

Praise for Deborah Willis

‘The emotional range and depth ... the clarity and deftness are astonishing’

Alice Munro

‘Willis zooms in and out on her chosen subjects, adroitly examining the physical and emotional distances that separate people from one another – and from the mysteries of their lives’

New York Times Book Review

More Praise for *Girlfriend on Mars*

‘Funny, tender, bizarre in the best of ways, and as infinite as our universe itself’

Amanda Leduc, author of *The Centaur’s Wife*

‘A perfectly observed satire that captures the absurdity – and beauty – of twenty-first century life. It reminded me of so many favorite novelists, from Margaret Atwood to Dave Eggers to Alexandra Kleeman. I loved it’

Joanna Rakoff, author of *My Salinger Year*

‘*Girlfriend on Mars* is out of this world. Deborah Willis pushes the absurdly miserable, deeply addictive pleasure of reality TV to its only possible end, zooming from euphoria past satire to slam into real life and death. Prescient and poignant, Amber’s reality is an inch from coming true’

Marina Endicott, author of *The Voyage of the Morning Light*

‘A deeply moving, deeply funny novel about love and loyalty in the midst of the paralyzing effects of eco-anxiety and the seductive toxicity of reality entertainment ... *Girlfriend on Mars* is propulsive and surprising in the very best ways – Deborah Willis writes with a combination of pathos and humor that entrances and lights a way forward in this troubled time’

Suzette Mayr, author of *The Sleeping Car Porter*

GIRLFRIEND ON MARS

DEBORAH WILLIS



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For Kris

Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, which had just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night.

“God sees everything,” repeated Wilson.

“That’s an advertisement,” Michaelis assured him.

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, *THE GREAT GATSBY*

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth have passed away . . .

—THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Nuke Mars!

—ELON MUSK, VIA TWITTER

SEASON ONE

*MarsNow or
Maybe Not*



AMBER KIVINEN—DRUG DEALER, LAPSED EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN, my girlfriend of fourteen years—is going to Mars. This is real. This is what I’ve been told.

Flashback. Interior. Day. Three months ago. Amber sat beside me on the Voyager. “Hey, Kev?” She tucked a blonde curl behind her ear. “You busy?”

Me, clearly not busy, wondering if I looked as stoned as I felt: “What’s up?”

That curl bounced into her face again; she tucked it again. “I have to tell you something.”

I expected the *something* to be that she wanted to adopt a cat, or that she wished I would get a real job, or that she’d made out with a guitarist or a guy who writes graphic novels. I did not expect her to say that she would soon be on television in a *Survivor*-meets-*Star Trek* amalgam, where she would compete for one of two seats on the MarsNow mission. I did not expect her to say that within the year she would (“hopefully”) strap herself into a rocket and blast into deep space, where she would float for nine months like a fetus in a womb before landing on the iron-rich red dirt of Mars. That she would then use the frozen water in the planet’s crust to grow her own food and produce her own oxygen. And she would stay on Mars forever, because the technology to come home doesn’t exist yet. And even if it did. Even if the technology existed, even if she wanted to come back, she couldn’t—her muscle and bone density would have decreased so drastically that Earth’s gravity would crush her to powder.

She confessed all this while sitting next to me on our green IKEA Beddinge couch, in our basement suite off Commercial Drive. She used the same voice as she had when she told me, last year, about hooking up with a guy we sometimes sell to, a computer

programmer/skateboarder named Brayden. (She “accidentally” went down on him on that green couch, one of our first purchases together—the couch we named the Voyager, because we’ve taken our best trips on it.)

“So.” She spoke quietly and looked at the constellation of confusion that was my face. “This is probably a bit weird for you.”

I wondered if I was more stoned than I thought. I waited for her to laugh. But she hadn’t been joking about Brayden, and she wasn’t joking about this.

“I mean,” she chattered, “it’s not dangerous or anything. Mostly the ship will be remote-controlled by people in New Mexico. It’s sort of like a drone.”

“Aren’t drones notoriously inaccurate?” I said. “And what about aerobraking? What about solar radiation?”

How did I even know those words? From hours of sitting on this very couch, in a nostalgic stupor, watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

“Will you do something for me?” Amber took my head in her hands. “Will you be a little bit happy for me? For, like, one second? ‘Cause I made it to the third round and that’s kind of a big deal.”

