she couldn’t stand the idea of taking part in a reality show, her abhorrence outweighing issues about my vasectomy. I kept trying to change her mind, suggesting, for instance, that Roma would let us opt out of *The New Martians*.

A week after my chat with Roma, George Butlarer gathered a group in the Building 1 auditorium, including the twelve astronauts who’d made the final cut for the Mars surface missions, along with the flight controllers. Bria and I sat in the first row, next to Sally and João, our crewmates slated for Arcadia 7.

They were married, too, which NASA saw as an added layer of defense. Pregnancy wasn’t the only concern about sex in space. In NASA’s view, the psychological effects of sexual relationships—the distracting bliss of falling in love, the depression that can result from being jilted, and everything in between—created more risks for a mission already full of them.

“No one should be surprised about Roma’s announcement,” George told the group. “Her team has achieved every milestone in RedLiner’s development ahead of schedule. But let me be clear. Q-Orbit’s decision to launch earlier than planned changes *nothing* for us. We’ll say a prayer for the First Fifty, wish them Godspeed, and then get back to our work.”

I caught Bria's glance and raised my eyebrows to convey the thought: *Are we sure we want to pass up Roma's offer?* But she only pursed her lips.

I raised my hand.

George looked down at me, his broad forehead glistening in the stage lights. "Yes, Addy?"

"Does this mean you'll require us to view and discuss episodes of *The New Martians* as part of our training?"

George gave me the stink eye as laughter broke out. Once it died down, he said, "No, I won't order the crew to watch *The New Martians*, but I am thinking of ordering *you* to take a class about holding your tongue. Maybe I should just grab the damn thing myself."

By the fire in his eyes, I couldn't be sure he was kidding. I kept my lips zipped while he let a long silence punish me in front of my colleagues.

"Speaking of *The New Martians*," he finally resumed, "I remind all of you, if you subscribe to that program, our policy prohibits you from communicating with any of the colonists or commenting about them to the press or on social media. Doing so might give the appearance that NASA is trying to influence their mission or support colonization."

After finishing his friendly little pep talk, George ceded the podium to Wendy Frost, our flight director. With her buzz cut platinum hair and earrings of shimmering orbs, she reminded me of a cosmic dust cloud churning out new stars. She told us we should "keep a couple of considerations in mind" about the RedLiner's first crewed mission to Mars, then rambled on for an hour about its targeted landing site.

Roma was aiming for Arcadia Planitia, in the lower region of the planet's northern hemisphere, the same area NASA had picked. It was relatively flat, with water only centimeters below the surface. The Chinese were eyeballing it as well. "If the different landing sites are near each other, it's good for us," Frost said. "In an emergency, we can help each other."

And grow mushrooms together, I thought, suppressing a smile.



We sat facing each other as our car drove Bria and me back to our condo. I took the plunge and asked her if she was reconsidering Roma's offer.

"No."

"Not even with three billion dollars on the table? Is it because of the crash course—sorry, wrong words—the *accelerated training* we'd have to do?"

"No, I can handle that." She gazed at the floor. "I don't want to be famous on a reality show." She looked up. "Plus, I would be chief medical officer for fifty people instead of four. The transit time would be longer. And I would be facilitating colonization, which might very well contaminate Mars and ruin the science mission."

"First, Bria, we're already celebrities. We're spokespeople for Mars Nuts and—"

"Having our picture on a box of candy is a hell of a lot different from acting out fake storylines in front of billions of people. And Roma's robot, what's its name? Tommy or something? Why does—"

"Tom-tom. It's her ex-husband's nickname."

"Whatever. You saw the press conference where she said he's going with the First Fifty. You heard his voice. Why does he sound like Darth Vader?"

"I can talk to Noel about changing Tom-tom's voice and excluding us from *The New Martians*."

"So you're on a first-name basis with her now?" Bria blurted, tightly crossing her arms.

Her jealous streak was her only flaw, almost laughable in the ways it got triggered. I shook my head. "There's absolutely nothing there, hon," I assured her in a calm voice, resting my hands on her thighs. She kept her gaze steady on me, as if looking for a sign she should trust me or not, then spoke.

"She asked Sally and João, too, and they turned her down. We've

trained with them for years. We don't know a single person among the First Fifty. It could be a disaster."

I drew back my hands. "But we'd be in command. They would have to follow our orders."

"And you'd be first on Mars, the Neil Armstrong of our times." She sat back. "Isn't that what this is about?"

I shrugged, trying to contain my frustration. "It's about a lot of things. You don't want me to get snipped, and I wouldn't have to for Roma's mission."

"Sally told me that João had his done, and it was no big deal."

I sighed. "All right. We won't be first. It's Arcadia 7. And I won't raise the issue again."

When she leaned over and kissed me, I felt like I was kissing a dream goodbye.

■ ■ ■