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MEG SMITHERMAN



PENGUIN BOOKS

Prologue

I have dreamed of the Planet my whole life. It's a recurring Heaven that shines brighter than anything on Earth, anything I have ever seen in the waking world. It is verdant slopes of blooms and soft green grass, the widest and bluest sky you could imagine, thick and quiet forests so dark with shadow and moss.

I can't remember a time when the Planet didn't fascinate me. This Earth-like miracle, a blue-green pearl in the deepest reaches of our galaxy. Unthinkably distant, but still within reach.

The Planet is proof that Heaven exists, and we've been there. My mother walked its plains, traversed its forests, and gazed up at its twin moons at dusk. She told me stories all the time – about its beauty, the way it spoke to her heart, how she thinks of it fondly, even now. But she never told me the stories that mattered. Never the ones she told on the news, or in the hearings, or in old interviews for *Time*.

When I was younger, I used to ask her what *really* happened out there, before I was born. Was she a hero who survived a cursed mission? A villain, doomed by popular narrative? But no matter what I asked, she would only frown and turn away. When I remember

it now, it's like she was afraid I'd see the truth in her eyes, whatever that was.

Eventually, I learned to stop asking her.

I've seen all the interviews; I've read all the articles. Some of them paint her as the lucky sole survivor. Some of them are damning. But they all ask the question: Why did only she make it back when the rest were left for dead? And she never truly answered. Maybe she didn't know. Maybe she was just as confused as everyone else.

When my mother finally died, the end of a slow creep toward eternity that seemed so wrong for someone still so young, I said goodbye to a woman I had never known.

But I know the Planet. I've seen it in my dreams.

I

'Jill.'

My name jolts me out of distraction. Reluctant, I turn away from the tiny porthole window. I don't want to stop looking at the Planet's lengthening curve, growing closer with every second. I blow out an impatient breath. 'What?'

Darcie scowls good-naturedly. 'Stop hogging the window.' She leans over me awkwardly, still strapped in tight as we grow close to breaking atmo, her thick black hair tickling my nose.

'Should've paid for the window seat,' I say, trying to flatten myself backward, giving Darcie more room. 'This is basic stuff. Mensa member my ass.'

She shoots me a withering side-eye. 'You know, Jill—'

'She's right, though,' Julian adds from the other side of the cramped shuttle, framed by the starlit shape of their porthole. 'Premium seats for free? In *this* economy?'

'Exactly,' I say, my mouth practically inside Darcie's ear the way she's craning into my space. 'I thought you were smart.'

'Apparently not smart enough to get out of a mission

peopled by incompetents,' she says pleasantly, still peering eagerly out the porthole. Then, cheerfully under her breath, 'J names are always such dick —'

'Okay, that's enough,' Ben interrupts from beside Julian. His presence is suddenly imposing, as if he can turn his leadership off and on like a switch. Probably comes with being military. Unlike us scientists, our brains running a million miles a minute, always joking and fucking around to let off steam, he's a landmine. He waits patiently. And then, when the team gets rowdy, or there's a problem that needs solving, he snaps into action. And he's suddenly *there*, undeniable, and I can't look away.

'Sorry, Dad,' Julian singsongs.

Ben pinches his nose with blunt fingers. 'Fleming, how many times do I have to say it? Do not call me *Dad*.'

'Yes, Dad,' Darcie says.

I refuse to join in on the joke. It feels too comfortable, especially around Ben. In the year the four of us have been training together, I still haven't let him in. Darcie and Julian are my friends now, for better or worse. But something about Ben makes me feel unsteady, and it's easier to hold him at arm's length than look my own feelings in the eye. I tell the others it's the fact he's military, but that's only part of it.

Ben shoots me a look as if to say, *Save me from them*, and I shrug, turning away.

Darcie and Julian begin bickering across the shuttle, and their voices fade to the background as my attention turns back to the porthole. The Planet rises toward us. I am already in love. I've seen her before in tapes and photographs. I've seen her rivers, mountains, and woods. Her deserts and weather patterns. But not like this. Not from space, approaching her from outside. She is an egg, ready to hatch. And we're her fertilizer.

I see humanity as it will be if our mission succeeds, making a new home on the Planet: First, a few thousand colonists, then doubling, then quadrupling, building, and spreading. Diverting rivers and carving through mountains. Thriving in our new home. My chest aches.

The background hum of jovial bickering grows loud and harsh.

'Don't be such a killjoy,' says Darcie, 'we're not even there yet.'

'I'm not being a *killjoy*,' Julian retorts, pushing a pair of oval glasses up their long nose. 'God forbid I speculate on the philosophical nature of this mission.'

'You weren't speculating, you dweeb,' Darcie says, facing away from me. 'You were being crass. *Cursed?* Really? Bitch, we're scientists.'

'Science can't explain everything, bitch.'

Ben sighs, running a hand down his face. He's older than the three of us, though not by much. I've never asked, but I'd guess he's in his late thirties, maybe forty. He has the long-suffering air of a man who's used to

putting up with bullshit. Another side effect of years in the armed forces.

'It can, and it does,' Darcie almost shouts across the too-small shuttle. 'What conspiracy sites have you been frequenting? Are you a flat-earther now?'

'Nobody's a flat-earther, Ferreira,' Ben rumbles. His voice is rough, low, and gravelly, made for giving orders.

'What if I am?' Julian says defiantly.

'Immediate ejection from the shuttle,' declares Darcie.

'You would *kill* me for having an unorthodox way of thinking?'