“Since when were you in the first round? And do they know you’re a drug dealer?”

“We’re not *drug dealers*. We specialize in hydroponics. Which, by the way, will be the technology used to grow food on Mars.”

“By the way,” I said, “we sell drugs.”

I remembered when we were kids and she went to summer camp, then mailed me letters addressed to:

Kevin Watkins
105 Amelia Street West
Thunder Bay
Ontario
Canada

North America

The Earth

The Milky Way

The Universe

“Remember when your parents sent you to that weird Bible camp?” I said.

“Kevin.” She shut her eyes, opened them. “Are you even listening?”

“Is this like that time you hooked up with Brayden?” I said. “Just to see what I’d do?”

When she shook her head, her hair bounced like it was already on Mars, like her hair already existed in low gravity. “No,” she said. “This is real.”



THIS IS FUCKING REAL.

Amber is in the makeup room of a television studio and can hear a dull roar—the audience. Someone named Teeghan paints glittery eye shadow on her lids.

“So *cute*,” says Teeghan. “Seriously, you’re gonna look amazing.”

“Is this stuff hypoallergenic? My eyes are kind of sensitive. I never wear makeup, actually.”

Teeghan gasps as though Amber had revealed a bomb strapped to her chest. “How do you feel *right now*? Is there *any* irritation?”

“No, fine. Just sometimes, creams and stuff make my eyes water.”

“Oh, well that’s probably good. If you cry out there. People love that.”

“Right.”

“Just be natural.” Teeghan smiles. “You totally got this!”

Then someone infinitely tall appears, digs her fingers into Amber’s hair, and says, “Oh my god, your hair. It’s amazing.” Holds out her hand. “I’m Manusha. Key hairstylist. What should we *do* with your hair?”

What Manusha does with Amber’s hair is add a shimmery spray-in serum, scrunch it, and say, “We’ll just let these curls do the work.” Then Amber is sent to wardrobe and told to put on a tight black jumpsuit emblazoned with the MarsNow logo. It takes two people—interns?—to zip her into the suit.

“Like wearing an eel’s skin,” Amber says. “And eels are *brilliant*. Some use the lunar cycle to navigate.”

One of the interns—a young man so gorgeous *he* should be on TV—adheres the jumpsuit to her chest with body tape for extra security.

“Some infant eels travel five thousand kilometers, through estu-

aries and seas, by looking up at the moon,” Amber says. The intern is clearly gay and *so* handsome—she wants his attention. His undying friendship. “Crazy, right?”

“Do your nipples feel secure?” he asks. “Cause no one wants a Janet Jackson out there.”

If only Kevin were here—he’d love this dialogue. If only Kevin were still writing screenplays. Or reviews. Or stories. If only Kevin did anything, really.

She takes a selfie and texts it to him with the words: *New Martian lewk! Too much??* Then, before she can stop herself, texts it to some of her back-burner men—Jianju the IT guy from work, Brayden that artsy hottie, Tariq her personal trainer. Out of habit almost texts it to Adam, but he’s *here*, somewhere in this studio; he might appear at any moment. The thought makes her queasy, so she emails the photo to her parents along with hugs and kisses, hears back from Brayden (two fire emojis and a request for *more pls*), posts the pic to Instagram (#selfie #smile #picoftheday), and rides the wave of a TikTok dance challenge by shimmying in her eel’s skin. Then hugs the phone to her chest. The producers said that this week they should post anything and everything to build momentum for the show, but once people start getting eliminated, and the chances of spoilers increased, their phones would be confiscated. They wouldn’t even be allowed to contact family and friends.

After five minutes, she has 124 likes and 11 new followers.

This is real. This is *happening*. She’s in the same theater where they shoot *American Idol*—she’s more likely to give herself bangs than to watch that show, but *still*. She was once a directionless person, a person who couldn’t even stick to being vegetarian let alone vegan, a person who couldn’t pay the rent without breaking the law, a person—

A camera is in her face and a guy with slick hair and a fake tan, that producer dude she met during Test Day, holds out a microphone. “For the confessional!” he says. “How are you feeling?”

“Confession?”

And boom, she’s twelve again, back in Thunder Bay, on her knees in a kitchen that smells like bleach. Her mother sits silently at the table, eyes averted; her father looms. They aren’t Catholics, they pity Catholics, but her father believes that to confess is to be cleansed. Her sister, Caleigh, always admitted to food crimes: *I ate all the Goodie Rings from the package of Dad’s Cookies.*

All of them? hisses Amber, who’d now be stuck with the crunchy oatmeal ones.

