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Designed by Beth Sparkman and Justin Ahrens

Edited by Ramona Cramer Tucker

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CHAPTER 1

Cave-in!

The wheels of the robot body under my control hummed as the robot sped across the red, packed sands of the flat valley floor toward the hills about five miles from the dome.

Thin Martian wind whistled around me, picking up the grains of sand that the robot wheels sent flying into the air. The sky was butterscotch colored, the sun a perfect circle of blue. Thin streaks of light blue clouds hung above the distant mountain peaks.

But I wasn't about to spend any energy appreciating the beauty of the Martian landscape.

Not with a cave-in ahead and desperate scientists waiting for whatever rescue attempt was possible. Robot bodies don't sweat with fear. But if they did, my own fear would have beaded on the shiny surface of the robot's titanium shell. While I was still in the dome, on a laboratory bed using X-ray waves to direct the robot body, all my thoughts were frantic with total fear and worry.

Once before I'd been sent on a rescue mission. A real rescue mission, instead of the usual virtual-reality tests for the robot body that I'd spent years learning to handle as if it were my own body. The first rescue mission had been to

search for only one person, lost in the cornfields of the science station's greenhouse.

This time was just as real.

And far more frightening.

Two hours earlier, four people in space suits had walked into a cave to take rock samples. They were searching for traces of ancient water activity and fossil bacteria. According to standard field procedure, they'd sent back their activities on real-time video transmissions beamed directly to the dome. An hour later—only 60 minutes ago—the images and their voices had stopped abruptly, thrown into blackness and drowned out by a horrible rumbling that could only be caused by the collapse of the cave's ceiling. Now all that remained to give an indication of their location deep inside the rock were the signals thrown by the g.p.u. in each of their space suits—a global positioning unit that bounced sound waves off the twin satellites that orbited Mars.

Four signals then beeped steadily, clustered together where the four people had been buried alive.

If the weight of the rock had not crushed them, they had about three days to live. That was as long as their oxygen and water tubes would last.

Back at the dome, a rescue team was being assembled. At best, they would be ready in another hour. Which meant anything and everything I could do quickly with the robot might make a crucial difference in the survival rate of those four people trapped in the cave-in.

Most terrifying of all, one of the g.p.u. signals came from the space suit of my best friend, Rawling McTigre, director of the Mars Project.