

# The Martian Job

by

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(opening chapter)

'If you're listening to this, I'm dead.'

*You have got to be kidding me.*

That was what I thought, at that moment. Not: *Why is my brother getting in contact after all these years?* Not: *Oh no, Shiv's dead!* No: I was exasperated at the screaming cliché. Real people don't say melodramatic crap like that. But a cliché's just something that's been true too many times and one woman's melodrama is another's tragedy.

I paused the recording. My brother's smiling face froze.

I'd been given the chip less than an hour ago, when I dropped round to collect a box of clothes from the apartment. 'This arrived yesterday,' Ken had said in that neutral, careful tone he's taken to using with me. But we've been married long enough that I knew he was curious about the unexpected package, with its offworld customs sticker. I made like it was something I'd been expecting, but he saw through that, though he pretended not to. And I pretended I didn't notice him pretending not to.

Shiv's image stared up at me from my phone; I'd had to hire a chip-reader from the local cornershop-cum-pornbroker and it wouldn't talk to the screen in my hotel-room-cum-cupboard. The last time I'd seen my half-brother was on the vidlink from Ma's trial, when he'd looked stricken, silent and serious. On this recording he had more lines on his face but looked fit and well, with the same indefatigable smile, restless hands, breathless speech.

As I went to restart the recording I had an incoming call. Mr Lau. I took it, of course. He was most apologetic about disturbing my evening, but he'd just been notified of a delegation arriving from Beijing in two days, and they needed confirmation of the travel arrangements by lunchtime, their time. No need to go into the office, should only take up an hour of my time.

The chip had to be Shiv's idea of a joke, and it wasn't one I expected to find funny. Like a good little wageslave I put my life on hold and danced to my boss' tune.

It took an hour and a half to make the initial reservations. By then it was after midnight and I couldn't face dealing with Shiv's message. Tomorrow was threatening to be another long day. I should get some sleep.

But first, I went out to the loud and badly lit bar down the street, found a drunk young man with good abs and minimal conversational skills, brought him back to this pokey excuse for a room, and had a decent, if cramped, bout of meaningless sex.

My name is Lizzie Choi, and this is the story of how I became the most wanted person in the Solar System.

This was the second time in a month we'd had sudden notification of a visitation from Head Office: the massive gamble that was Project Rainfall was sending ripples through every part of Everlight.

In addition to the flights and hotels I'd booked overnight, the next morning I added chauffeur-driven vehicles, a private dinner at the Savoy, plus a selection of diversions for the three spouses and pair of teenaged children accompanying the half-dozen strong delegation. And far be it from me to imply this was any sort of jolly for said spouses and kids. Still, the Chinese do love London; the bits of it they don't already own, anyway.

By lunchtime, our time, everything was in place for the visit and I was ready to start my ten-hour work day. I asked Mr Lau if he was free to speak with me before he headed out for his lunchtime meeting. He invited me into his office, and greeted me with his usual avuncular smile.

'Another path smoothed. Thank you, Ms Choi.'

I smiled back. From where I stood, between his two plush visitor chairs, I noticed that the orchid stem in the lacquered vase on the southwest corner of his desk had a small brown blemish on the underside of the main blossom, only visible from this angle; I made a mental note to get it replaced before he returned from lunch. 'My pleasure as ever, Mr Lau. However, whilst your gratitude is my most treasured reward, current circumstances force me to mention the possibility I raised some weeks back, that of a remuneration review.' Or, to put it another way *You're not a bad boss but I need more money.*

His eyes went to the orchid. Perhaps the blemish was visible from his side. 'Your circumstances. Ah, yes.' Not a bad boss, but with an old-fashioned view on infidelity and divorce. 'I will see what can be done, given the current corporate climate, Ms Choi.' Or, to put it another way, *Fat chance.*

While Mr Lau was out at lunch an automated system called my personal phone asking if I'd accept a reverse-charge offworld call. I assumed it must be some mistake, then

wondered if this was Shiv following up on his odd little joke. But it wasn't from Mars, it was from Luna.

If it was who I suspected it might be then this wasn't a call I could take at work, even alone in the office. I refused it. As I did so I realised there was only one reason my mother would be allowed to call me in the first place.

After years spent disentangling myself from the disaster that was my family, they were back in my life.

If Mr Lau noticed I wasn't at my best that afternoon he didn't say anything.

I got away from the office as early as I could. I needed to listen to Shiv's message all the way through. But my phone chirped again as soon as I was outside. I queried the call source. It came from Luna Authority Correctional Facility Six. She wasn't going to give up. I waited until I was back in my tiny room before bowing to the inevitable.

She didn't look that much older; a bit thinner in the face, but healthy and with her hair-colour back to glossy chestnut. Behind her the blank wall was painted a soft and non-institutional blue. 'Hello, Mother,' I said before she could open her mouth.