Amber.

Sorry, Daddy.

Let your sister speak. Unless you have something to say?

Amber shakes her head. Tucks her hair behind her ears. *Nothing.*

Are you sure?

From this angle, her dad looks like a cyclops, like he possesses only one huge, unblinking eye. She suppresses crazed giggles. Focuses on the swirling beige pattern of the floor. The floor her mother swabs every Saturday with Mr. Clean, on her knees, scrubbing until the lino gleams like marble.

You can keep the truth from me, but God sees everything.

There’s always something to confess. Caleigh is prone to sloth and gluttony, Amber to envy, lust, and pride. And even if you hadn’t done anything wrong, you’d probably had evil thoughts. Even if you hadn’t had evil thoughts, your body had bad urges—your body could only be controlled through physical exertion, sweat-inducing saunas, and simple self-hatred.

Even this, her intractable wish to keep her mouth clamped shut, to say nothing despite knowing that her father would force her to kneel until the linoleum’s pattern was pressed into the skin of her knees—

“Nothing,” she says now. “Nothing to confess.”

The slick producer (Nick? Rick? Dick?) laughs. “We call it a *confessional*—that’s just TV-speak, baby.” He gives her ass a smack—

is that allowed? “Just a quick splice, for our intro sequence. So the people can get to know you.”

“Right.” She blushes. “Sorry.”

“Ready?” Slick producer dude seems to disappear and then there’s just the camera, one huge unblinking eye.

She’s totally got this.

“Hi! I’m Amber.” She smiles. Waves girlishly. “And I don’t know about anyone else, but I’m going to Mars!”



AMBER APPLIED TO GO TO MARS, WITHOUT TELLING ME, ONE YEAR

and two months ago. She read about the competition online, then sent in a résumé and a two-minute video of herself. The video was filmed in our kitchen—I must have been out buying groceries or picking up lattes or hanging with Marcus, and it must have been summer because her hair catches the sunlight and haloes around her face.

I've now watched the video over and over, in the obsessive way a man might watch pornography that he happens to find on the Internet and that also happens to star his wife. Our laptop is ancient, so the video is grainy and slightly distorted—Amber appears as though she's already looking out through the curved glass of a space helmet. You can see a hint of the sequoia-tree tattoo that wraps itself around her bicep, and there's chipped green polish on her thumb. Her lip ring glints in the light, calls attention to her shimmery mouth.

"I believe that discovery is a universal human drive." She leans forward, showing just enough cleavage. "And I am sure that my athleticism, expertise in the field of hydroponics, and thirst for spiritual meaning will serve me well on the first human-led mission to Mars!"

The panel of MarsNow shareholders and venture capitalists and scientists must have liked what they saw, because Amber beat out over 150,000 other candidates such as Laurie Kalyniuk, housewife in Iowa, and Dr. Christopher Gelt, Germanic literature professor living in Guatemala City.

Round Two involved writing a placement exam that tested your basic math skills, and a thousand-word essay about your motivations/ambitions. Amber must have composed the essay when I was having naps or showers or something, because if I'd seen her writing anything I would have worried. When Amber writes—always in one of

those overpriced Moleskine notebooks—it means she has a secret she can barely keep. Like when she bought a single flight to Bolivia using our joint airline points, or applied to work in a fire tower, or ate pulled-pork poutine every day on her lunch break even though we were supposedly vegans at the time and I was subsisting on peanut butter and rice cakes. Writing is often followed by surreptitious texting, generalized anxiety, and finally by the relief—for both of us—of discovery or confession.

But this time she didn't want to get caught. This time she quietly composed her essay and submitted it. This time she told me she was going to meet friends for coffee, when in fact she was being checked by a MarsNow-hired team of medical specialists: cardiology, psychology, osteopathy, and kinesiology.

Of course I noticed that she joined a gym and lifted weights, enrolled in spin and boot-camp classes, hiked the Grouse Grind every Wednesday with her "Active and Out There!" Meetup group, practiced yoga and qigong for mental/psychological well-being, and talked a lot about *maintaining muscle mass*. I also noticed that she started taking a cocktail of supplements—vitamin D, curcumin for inflammation, CoQ10, and cal-mag (same stuff we feed the plants). I noticed that she lost weight and became ropy with muscle. I noticed that she stopped getting her period and her box of different-absorbency-level tampons sat unopened under the bathroom sink.