'Jesus, Jules, I swear—'

'What are you assholes arguing about?' I cut in. But I think I already know. It's the same thing they've been whispering about for the past year, ever since the four of us got placed together on this team, ever since I told them who my mom was.

An awkward silence falls over the shuttle.

'Ignore them, Jones,' Ben says. He always calls us by our last names.

'Julian's being a dillweed,' Darcie says at the same time.

'If you didn't want to be on this mission, Jules,' I say, crossing my arms and leveling a ripe glare across the shuttle, 'you should have thought of that three months ago before you crawled into your hyper-sleep pod.'

I hate that it bothers me, the stuff people say about my mother and what happened to her on this planet. Good or bad, it has nothing to do with me. But sometimes, when it's quiet and I allow my mind to go there, I believe the bad things: the imagined darkness my mother endured at the end of a mission that fell apart.

'Like I'd turn it down,' Julian says haughtily. 'Life-changing opportunity.'

I snort but say nothing else. They won't meet my gaze; they know they've crossed a line.

Darcie turns to me, her expression pained. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let them bait me. It's just . . . I'm sure you're a little on edge, right? No one ever found out exactly what—'

'No, I know,' I interrupt. This is the first time anyone has brought it up since I told them about my mom. I guess the anticipation and anxiety has finally made it impossible to keep their mouths shut. Not that I blame them, really. 'They never found the bodies,' I finish for Darcie. 'But I'm sure . . . I'm sure it was nothing crazy. She was scared, on an alien planet, watching her team drop like flies. No one would want to relive that. Or maybe she just forgot most of it. The trauma and everything.'

Darcie eyes me. 'You mean she never even told *you*—'

'And that's enough of that, kids,' Ben cuts in with finality. 'This isn't a ghost-hunting trip. This is a reconnaissance mission for the ECE. Testing the Planet for

viability. Got it? No one is to get carried away discussing missing *bodies*?

'Yes, sir,' Darcie says, dripping sarcasm.

'Ben,' he says, leaning his head back against his seat and closing his eyes. 'It's Ben. None of you people are in the military, and "sir" makes me sound like your dom.'

'Sorry, sir,' Julian says, grinning.

We all recede into silence as we break atmo. Heat and light rush past us, but within the lightly vibrating shuttle, we're in the eye of the storm. I can't help but grip my seat, fingers taut, as I stare out the porthole.

And then in a flash, we're through, we're *here*, within the Planet's embrace.

She rises up to greet us, inescapable in her glory. A blue sea expands like a white-flecked jewel below us, wide and glimmering in the morning light. As we descend, tiny islands materialize, emerald green and untouched. Soon, the greater continent looms below, and I know that we're perfectly on course. I never doubted the shuttle's auto-pilot navigation, but a little tension fades from my shoulders anyway. And then there are mountains within view, snow-capped and violent in their suddenness, lit up by the cresting sun. Watching her take shape below us, I'm eager. Despite what Julian said, I'm not afraid of what's already happened. I trust the Planet. I'm ready to plant my feet on her shores.

After all, this might be our new home.

'Hang on tight,' Ben announces, his voice cutting through my abstraction.

'The landing is supposed to be gentle,' Julian gripes.

'It *will* be gentle,' Ben says. 'But just in case, hang on.'

'To what?' Darcie asks.

'Your hats,' Ben suggests.

Eager anticipation buzzes in the air. We're all smiling, the tension from before gone entirely. Darcie's trying to get a good look through the porthole again, pushing into my personal space.

'I'm not wearing a hat,' says Julian.

We're close now.

The ground flies up to meet us. With a swoop in my gut, I realize I recognize this forest. I've seen these thickening trees, and I recognize this plain, the meandering river and its crescent-bright oxbow lakes. I've seen them in tapes, training materials, pamphlets, and posters, of course. But most vividly, I've seen them in my dreams.

A tang of fear slides up from my gut and into my mouth. What if the landing *isn't* gentle? We've never done this before. None of us are pilots; that's why the navigation is automatic. What happens if the shuttle goes off course? If it lands wrong? What if -- there are so many things that could go wrong. My mother was here before, and everything went wrong. Everything. What if that's our fate, too?

Individual blades of grass scream up to meet us. Flowers wave in the backdraft.

‘Brace for landing,’ says Ben.

‘Fuck, fuck, fuck,’ Julian chants.

Suddenly, the shuttle is stationary, then it swings backward and upward. Unearthed clods of grass whip past the portholes, dirt churning up around us. We descend again, slowly, the shuttle’s engines stirring up earth and plant matter.

And with a soft jolt, so gentle it’s almost imperceptible, we land.

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‘Welp,’ says Ben, unstrapping himself and standing. ‘We made it, gang. Let’s get this show on the road.’

No one says anything.

‘You good?’ Ben says, fixing each of us with a look of impatient concern.

Am I good? I find there are words trapped in my throat, but I can’t voice them. We made it. We’re on a new planet, light-years from Earth, and we’re supposed to take off our seatbelts and just get up and carry on? In a second, alien air will be touching my face. Alien grass will tickle my ankles. We’ll be only the second team of humans to come here. Ever.

Reality sinks in slowly.

‘Kids, get your shit together,’ Ben says, and at least his tone is gentle. ‘I said, you good?’

‘Good,’ says Julian, their voice faint. I glance over and see that their face has gone sickly pale.

‘Good,’ murmurs Darcie. She meets my gaze, her eyes shining with tears.

‘I’m good,’ I echo. I grab Darcie’s hands and squeeze