

BOOKS BY CHRIS GERRIB

PAMELA'S GHOST

THE PIRATES TRILOGY

**THE MARS RUN
PIRATES OF MARS
THE NIGHT WATCH**

THE PIRATES TRILOGY BOOK 1

UNCORRECTED PROOF NOT FOR SALE

**THE
MARS
RUN**

**CHRIS
GERRIB**

Copyright © 2006, 2016, Chris Gerrib

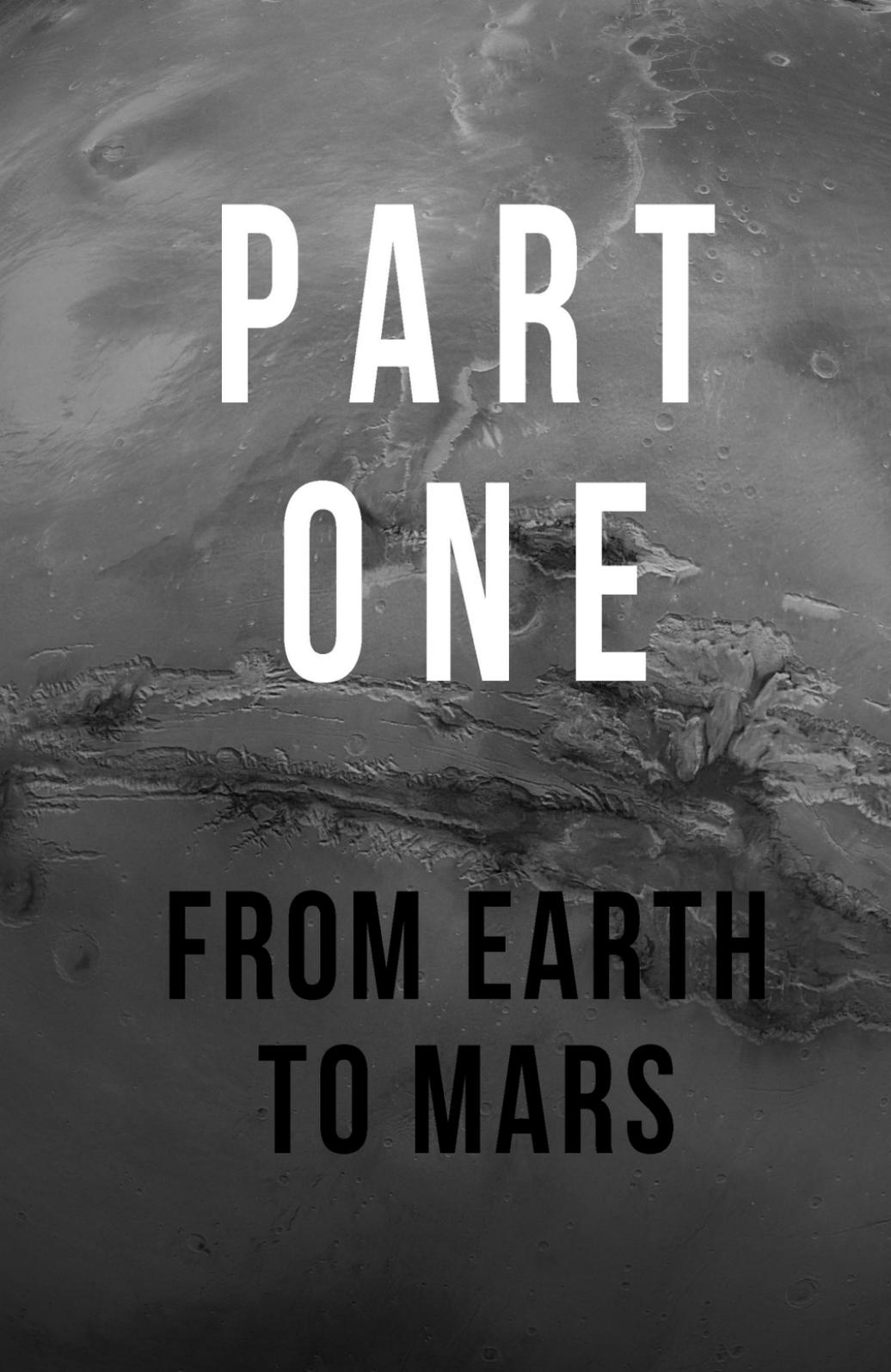
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or me-chanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 9781632021595

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FIRST, I'D LIKE to thank my parents, Mike and Martha Gerrib. Neither of them were big readers, but they supported a son who loved to read. Second, I'd like to thank Charles Sheehen-Miles, my editor, and a man whom I've called "the most criminally unknown writer in America." Without his editorial assistance, this first novel would have quietly disappeared. Lastly, I'd like to thank all the many first and second readers who looked at one version or another of this novel and provided their input.