I noticed, but didn't notice. I lived in my own world, existing mostly in a limited, indoor orbit. (This metaphor only works if you think of me as a small and insignificant planet and our pot plants, glowing under 9,000 lumens of LEDs, as the sun.) And even when she told me—the day before the MarsNow team was set to send out a press release—that she was one of 143 MarsNow applicants worldwide who'd moved on to Round Three, I didn't believe it. Mars didn't seem real.

Here's what's real: Amber and I are thirty-one years old, born four months apart in Thunder Bay, Ontario, but currently living in

Vancouver, BC. She works as a receptionist at the conference center downtown and I work as an extra on film sets (I once met Jennifer Love Hewitt), but we generate most of our income from selling the high-THC-content weed we grow in our bedroom.

Here's what else is real: we've known each other since grade two. She was a little bit scary—playing tag with Amber was likely to get you mowed down on the playground when she came at you with the full force of her *YOU'RE IT!*—but I liked her. Maybe even *liked-liked* her. When our class had to draw warm-fuzzies for Valentine's Day, I drew a stick figure of a girl with wild hair and wrote: *For Amber, you're pretty and god [sic] at running.*

Then I got shy around girls for a few years and didn't talk to her, barely knew her—she was just one of the Christian kids who had to leave the room during sex ed classes. Then she was the girl known for being the gymnastics champ of eastern Canada, particularly impressive in the vault event. The local paper had pictures of Amber shooting off the springboard like a rocket, pirouetting through the air. Then she was the girl whose Olympic ambitions were dashed when she injured her shoulder. The girl who started drinking too much and hanging out at parties with guys like me and Marcus.

The girl who took me outside. Who grabbed my hand and led me to a place that felt like it was beyond the city, beyond time, beyond the border of the life I'd been living—she showed me a hidden lake. A refuge, a paradise.

We lost our virginity to each other two months after that, on her single bed, under a canopy of glow-in-the-dark stars she'd stuck to the ceiling. Afterward she pressed her body against mine and said she hadn't been able to breathe properly since losing her chance at the Olympics, said she felt nauseous because she didn't know what to do with her life—she was only seventeen but already fully heartbroken. She said she liked me because she could breathe when I was around, because I didn't seem to have expectations of her. I said that was true:

I loved her for no reason at all. (It came out sounding dumb, but I meant it in a good way.)

We are officially the only people we have slept with. Unofficially, during the 3.5 weeks we “took a break” in 2006, Amber had sex with a video store clerk and I technically had sex (for about two seconds, in and out) with Tanya Vargas at a bonfire. But other than those 3.5 weeks, we have been together every day for twelve years. We live in a suite as hot as a sauna and like to cuddle on the couch and look at Dino Comics. Our tippy bookshelves are jumbled with my mom’s movie collection, the detritus of my post-film-school attempt at becoming “well-rounded”—faded copies of Chomsky and Flaubert—and Amber’s old textbooks on botany and nutrition. I call her Slammer (she once spent a night in jail) and she calls me Tater-Toter (don’t want to talk about it) and we have a life together. We own one of those four-hundred-dollar blenders that could pulverize your skull, several hardcover luxury cookbooks, and the entire *Get Smart* oeuvre on old-school DVD. And we have our plants.

We started with a few seeds sprouted between wet sheets of paper towel, then planted like an herb garden on our windowsill. We transplanted those into bigger pots that we kept beside our bed like babies in bassinets. We fed them molasses and they grew past our knees, and that’s when we started selling. Just to Marcus and Amber’s sister and our former friend Brayden and some people I worked with on set.

It was Amber’s idea to go hydro. She had a master’s in environmental science, with a cross-disciplinary focus on nutrition and health (thesis: “Pacific Northwest Ferns and the Traditional Food Technologies of the Coast Salish People”), but couldn’t find work doing anything but waitressing or answering phones. I was going to sell a screenplay someday for sure, but in the meantime I played Member of the Crowd or Guy on the Bus in other people’s productions. And the rent we paid for our basement suite, complete with peeling paint and worn-out carpet, was eye-wateringly expensive.