The Earth-Luna delay was only a couple of seconds, but it was enough for me to see her expression fall into the familiar combination of concern and disapproval. 'Beth! Been trying to get hold of you all day.' She sounded more American than I remembered; her only link to the old US was a single grandparent she'd never met, but everyone indulged the remaining Americans, so she'd probably been cultivating the accent in prison.

'I've been working. I can't take personal calls on work time.'

'Working?' The idea still appalled her, it seemed.

I resisted the urge to sigh. 'At Everlight, yes.'

'You're still with the opposition?' My father had called them that, jokingly; given how little time she spent with him, and how that time ended, it hardly made sense to refer to one of the world's biggest companies as 'the opposition'. But that was my mother.

'Yep. Still at Everlight.'

'Well fuck me.' Another thing about my mother: she loves to swear. She blames it on having had, as she puts it, 'a shit childhood' but I think it's more about image, the street-smart American shtick. And because she swears, I don't. 'And're you still doing,' she waved a hand dismissively, 'office work?'

'Operational administration.' After years of silence, and with a noticeable delay on the line, she could still propel me from mildly peeved to wound-up-fit-to-scream in a matter of seconds.

'And how's...' another hand-wave, 'whatsisname?'

'Fine.' I bit down on the word, but her eyes were narrowing.

She squinted past me. 'Thought you two had one of those neat corporate apartments.'

'You're calling because of Shiv, aren't you?' She would only have been allowed to contact me because I was now her registered next-of-kin. Because Shiv really was dead.

Her expression fell, and she looked old for the first time. The pain I glimpsed wasn't entirely faked. 'Yes. He... he was everything I could've wished for in a child.'

I let my subconscious chime in with *unlike you*, because I had no desire to be everything my mother could have wished for. 'When did he... When did it happen?' *My brother's dead. My brother's really dead.*

'Shit. You don't know?'

'No. How would I?' I didn't even know how he'd got hold of my contact details. 'I only know at all because of this call.' Not technically true, but I wasn't giving her any ammunition. 'So, how long...?' I let the question trail off into the signal-lag.

'Three weeks.'

In order to reach me when it did, Shiv's chip must have left Mars three or four days after it happened. Whatever *it* had been. 'And how did he...' I had to say it some time, '... die?'

'A flyer crash, according to some shyster Martian lawyers. He left details of his final wishes with them.'

The same lawyers who'd presumably found out where I was, and dispatched the chip. 'A flyer? He was a good pilot.'

'According to these lawyers it was a solo flight, and he didn't file a flight-plan with Olympus Central.' *You don't say.* 'They claim he ran into technical difficulties but that the glider's transponder had been tampered with. A rover-train spotted the wreckage two days later.'

In other words, anything could have happened. 'These lawyers, who are they?'

'Shah... something. No, Shah, Shah and something. What the fuck does it matter?'

'Probably doesn't.' Not a Chinese firm, then; no surprise there, either. Should I tell her about the chip Shah, Shah and something had sent me?

'But it ain't all shit, Beth. There's one piece of good news. His legacy, perhaps.'

Mum's so calm. But she'll have known about Shiv for a while. 'What do you mean?'

'It's coming up for ten years. Since I first came to this shithole, I mean.' Spoken as though she could leave. Which, I realised with a jolt, she could, potentially.

'You mean, the buy-out clause?' So that was why she was calling me. Not to commiserate on our shared loss, mend fences or volunteer useful information. No, as usual, she wanted something. Whatever was on Shiv's chip, I wouldn't be sharing it with her.

She nodded. 'I've had a decade to, as the shrink here says, reflect on the human aspect of the incident. Now I've done my time and had my therapy the slate's clean, of the whole culpable homicide thing anyway.'

The remaining ten years of Mum's sentence were a material loss penalty, which could be reduced by paying certain fines. 'The court set a ridiculous price, if you remember.' The vagaries of Lunan law: damaging a hab was as dire an act as taking a life, but if you could pay for a new hab to be built your crime need never be spoken of again.

'Yeah, they sure did. But you've done well, you said so yourself.'

*I did? When, exactly?* She was looking at me like she expected me to conjure the necessary funds out of the air. 'Not that well, Mum. Sorry.'

'Ah. So it's like that.' She sighed, and got that disappointed look in her eyes. I was still working out the best way to field this latest ploy when she continued. 'If you could, you'd free me though, wouldn't you? We could start again.'

'Of course I would.' What else could I say?

She nodded. 'Thank fuck for that at least. Sometimes, Beth. Sometimes I wonder about you, how you turned out. But you're a good girl really.'

'I have to go now.'

'Sure, I guess.'

'Bye Mum.' I cut the call.

I pulled the package containing Shiv's chip out of the cubbyhole where I'd stashed it. The chip was in a holder, the holder was in standard packaging along with a hardcopy slip of paper with the cryptic phrase 'Remember the world's dodgiest airlock?' printed on it; the package was labelled with my name and last registered address and a customs mark which indicated it came from Mars. And that was it. The piece of paper would have foxed anyone else; but as soon as I'd opened the package I knew what it meant, and who this package came from.

