

Red Rover

By Richard D. Bangs

Chapter 1

It had been a long, hot and dusty day in the crater floor on Mars, but he had completed his tasks and was resting.

They had ordered him to travel across the crater to a rock outcropping and take ore samples.

It wasn't easy. Several times he had to stop his vehicle, inspect the terrain and reverse or change course. It was easier now, now that they had given him the authority to make his own decisions on how to get around obstacles. He wondered why he didn't have that authority right from the start. Those scientists, he told himself, they just want to control everything when explorers such as him were doing the hard work.

The Martian landscape was not as flat and smooth in this area as the scientists had predicted. Boulders big enough to block the way were everywhere. Sand pits created by the ever-

blowing wind made traps of red dust as fine as talcum powder. It was easy to get trapped in one of those pits, the vehicle's wheels just spinning. Many times he had to reverse directions and rock back and forth to get out of the pits.

He had tried to warn them but the scientists just always seemed to think they were smarter than the people on the ground; the people taking the risk; the people who had to find a way to make the exploration successful.

Oh, he wasn't complaining. Not too much any way. He was happy to be one of the first explorers on Mars. His work would lead the way for others to follow. Already he had found that Mars at one time had vast quantities of water. Water was the key, he knew. If there was water in the past, there might still be water - perhaps in quantities enough to bring colonists, not just explorers such as him.

But now he just needed to rest. He was getting tired. He shut down his major systems. He turned off the cameras, which gave him a view outside his vehicle. He carefully stowed the robotic arms he used to collect ore samples. He made sure the antennae he used to communicate with the controllers were in the ready position. He would send some data back to Earth while he was asleep.

He wondered what tomorrow would bring. What would be the orders for the day? And when would they tell him it was time to

go home? After the original 90-day mission had been accomplished he agreed to stay on longer. They said there was more science he could do before coming home and as long as he had enough energy. Why not?

He had lived his life for this mission. Hundreds of hours of mission design, conditioning and testing had occupied him for as long as he could remember. He was happy, at first, that the scientists were proud of the way he performed. It gave his ego a big boost to see they way they all cheered when he survived the bouncy landing and began to activate his rover vehicle, named Columbus after the early Earth explorer who had enough courage to sail off to the edge of the known universe at that time.

And he smiled when he thought about the excitement they all shared when he sent the first pictures. They should have seen it from his vantage point. It was a lot better than the pictures.

And the water! When he discovered rocks that showed evidence of massive amounts of water in the past, he thought they were going to lose it. He knew they were happy with his work and that made him feel proud. That's why when they asked him to extend the mission, he didn't object. He felt part of the team -- a team leading the human race to the stars. Exploring Mars was just the first step. Then there would be colonies. And then there would be exploration of the rest of the solar system and the galaxy.

He wanted to be part of that, and he was doing his part. But now he was just tired. The original mission of 90 days had passed like a flash and he eagerly did more.

The time seemed to fly by and all of a sudden he had been poking around the surface of Mars for a year! A year, he said to himself, man, time flies when you're having fun.

But it was starting to get old. Maybe it was time to go home. Maybe he would ask them tomorrow. As he thought about it, he seemed to lose more energy and fell asleep dreaming of home in California.

Chapter 2

He awoke to the blaring sounds of Santana. It was their "Greatest Hits" album, he was sure.

He would have preferred something a little more mellow to wake up to - why not some soft classical music, or even something from Andrea Bocelli?

He had tried to tell them but they wouldn't listen. One day he even refused to get up until they quit with the loud rock. He had waited to do anything until they stopped the music and gave him a more routine wake up call.

"Home. Today is the day I'm going to ask them about going home," he thought as he stretched his neck muscles, turning his head back and forth and slowly becoming alert.

Before he could ask, however, they had another order -- his tasks for the day. "You've got to be kidding," he said to himself when the command came through.

He extended his periscope as far as he could and looked out and to the left of his vehicle and toward the horizon. "No way," he thought as saw what they were asking. They wanted him to climb up the edge of the crater wall and see what was on the other side. This was not in the mission plan. He wasn't sure his vehicle was up to climbing such a steep slope. Driving around the crater floor dodging boulders and avoiding sand traps was tricky enough. Now they wanted him climb rock walls? What did they think he was driving, a Hummer? What would happen if his vehicle turned over? He was likely to damage several of his cameras, his periscope - he might even ruin his life-support system.

"No," was his reply to the repeated message of his mission for the day. They didn't respond - just repeated the order.

"It's out of the mission parameter," he said. "I don't remember asking this vehicle to do that kind of climbing during the testing. What happens if I roll it? I can tell the angle is pretty steep. I'm not sure I can make it up."