We could have moved to Alberta, where Amber would write dodgy environmental reports for oil companies. Or to Chilliwack or Prince George, where low wages would stretch further. Or back to Thunder Bay, where we'd live too close to Amber's oppressive family and to the bungalow where I grew up with my mom, a house I feel sure is haunted.

Seven years ago, we sat on this couch and considered our options. Amber packed the small pipe I'd bought for her birthday. The glass used to be pale orange with swirls of gold, the same color as her hair, but years of smoke passing through had darkened it to a burnished red. We passed it back and forth, and that's when Amber said, "Or we could stay here and do this."

She said we'd probably produce more marijuana, using less space, if we grew hydroponically.

"Dealing drugs." She leaned against my chest, her eyes half-closed. "It's the best idea so far, right?"

First we cleared it with our upstairs neighbor, Norm, who works nights stocking medical supplies at the hospital. He said our secret was safe, as long as he got to partake of the product—marijuana helps him sleep when he gets home from work in the mornings. So we bought a pH and PPM meter, a water pump, lights, nutrients. We went to a pet store and bought six kitty litter boxes to use as reservoirs. We set up in the bathroom because it has good ventilation, but opening and closing the door and using the shower kept messing with the ambient temperature. We moved our operation into the spare room Amber once used as an office.

It's not ideal to live where you grow. We keep the heat at 28 degrees Celsius, and when the plants are in a vegetative state, we leave the lights on for eighteen hours a day. And there's that skunky, sticky smell that coats your skin and throat. It took some getting used to but this apartment has become my habitat. The heat, the humidity, the stillness, the silence. It's like the Garden of Eden, except better

than the original. Every plant here is the Tree of Knowledge, and you can eat from it whenever you want.

So why would Amber want to go anywhere else, especially to a red, dead rock? I thought we had an understanding. We're not married; we don't have kids; we don't have pets. But we have our plants and we have each other. And we're committed to this kind of noncommitment: growing weed in our apartment, ordering pizza from the gluten-free place up the street, watching whole seasons of *Arrested Development* all at once. We sat on this couch and made a decision. We were, I believed, committed to going nowhere. Going nowhere together.



IT STARTED WITH GYMNASTICS, THE EXHILARATION OF SPRINGING
off the vault and looping through the air.

Or maybe it started when gymnastics ended: when she injured her rotator cuff and lost her chance at the Olympics—lost everything.

Or maybe it started a year and a half ago when her Outlook crashed at work and she had to call the IT guy. But instead of the old white dude with the gray ponytail, this beautiful Asian kid appeared and said, “Hey, I’m Jianju.”

She could only stare at him.

“IT,” he said. “You called us, right?”

“Oh my god. Yes.”

“Outlook crashed? It’s the worst.” He leaned over her desk, his fingers on her keyboard. “I just need your password to get into the back end here.”

“Into the—back end?”

“You can change it once we’re done.”

“My password?” She wanted to die. “It’s . . . LiamHemsworth1.”

He smiled only slightly. “All one word? Capital L and capital H?”

“Correct.”

Then he leaned over her, silently worked some IT magic, and she could smell his laundry soap. Could feel the heat from his body. Could see, up close, the smooth skin of his neck.

She had to stop being this person. Because her life was perfect. She loved Kevin. She loved their relationship. Loved that their relationship didn’t fit the paradigm. She and Kev were not married because it was an outdated, misogynistic tradition that left women miserable—studies proved this. And she and Kev were not going to have children because she did not want her body invaded by alien life-forms. Plus, the environmental impact of having kids is obscene.

"You're good to go." Jianju clicked her mouse expertly. "You can reset that password now."

But maybe she did want a baby? Sometimes it felt like she did.

"Maybe Chris Hemsworth this time?" Jianju paused on the way out. "Or are you committed to Liam?"

She laughed. "I am committed to nothing."