**PART
ONE**

**FROM EARTH
TO MARS**

CHAPTER 1

WHEN RAJ STEPPED up onto the metal staircase leading into the vacuum chamber, neither of us knew he wouldn't leave the chamber alive. At the top, he turned to look at me. "Hey Blondie," he said, using his favorite nickname for me, "My place after the lab?" I felt my face flush, the curse of pale skin. Trainees were discouraged from dating each other. "Sure thing, study buddy," I replied. We'd done many things at his place, but studying wasn't one of them.

"Janet, Raj," one of the instructors growled over the radio link. "Lock it up."

We both acknowledged his instruction. Raj clicked off his radio transmitter and touched his helmet to mine. "Vacuum sucks."

I managed to kill my radio transmitter before I started giggling. I shouldn't have been laughing. We were partners for this exercise and responsible for each other's safety. Even though we were still on Earth, vacuum could kill. It was only the second time we'd worn a spacesuit in real vacuum.

The vacuum chamber was a windowless concrete room, lit with industrial fluorescent light and studded with video cameras. As soon as we were inside, one of the instructors pulled the heavy steel door shut. With the alarms sounding and the yellow warning light flashing, the huge vacuum pumps quickly sucked the damp Florida air out of the space.

“Comex, Comex,” one of the instructors, Riblisi I think, said, his voice harsh and crackling in our earpieces. This meant “commence exercise” and was just one of the many acronyms and abbreviations thrown our way, apparently solely to confuse people.

This was supposed to be a simple exercise, designed more to build our confidence in our spacesuits than anything else. Still, training time was valuable, so somebody had incorporated some basic Damage Control drills into the mix, which involved finding and patching a simulated hull leak.

The biggest problem with a small leak in space was finding the damn thing, or so our instructors said. Even now, ships were lost due to their crew’s inability to find and fix small holes. So, a crude mockup of a ship’s hull had been set up in the middle of the chamber. When the instructor hit a button, smoke, simulating somebody using a smoke candle, would be let out of tiny pinholes for us to find and patch.

It was surprisingly hard work. Smoke did not move in vacuum like you expected it to. Our instructors weren’t much help. Don Marsh, the lead instructor, was lecturing somebody at the far end of the chamber, his voice droning on over the common channel, and Reed had been busily texting somebody up until the minute we went COMEX on the exercise. I glanced up and saw him standing by the door aimlessly.

We were on our third set of simulated holes, a collection of pin-heads hidden under a mock radiator labeled “HVAC #1.” Given the crappy light and the way the smoke moved in vacuum, finding the little buggers was a problem.

“Found the hole, finally,” I said. “Pass me the seal-sprayer, Raj.”

He didn't respond, and I repeated myself. He'd been acting dumb since the exercise started, and I was getting a little bit tired of it. "Damnit Raj," I said, "let's get with the program here." There was no response, and so I turned sideways. Where the hell was he, I thought? This was no time to goof off.

Space suits are clumsy and awkward at best, and not designed for a one G environment, so just turning around took a bit of doing. I finally located him, all the way behind me, and as I watched as he sat down in the middle of the floor. I ran to him as quickly as I could, and looked at Raj's face in the helmet. Blood was streaming down from his nose, and he was moaning, patting his helmet with his hands.

Feeling suddenly sick with fear, I hit my suit control panel on my forearm and toggled to the emergency frequency. "Man down! Man down! Loss of suit pressure!" I screamed into the mic. There was a separate controller box on the sleeve of our suits with one big button on it. It activated an emergency repressurization system. I mashed the button, shouting over the emergency channel "Activating emergency pressure!" I saw two other students press their buttons. That was the drill—everybody hit the button.

All of the safety instructors converged on me. One of them pulled me clear, and two more bent down to work on Raj. The yellow warning lights went on, announcing the return of pressure, but nothing happened.

"We need emergency pressure now!" I shouted over the radio, nearly hysteric. "Why don't we have pressure?"

"Emergency pressurization system failure," Riblisi said. "Use the secondary evac door!"

I struggled free of the instructor holding me, and helped lift Raj up. Three of us carried his limp body to a side door in the compartment, and shoved him into a small

airlock. Two instructors got in with him, and I slammed the metal door on them. As I did, one of the instructors, Ribilisi again, pulled me aside.

“Didn’t you monitor him, Janet?” He said, his voice harsh over the radio link. “That was your responsibility!”

I don’t think I responded. By the time they got Raj up to a safe pressure, he was dead. My knees gave out, and I fell to the floor.



“There will be an investigation of this mishap, of course,” the Safety Director said. “You understand that, Miss Pilgrim, as a subject of that investigation, you are not to discuss this matter with anybody.”

We were sitting in the Safety Director’s office. I was in coveralls, my too-long blonde hair still matted and sweaty from the suit helmet. The carved wood nameplate on her desk, out of place in the plain, almost generic office, said read Alison Hill. “Florida law requires a coroner’s inquest in these cases, and I’m sure you’ll have to testify.”

Raj was dead, and she called it a “mishap?” “Should I get a lawyer?” I heard myself ask. It seemed like I was dreaming.

“I would for the inquest,” the Director said. “NASA’s mishap investigation is confidential and can’t be legally used against you.”

“Thank you for your advice,” I said. “Can I go home now?”