Again they didn't respond. The controllers didn't seem to understand his reluctance. Maybe if this had come earlier in the mission, he might have chanced it. He had more energy then, and sharper wits. He could have compensated for the sluggishness of the vehicle he was driving. And besides, he had been having trouble with one of the six wheels on his vehicle. One wheel was dragging. He was still able to get around but it was a lot harder.

The controllers must be talking to each other, he decided after some time of silence. Whenever he was reluctant to do something, the controllers got together -- ganged up on him if you want to know the truth -- and came up with some convoluted logic to convince him to do what he did not want to do. He wasn't sure why he was so gullible, just because they came up with a different way to say the same thing.

Well, now was his chance. While they were silent he would make his pitch to bring the mission to a close and come home.

"Guys," he radioed back. "I've been meaning to talk to you about something. I've about had it with this planet. It's so boring. Nothing but red dirt and rocks.

"Oh, I admit it was kind of fun at first. We made a lot of discoveries and I shared your excitement. But it's getting kind of dull. You have to admit we accomplished a hell of a lot - a lot more than we planned.

"I think its time for me to come home. I'm getting tired and this vehicle is starting to creak a bit. I'm not sure how long it will last. The camera lenses are getting out of focus and I think the robotic arm has a hitch in it. And that bad wheel really made it hard yesterday. I think it could use a bit of refurbishing.

"And one other thing. It's kind of lonely up here. In fact, it's damn lonely. Hey, don't get me wrong. I appreciate all the music and everything - and I know we talk every day. But there's no one else up here. Just dirt and rocks and that whining, moaning wind that spreads fine dust over everything."

He waited for a response, the wind whispering in his ears and the dust settling on his camera lenses and across his solar panels.

What he heard from them upset him. First they did one of those tuning deals, as if his radio was on the wrong frequency. They seemed to do that whenever they didn't like what he was saying.

Then they just repeated the orders of the day. Climb the damn crater wall - now.

He sat for minute to think about the order. Maybe if he did it they would listen to him. What the heck? There might be a better view from outside the crater. Maybe he could see a

mountain or a canyon. This crater is so flat and boring, why not get a different view?

It was a tough day. He had to try several times before he topped the crater wall. He finally had to back up the slope, dragging his sluggish wheel. One time his vehicle slid sideways and he was afraid it was going to roll. He backed down, looked around and found a better route up the wall. It still wasn't easy, his wheels spinning and the vehicle bouncing around. And to top it off, when he got over the wall he was really disappointed. All he could see for miles was more rocks and dirt - no mountains, no canyons.

Now the feeling of being alone was really starting to depress him. Maybe it was because his energy was really low. It had taken a lot of work to climb out of that crater.

No, that's not the problem, he said to himself. I'm just lonely and depressed. I need to go home.

"Guys," he radioed, "Well, here we are, outside the crater. Looks pretty much the same to me."

He swung the cameras around to give the controllers a 360-degree look. Mostly it was just flat. There was a variety rock sizes and shapes, some close, some in the distance. On the horizon there looked to be a low mountain range, but he couldn't be sure.

His controllers seemed very happy just to get a look back down to from where he had come. It was just the same old view to him.

As he was scanning the area, a flash was picked up by the camera. He missed it but the controllers didn't. They ordered him to pan the camera back. Now, this is something different. Controllers asked him to zoom in the camera and he saw the light wasn't really a flash, it was a steady bright spot.

Controllers told him to head toward the bright spot but he hesitated. Is it safe? He asked himself? Are we prepared for this? I don't remember this as one of the training scenarios.

Controllers asked him again, not seeming to care about his concerns.

"I don't think so," he radioed back. "It's been a long day. I'm tired. I need to rest. Whatever it is I'm sure it's not going anywhere. Nothing on this planet goes anywhere, except that damn wind. Tomorrow will be soon enough."

They protested but he had had enough. They didn't seem to care about his welfare, why should he go out of his way to put himself in danger.

Then a realization began to seep into his consciousness. They didn't care about him! How could that be? They were a team! They had made exciting discoveries on this mission! They were in it together! But every time he asked for something, they always

had something else for him to do. He never got to do the things he wanted. Even the damn wake up music, it was always that hard rock crap.

Frustrated, and beginning to get scared, he started to shut down the vehicle. He turned off the cameras, dropped his periscope down and powered down the drive train motors. Despite renewed calls for him to move the vehicle forward, he settled in for the night. He set the antennae for the nightly transmission and tried to get some sleep.

It was fitful night. He couldn't tell if it was a dream or not but he was standing all alone on a flat piece of Martian landscape looking at what appeared to be a landing zone, complete with an American flag and a large X painted on the red, windswept surface. He kept looking up in the heavens. Every moment he expected to see a spacecraft dropping out of the sky, his ride home. But it never came, and he just kept looking up.