Afterward, when they saw each other in the hallway, he smiled in a way that suggested he knew her darkest secret, and she smiled in a way that suggested he did not. Then he contacted her through the workplace email directory, and somehow they exchanged phone numbers. His texts lacked wit and punctuation, but her ego was boosted at the thought that a twenty-two-year-old would bother. Then he asked if she would be at the work Christmas party, and she replied, *hell yes and I'll be wearing sequins . . .*

She knew she should stop. But she sat at her desk and watched all the women click by in their heels, wearing their Aritzia blazers or the little cardigans they called "cardis," holding their Michael Kors bags, running their manicured hands through their highlighted hair, stopping at her desk to confide in her—it was something about being a receptionist, you were viewed as *receptive*, a good listener. Amber knew and guarded these women's secrets: they were overwhelmed by trying to organize child care, overwhelmed by work, overwhelmed by in-laws and birthday parties and schlepping the kids to swimming or ballet or hockey. They were addicted to caramel corn or iced caps or Coffee Crisp or wine—which they called *mommy juice* without any seeming awareness of how sad that was. They watched helplessly as their parents demented then died, while dealing with their own cancer scares or Hashimoto's or fibromyalgia. They were constipated since menopause hit; their antidepressants made them bloated; they had insomnia and couldn't sleep more than three hours a night. They were either expected to endure a husband's weekly jackhammering or sexually ignored; one married woman confessed that she hadn't been kissed in over a decade. And of course while Amber's own body

sounded its alarm—a subtle whine of *baby, baby, baby*—these women were having trouble conceiving or were accidentally pregnant. Their babies had colic and their toddlers ADHD; their teenage children were anxious and cruel and addicted to their phones; their adult children were depressed and neglectful and addicted to prescription drugs. There must be some joy in it, in “having it all,” or at least a sense of accomplishment and job-well-done, but the women didn’t talk about that. Amber was only twenty-nine then—you’re a baby! the women said—but she could see the menacing road toward forty, fifty, sixty . . .

It felt like she was about to be sucked into a black hole and there was no stopping this gravitational force. Before it was too late, she wanted to dye her hair blue or move to Ecuador or hit a sex club. Anything. Anything to feel alive before she got spaghettified.

She started fantasizing about being stuck in the elevator with Jianju. Or him offering her a ride home, then . . .

Her imagination was so *porn-y*.

But sometimes a girl gets tired of the 9 p.m., post-Netflix, pre-teeth-brushing, *I-love-you-I-love-you-too*, mellow-missionary sex at home. And Jianju was so young, was probably rock hard all the time. With Kevin there were always questions. Did his erection flag because of the pot—she’d googled it and daily use *can* lead to ED—or was he just *not that into her* anymore? And why would he be into her when she was always distant, enraged, or childishly cuddly? Also she couldn’t be bothered to shave her legs or her pits, and who wants a girlfriend with gorilla legs? Plus she was embittered because she always initiated sex, and that bitterness led her to be dry as toast and limp as cold seaweed salad. Once, in a club, a stranger grabbed her by the wrists, kissed her, and said, *Give me your tongue. I want to feel your tongue*. She craved forcefulness—wanted Kevin to press her against the wall, kiss the ridge of bone along her neck, say, *Does this feel good?* Smack her ass while he took her from behind. Though if he did that, they’d probably both burst out laughing. And it’s not as if she ever asked what *he* liked.

Usually he liked the usual. Who has time to be creative? Not someone who works full-time, runs a home-based business, and does nearly all the cooking and cleaning. But Beyoncé is probably creative in bed, and she has three kids!

So maybe this is Amber's biggest, most shameful secret: she's good at many things, but as a lover she's a failure. Would it be different if she'd been allowed to take sex ed as a kid? Would she have learned about pleasure and joy? She tended to initiate sex on the Voyager by matter-of-factly rubbing Kevin's crotch to see if he could achieve liftoff—barely bothering to kiss him. Sometimes they launched and it felt so comfortable and real and *right*. But sometimes it didn't work; sometimes he was distracted or uninterested. She told herself it was not a reflection of her worth. But even if it was just the pot, a purely physical issue, wasn't that worse? Because it meant that he loved weed more than he loved her—chose weed *over* her, every single day. But of course he loved pot more than he loved her. Who wouldn't? A woman with a real sense of self, a true feminist, a good and honest and lovable person, would just *talk* to him about it. But talking about it would hurt his feelings, and she couldn't stand that—she loved him so much. Her devoted, funny, sensitive Kev. Wasn't she hurting him less this way? By keeping quiet?

Imagine having simple, empty sex with a stranger. Imagine if it meant *nothing*.

Around that time—the winter of Jianju—she succumbed to food cravings and gave up being vegan, which was an added disaster because eating meat seemed to exacerbate her sex-drive (baby-drive?) problem. She noticed that she was going out of her way to walk past the IT desk every day, and when she saw Jianju she felt a lurch in her stomach, equal parts pleasant and painful, one hundred percent familiar. And she thought: *It's happening. Again.*

She was exhausted. So tired of herself.