“Unfortunately not, Ms. Pilgrim. You should meet with the mishap team. It’s best if these interviews are conducted as soon after the incident as possible.”

I have only a vague recollection of the next few hours. It seems I spoke to three or four different people, all ask-

ing the same questions. Did I notice that Raj was not responding normally? Did I check the hose connections from his backpack to his helmet? The training exercise had started at 18:30, and it was nearly midnight before the lead investigator, a kindly, gray-haired old man, finally told me to go home. “You should eat something,” he said as I left. The thought of food sickened me, and I involuntarily made a face. “Report to me here at 09:30 tomorrow.”

I was staying on Academy grounds, but my studio apartment was miles from the training center. To get back and forth we had to ride a rickety old monorail system. I lucked out, and got a car nearly to myself. The Academy sprawled over miles of Florida swampland, but it was still like a small town, and word got around. I don’t think I could have taken the sympathetic looks of my classmates right about then.

“Home” in this case meant the “Carlos X. Montoya Memorial Housing Unit”, on the south end of campus. Whoever Carlos was, I don’t think he would have been impressed. The unit consisted of a number of two story cinder block buildings arranged around a couple of hot and dusty squares of grass and mud. My unit was a tiny one-bedroom apartment on the second floor of Building 30. The main door opened onto a sagging concrete walkway, open to the air, which was the common access for all the other units. My unit was closest to the east stairway, so people were always walking by my windows at all hours of the day and night.

The apartment, number 3022, had a small living room combined with an eat-in kitchen barely big enough for a small, cheap dinette set. The bedroom was barely big enough for the built-in bed, and the tiny, moldy bathroom had a shower only. Everything was manual. Manual doors, a manual stove in the kitchen (apparently nobody

ever heard of an auto-cook before) and one phone display, in the living room. It was a dump.

I rattled around the place in a daze for a bit, and finally found myself sitting at the dinette, staring at a plate of beans and rice. To this day I don't remember heating it up, but steam was coming off of the plate, so I guess I had. I ate mechanically, surprised to find out that I really was hungry. I left the plate on the table and went back to take a shower.

The tears came in the shower. I'm short—165 centimeters—and the shower head was at my face level. Raj was taller—2 meters—and always bitched when he took a shower at my place.

When I got to the bedroom, another set of tears hit. He'd bought me a blue shirt "like your eyes" he said, and it was crumpled in a ball on the floor next to one of his.



We'd met the first week of school, right after the "Ship Security and You" seminar. I smile as I write this. I've become an expert on the subject, unlike the old windbag of an instructor.

"Hey, Blondie," he'd said as I walked out of the auditorium, "Wait up."

I'd turned and shot him an exasperated look. "What did you call me?"

"Blondie. Worked, didn't it?" My smart-alecky classmate was a tall, dark and handsome young man. Brown skin, straight black hair, small and neat goatee and moustache. He had a warm smile, and held out his hands disarmingly. Definitely a hottie. My irritation faded under his gaze. I wondered then what he saw in me. I'm way too hippy and chesty to be fashionable.

“My name’s Janet. And yours?”

“Raj.” He fell in next to me as we started to walk down the hall. “What didja think of Doctor Doom in there?”

I suppressed a snicker. “Every time he said the word ‘pirates’ I kept picturing somebody with a peg leg singing ‘Yo Ho Ho.’”

“Now here, young Miss, that was serious stuff,” he said, a stern look on his face.

“I suppose so,” I said mildly. Doctor Doom had told several stories of actual and attempted shipjackings.

“Good, then,” he continued. “Glad to see some of this valuable information is sinking in then.”

I busted out laughing at his parody. Doctor Doom had said the exact same words at least a dozen times in his short presentation. Raj was jerking my chain.

Raj mock-glared at me for a second, then lost it, and roared with laughter.

“You hungry, Janet?” He’d asked when he’d gotten his breath back.

“I could eat.”

“Great. I know this great little place that serves the best Indian food. You like Indian?”

Raj’s “great little place” turned out to be his off-campus apartment. Unlike my Academy-provided dump, his had a pool and air conditioning that really worked. He was a surprisingly good cook, and went easy on the spices out of respect for my palate. I ended up spending the night at his place, where he became my first lover.

I wasn’t raised to hop into bed with the first guy I met—it just happened that way. I mean, it’s not like in great-grandpa’s day, when people had sex all the time. To hear some of the stories from that time, you wonder how they had time to do anything else but have sex. Grandpa Pilgrim had a half brother, who was born when great

Grandma Pilgrim was only 15, and nobody even said much about it.

Things were different at school. It wasn't just that everybody was away from their parents, although that helped. We were, after all, learning a "dangerous trade" and, more to the point, one that would keep us away from friends and loved ones for months if not years at a time. There was a "get it now while you can" mentality.

Although Raj was certainly easy on the eyes, our mutual attraction wasn't just physical. We were both people with a plan, and the United States Merchant Astronaut Academy was just a way station. We were both looking to be "one hop and out" astronauts—in my case make enough cash for college then quit. Raj's plan had ended on a cold concrete floor that February night.