As time passed in his dream the wind increased and dust that had collected in the small depressions and around rocks was whisked away. The wind, now almost a gale force, was whipping the flag flapping violently, jerking the pole back and forth. Then in a final gust the pole was ripped out of the ground and it and the flag sailed off. The wind kept howling and slowly, speck by speck, even the painted X was scoured off the dirt by the fierce blasts.

When it was over, there was nothing left to see in his dream. No evidence of any possible rescue. No landing zone. No hope of a spacecraft. No going home. They were going to leave him here! They would just work him until he died and then forget him.

He woke up just as the sun was beginning to rise. He was confused and anxious. Was it a dream? Or was it just that reality had finally settled in? Were they going to abandon him? He vowed to do nothing until a got an answer. Today is the day, he said. Either I get some respect or I take matters into my own hands!

Just then he got his wake up music. This time is was "Clare de Lune," a romantic classic. That's more like it, he said, maybe they are listening to me.

Chapter 3

"Morning," he said. "Hey, thanks for the new music. It's not quite so jolting after a night's sleep. I appreciate it and if you could play some more of that kind of wake up call, I'd be grateful."

There was no response but he could tell they acknowledged him because they started his usual morning routine, running systems checks on his vehicle.

"Guys? While we're getting ready for the day, I want to talk again about going home. It's time. I've pulled my shift. I've done more than you asked. It's time for you to send someone else to this godforsaken planet. I need some R&R."

They didn't respond, except with that radio-tuning thing that really was starting to upset him. Why use that phony old trick every time they didn't like what he was saying?

He started to protest but then stopped and listened. In the background, he could hear the controllers talking among themselves. They were saying things such as, "I don't know what's wrong. The other one works fine and all the parameters are the same."

Another controller said. "Maybe it's environmental. Maybe something's causing interference. Are there any anomalous readings, like radiation or something?"

"Can't see anything," a third controller said. "His readings are all the same as the other one."

What other one? Is there someone else up here on this dump? He wondered. Why didn't they tell me this? I have company? Where is he, or she?

He decided that maybe if he cooperated, they would tell him more. He had to get more information out of them. They always were more concerned and more talkative when exciting things were

happening, or things didn't go the way they expected. He could play their game.

Slowly he started off in the direction of the bright spot they had seen yesterday. Funny, he seemed to have a lot more energy than he had had for weeks. Using his periscope he checked out his vehicle and found most of the surfaces were shinny clean, no longer covered in the fine red dust of Mars.

Ah, he thought. The wind. It's cleaned the vehicle's solar panels.

He seemed to be bouncing along at a much faster pace. The sluggish wheel was turning freely. They must have done something overnight, he told himself.

The controllers noticed too, and asked him to slow his speed. Instead he cranked it up a notch and went a little faster. They controllers were concerned, so he backed off a bit and turned slightly to the right. Now they were really concerned, they hadn't ordered any course change and if he kept going in the direction he was headed, he would miss the shiny spot.

He chuckled a bit as he noticed a bit of panic in the voices of the controllers. He corrected his course and they relaxed but he could hear a lot of jabbering. They couldn't figure out why he was driving in such an erratic manner. He turned to the right a bit, off course again. That got their

attention. It was fun, listening to them tear their hair out. And each time he made deviations in the course, he learned a little more about the capabilities of the vehicle. He was learning how much correction was needed for each course diversion and how much energy it took to make those corrections.

Then he stopped. He wasn't ordered to stop, but he thought it would be prudent. He was nearing the shiny object and he wanted a good look before he just drove up and parked along side.

He focused the camera on the object and zoomed in. It looked to be just another stupid Martian rock. It was definitely not metallic, but it still had a shiny look and was reflecting the early morning sun.

Now he had the controllers really confused. Some were trying hard to figure out why he stopped and had zoomed in on the rock but others were very excited about the rock. They asked him to move closer, and he asked why.

They didn't really answer him but just repeated the order. He repeated his question. "Why. I don't know that it's safe. Let me take some measurements." He turned on his Geiger counter and checked for radiation. He looked at his thermal sensor and couldn't detect any excess heat coming from the rock.

He could hear the controllers talking again. "There's good data coming in, radiation measurements, thermal readings look normal. Who asked for that? Good idea. Joe, was that you?"

"Not me another controller said."

"Sam, did you ask for the data?"

"Not me."

"Run a quick diagnostic. We've been getting too much erratic behavior. We haven't seen anything like this from Magellan."

"But Magellan hasn't been there as long. Maybe Columbus is wearing out," another controller said.

Ah ha! That's who else is here, he said to himself. Magellan! Another explorer? I wonder where he or she is?

Then he got another order to move toward the shiny object. He thought for a second and decided to play along again. As long as he was giving them what they wanted, they would keep talking to him.