That was around the time she read about the MarsNow project. On a whim she wrote her essay, the words pouring out, and submit-

ted a video she didn't even bother to edit. She started working out again; it was a good excuse to get into shape and her body changed from slouchy-secretary to potential-astronaut. She did a phone interview with a woman who sounded like an automaton. She met with a series of doctors who tested her for kidney stones, gallstones, a heart murmur, slipped disks. It started to feel a bit real then, once she was declared fit for space travel despite her weak shoulder. She wanted to tell Kevin, but what was the point of worrying him when Mars was such a distant possibility? She still had to beat thousands of people to even get on the show. Just like the Olympics. Even if you rocked the national championships, even if you made it onto Team Canada, your squad still had to compete with the Americans, the Russians, the Chinese, and everyone else to qualify for the Games—to be in the top nine and move on to the finals. And none of it guaranteed a place on the podium. Failure and humiliation were the most likely outcomes—Amber should know. She made it onto the national team but injured her shoulder before they qualified and was replaced by a girl from Moose Jaw. And that was it. The end. She could have tried for the next Olympics, but by then she would have been geriatric by gymnastics standards. Her father kept saying, *You can do this* and *You're my champ* and *Did I raise you to be a quitter?* But by sixteen, she'd been training hard for ten years and her body felt broken. It wasn't just the shoulder, though that was the worst—there was her wonky knee, her partially torn calf muscle, a rib she broke at age ten.

The strangest thing about losing her shot at the Olympics was that the world kept spinning. Other people's lives continued. And no matter how much Amber stretched, no matter how religiously she did her physio, her shoulder remained weak and tight. No matter how much she prayed for relief, for healing. So she stopped praying. Stopped listening to the sermons at church. Stopped taking her dad's word as the Word. Her injury was the beginning of the end of belief, because what could God do for her now? *Smite me from above*, she used to dare Him. It was funny because she was already smote.

But look at her now. Forsaken, sure, but back in the game. Winning a seat on the Mars mission wasn't only unlikely—it was madness to even try, but a madness she must have missed, a madness that made her feel alive. She had to tell someone about her successes, so she spent more time on the MarsNow private forum, and that led her to Adam, and once they started messaging a floodgate opened. Turned out she craved honesty. Craved a stranger at the other end of an electronic rope, a stranger as distant and mysterious as a priest shielded by a confessional's mesh.

Then she had another MarsNow interview, this time over Microsoft Teams. Six men in suits sat at a table and asked her a series of questions:

Do you ever hear voices telling you what to do?

Would you rather steal something from a store or from an individual's home?

Have you ever been in a fight? Have you ever initiated violence of any kind?

Are you straight, gay, bisexual, or other?

Have you gotten a DUI?

Have you made a sex tape?

Are you on the pill?

Do you have enemies?

Why do you want to go to Mars?



WHY? I ASKED. WHY MARS? WHY NOW?

Because I want to see the Earth from above!

Because it's an amazing opportunity!

Because it's the first mission of its kind!

Amber sounded like a convert to a new religion. Still, I wasn't super worried because I knew this: her parents were coming to visit, and her father—this freaky Finnish guy, a die-hard fundamentalist and yet also an alcoholic—would never allow his daughter to go to Mars.

When we were growing up, her dad coached peeewee hockey and would put me in goal without a helmet, which was supposed to teach me to be less afraid of the puck. He still addresses me by my last name, Watkins, and it still scares me. My fear is made worse because I'm in love with his daughter and have a crush on his wife. (This might be the only secret I've kept from Amber, the fact that when her blonde, big-boned mom sat in the bleachers, it made me play harder, skate faster, flinch less when the puck flew at my teeth.) What you need to know about Amber's father is that he hates our cannabis business and blames me for his daughter's life going nowhere.

But now Olav would be my savior. He would come to town, with his vodka and disapproval.

Then they were here, in Vancouver, after driving for a week straight from Thunder Bay because Amber's mother has a fear of heights. (Lydia is unlike her daughter in this regard. In fact, everything in Amber's life, from gymnastics to weed to Mars, can be read as one long attempt to be nothing like her mother.)

We all went to a pub that served burgers and craft beer, and Amber told her parents about her plans to move to Mars.

"Mars," said her father. "You mean the planet?"