I should go out and hire the chip-reader again. Instead I decided to go out and get laid. Sex was, truth be told, the solution to a lot of my problems these days, even if it was also the cause of one of them. Which made Ken's call, as I was putting my lipstick on, perfectly

timed. Behind my soon-to-be-ex-husband the apartment looked spacious, comfortable and airy. Still no signs of change, specifically the kinds of change made by another woman.

'I expected to hear from your lawyer today, Lizzie,' he said, doing that looking-up-from-under-his-brows thing I used to love but which I'd come to think of as passive-aggressive neediness.

He did have a point, though. I'd forgotten to call the divorce lawyer. I never forget things like that. 'I... had a difficult day.'

'You can tell me about it if it helps.'

I wish he wouldn't make civilised, genuine-sounding offers like that. Just like I wish there was another woman, or man, or something else; some other reason. He's trying to make this as easy as he can, and that just makes it harder. 'I'm fine. I'll get on it first thing tomorrow.'

The lawyer in question wasn't available first thing, so I had to queue the call for lunchtime. If I'd had the money I'd have hired a lawyer who'd return my calls, but the storage charge on those possessions I no longer had room for in my nasty little cubbyhole – which was most of them – had just gone out, and I barely had the money to pay rent on said cubbyhole. My original thought, that I'd get a studio flat in a nice, non-corporate suburb once the divorce went through, was about as likely as me taking Mr Lau's place as Everlight Europe's Junior VP for Finance.

I stayed for the meet-and-greet for the visitors from Beijing, hovering in the background trying not to look too tall and Western, on hand in case anything went wrong. Which it didn't, because I'm good at my job.

As soon as I got home I rented the chip-reader.

When my phone screen asked for a password, I keyed in DAE-BUM, the designation on the LunaFree Community's main cargo airlock. It used to make me laugh, especially the way Shiv said it, 'That's DAE as in Dodgiest Airlock Ever and BUM as in *bottom!*' What can I say, I was only eight.

The initial screen showed Shiv in freeze-frame, and a date. I hadn't really registered the date before but I now knew he'd recorded this three days before he died. I swallowed and hit play.

'If you're listening to this, I'm dead.'

*Yes, you are. You really are.*

‘Just kidding! Got your attention though, didn’t I?’ He didn’t look dead. He looked great. I blinked and his image went blurry for a moment. ‘By the time you get this everything will be sorted. I’m stashing the chip just in case, well, in case two things, but mainly in case you don’t work out it was me! Because it was!’ He grinned wider, like he expected me to get the joke. ‘Mum’s probably free by now – that’s one of Mr Shah’s conditions for sending you this, me having bought her out. Which I will be able to afford because I’ve just pulled off...’ his voice rose in that mock-gameshow-host way he had, ‘...the greatest heist humankind has ever seen!’

Except he hadn’t; or if he had, it’d gone wrong and been hushed up. Plus: great idea this, Shiv – you’re about to commit a fantastic bit of thievery which no one can pin on you, so you record a confession. Okay, it was on an encoded chip which – presumably – no one else had access to, but even so, that kind of arrogance could get you in trouble. Killed, even.

His expression fell, the smile fading a little. The back of my neck prickled. ‘There’s also a real small chance’ – one of Mum’s favourite phrases that – ‘a real *real* small chance that things might not work out. That’s why I’ve given you the details. Because if something unexpected happens and I can’t do the job for some reason, then you could take it on. I know, I know, you don’t touch this kind of business any more, you’re on the straight and narrow working for the big bad corp, but you can’t miss this one! And if I can’t see it through then you’ve got to be the one who gets Mum out of that place.’

*Oh, have I?*

His moment of sombre reflection was gone as fast as it arrived, and the winning smile was back. ‘I’m just being pessimistic. Everything’ll go fine. And maybe, when the dust has settled, we can meet up? I know you still feel bad about how Mum got shafted in New Bombay and the Four Flowers business on Luna, but we’re older now, older and wiser. And you’re still my little sister.’ He mimed blowing me a kiss, then blew a raspberry. His traditional farewell, back from when we were kids. ‘Bye now!’

I threw my phone across the tiny room. It bounced off the wall. I retrieved it, and, because I had to pick the scab, checked the data-file. Sometime during Shiv’s speech I’d got it into my head that his ‘greatest heist humankind has ever seen’ would be about Project Rainfall. That he was going to try and steal the water-rich proto-comet Everlight were currently braking into a stable orbit around Mars. I wouldn’t have put it past him to try, given he’d trained as an engineer, back before he’d taken up the family trade. But I was wrong.

He wasn’t planning to steal a comet.

He was planning to steal the most valuable gem in the universe.

I returned the chip-reader on my way out. Time to get laid again.

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