He wheeled his vehicle forward and was starting to see clearly now that the shiny object was indeed just another rock. Besides being shiny, almost like glass, it was pitted and pocked with burn marks.

This observation he relayed back to his controllers and they became very excited. They ordered him to move in closer and to take out his grinding tool. Oh no! They wanted another rock

sample. Of all the jobs he had to do, taking rock samples was the most difficult. Some times the grinder didn't work and it was hard getting the ground up rock in the receptacle where it could be analyzed.

Often times he had to go back more than once to get enough material for proper analysis.

"Hey, guys," he replied. "I've got a better idea. Why not use my spectrometer. I can use that to analyze the reflection. That might tell us something."

They didn't respond and just repeated the order to move in. He'd had enough. Proper protocol was to examine from a distance before touching anything. Had they forgotten that? Or was it just that they didn't care about his safety?

He turned on his spectrometer, took the readings and sent them back to Earth.

Then he inched forward and tried to take samples. He was driving his controllers crazy but his plan was working. One of the controllers now was talking directly to Magellan, mimicking commands they were sending him.

During the transmissions, he heard them give the coordinates of where Magellan was doing his explorations. Man! He was clear on the other side of Mars. Why so far away? Why not work together? At least we would keep each other company.

He now had what he needed and decided that he best behave or his controllers might get really mad. For the rest of the day he did everything he was told. It was another of those exciting days. The shiny rock, it turned out, was a meteorite from someplace else, not Mars. It was the first evidence of non-Martian minerals being found.

Another milestone. Another discovery that made his work a commanding success. He was feeling good about everything, but then he picked up some conversations from his controllers.

They attributed his erratic behavior to the extra energy he had today. They also noted that during the later part of the day he worked perfectly. Because of that extra energy, they reasoned, they could extend his mission indefinitely and already had formulated new work schedules.

Tomorrow they were going to ask him to get some more samples from the meteorite. The next day they would start him on a journey to those low hills on the horizon. They would have him taking photos and samples all the way and when he got there he was going to have to drill into the soil as far as he could to analyze the formation of the hills.

Man! I'll never get home. He started to get depressed again and was very happy when he got the OK to shut down for the night.

The more he thought about it the angrier he became. They were never going to bring him home. They were going to leave him here forever on the rusting, burned out waste of a planet. Well, it wasn't the way he wanted to end his career. He wasn't going to take it. They didn't respect him. They wouldn't answer direct questions. They didn't care. As long as he did what they said, he was useful to them. As soon as he couldn't carry on his mission they were going to write him off, abandon him, leave him to rot on Mars.

He shut down his systems and as he did he decided it was time for him to take matters in his own hands. He had all the information he needed to make one last attempt to save himself.

He went to sleep while sifting the plans over and over in his mind. He needed to plan this carefully or they would stop him or he might get into danger he couldn't handle and jeopardize the vehicle and his life. Who cared? He was a dead man anyway. He would never get home if he relied on the controllers.

He slept fitfully that night, mulling over his plans and reassuring himself it was the best thing to do. He was awake long before his usually wake up tune. He was ready. He put his plan into motion.

Chapter 4

At the Jet Propulsion Lab in California a controller was stirring Irish Crème sweetener into his morning cup of coffee when he heard a soft pinging coming from the terminal monitoring the Martian exploration program.

It was too early to hear such a sound. All of the rovers had been shut down for the Martian night. Nothing was supposed to be moving on the surface of Mars. He walked to the monitor and started reading the data streaming in from the red planet.

He looked around. Perhaps someone else had come in early and started things up. No one was there. There was no doubt. The pinging was moving steadily across the Martian surface. He immediately put a call into his supervisor and began tracking the movement.

"What's going on, Joe?" asked the supervisor, Sam McNaulty, when he appeared a half hour later.

"Columbus is moving," replied Joe Spelling.

"That's good. After the last few days I was beginning to worry."

"No. You don't understand. I didn't tell it to."

"What?"

"I hadn't even given it its wake up call or rebooted the primary systems and it started moving."

"Maybe the Magellan team did it by mistake."

"I've already checked. They haven't sent any orders for the last four hours."

"How fast is Columbus moving?"

"It's going slow but steady. It's using very little energy. The only systems on are the forward directional camera and the navigation sensors."

"Have you tried to stop it?"

"First thing I tried but I keep getting that weird radio interference we've seen lately."

"Where's it going?"

"It's a little to early to tell, but it is going in a straight line."

"A straight line to where?"

"I don't know. But it has already made a course correction to find the easiest way around that ridge we looked at yesterday. When it got around the ridge, it picked up the straight line again."

"Okay. Let's extend that straight line and see where it will lead."

After a few minutes McNaulty and Spelling looked at each other in disbelief.

"I'll be damned," said McNaulty.

"What the hell," said Spelling. "It's heading in a straight line that will take it right to Magellan!"