

Joshua, a brave, teenage alien scientist risks everything to make a life on Earth. Between strange space communications and intergalactic deception, things get really crazy and Joshua finds himself making the most crucial decisions of his life.

Joshua: Between Two Worlds

By Patricia Miller

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BOOK 3

JOSHUA

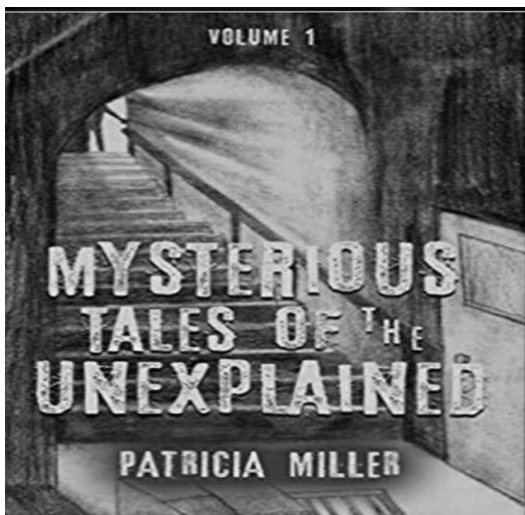
Between Two Worlds



Patricia Miller



FIND BOOKS 1 & 2 IN THIS EXCITING YA SCI FI
ROMANCE TRILOGY



FOR MYSTERY LOVERS

FACEBOOK @ PATRICIAMILLERAUTHOR
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SIX MONTHS EARLIER

1

Friends, Ice Cream & Science

“I’m telling you,” Cole said indignantly. “Butter pecan is the best ice cream flavor on the planet.” Along with Emma, Cole, Mani, and Rick, I stood in line at The Dilly Dally ice cream stand, above which the sun peeked out from behind the clouds. May had just begun and all of us were celebrating the end of another college semester. At least for Emma, Cole, and I, that is.

“Honestly,” answered Mani. “I don’t care what flavors they have. I’m just starved for ice cream.” Her hands were clasped together as her body restlessly twitched, her purse brushing up and down against my side. I stepped back a little and gave Emma a smirk.

“I think you are obsessed with ice cream,” Emma teased. “I don’t know how you stay so trim, eating it right and left the way you do.” Emma then cast her eyes upon the bright pink crop top and black miniskirt Mani was wearing. Emma called Mani a fashionista. Huh. Until then, I’d just thought she dressed silly.

Mani shot me a sideways look: “Well, we have a little secret or two, don’t we, Josh?”

“Mani...” Yep, I’d tried to stop her from completing her sentence, without a shred of success.

“Great, now you let the...what is it...dog, mouse?” I struggled, my eyebrows lowering.

“Cat, you dimwit.” Emma lightly hit me on my chest. “The phrase is ‘let the cat out of the bag,’ and yes—she most certainly did.” She then pierced her eyes into Mani: “Are you telling me that Theos has invented something that keeps your weight down?”

“Ummm...” Mani’s volume was low, her sound tucked deep under her breath.

Our cones were ready. We each raised our hands to take them, then turned to walk in the direction of the patio, where rows and rows of umbrella tables and chairs awaited. Mani and Emma walked a bit ahead of us, whispering amongst themselves. I vaguely heard Mani say, “I’ll tell ya later,” after which they both giggled a bit.

“Mani, we don’t know for sure that it would work on Earthlings...”

Emma frowned and said, “No one was asking you, Josh.”

They continued to walk ahead of the rest of us. I licked the side of my cone, but the melting process seemed to stay one step ahead of me. “Tell me something, guys,” I said to Cole and Rick. “Why would anyone be putting a cat in a bag anyhow? I mean, I know it’s just a figure of speech, but how could such a phrase come about?”

Cole answered my question with a simple shrug. They then laughed and nudged me as we continued to walk behind the girls. Emma and Mani found a table

toward the back of the patio, where it was shaded. We all sat down.

“Well,” Cole exclaimed as he raised his cone in a toast. “Here’s to another semester of college in the books.” We each raised our cones, bumping them together.

“Actually,” Emma said, staring at me from the corners of her eyes. “Josh has something extra to celebrate as well.”

I’d wanted to tell them another time, but it looked like the time would be now. So I cleared my throat and looked in Cole’s direction: “It seems that I won’t be returning to the university next semester with you and Emma, Cole.”

Cole screwed his eyes up, looking back and forth between me and Emma. “I...I don’t understand. What do you mean?” He then looked at Mani.

“Don’t look at me. I don’t know what he’s talking about,” she declared.

Everyone except for Cole realized our cones were melting out of control and paused the conversation to keep them from making a mess all over the table. Before continuing, I looked over my shoulder to make sure no one was listening. Cole followed my lead, looking everywhere I looked.

“Um.” Cole looked around then rolled his eyes. “Excuse me. What exactly are we looking for?”

Finding his voice a bit too loud, I shushed him and bent inward over the table. The others did the same, the better to hear. “Keep your voices down,” I directed.

Then out it came: “So, right after we all got back from Theos, I got an email from the dean of the University Chemistry Department. I’ll save you the long story by just getting to the end: I have been recruited to join the Space Travel Research Department. It’s a branch of the U.S. government.” I paused, letting it soak in.

Crickets. They stared blankly, as if I hadn’t said a thing. They could have been stone statues. When I waved my hand before their faces as if checking to see whether they were conscious, Cole batted it away.

“Stop it, you idiot!” he bellowed.

After the people at the nearby tables stopped gawking at us, Emma took her turn to speak: “Cole,” she whispered, secretively and softly, “Josh will be continuing his studies within the government.”

“You won’t be in classes here anymore?” He looked down, realizing he had better tend to his cone. With a shove and a crunch, his mouth was completely full! *Good! That should keep his chops busy for a few seconds, so I can explain...*

“Cole,” I whispered. “This is Top Secret. No one can know about me working for the government...or about the Space Travel Research Department for that matter.”

His forehead scrunched up. “Everyone knows the government has people working in space travel. It’s called NASA.” *Ugh. Sometimes he is so naïve.* I looked over at Emma. *Let’s see, how can I wrap this conversation up quickly so I can spend some time with Emma alone?*

“Cole,” I explained, “yes, everyone knows about NASA and that’s all everyone is *supposed* to know about. Like I said, the department I will be working in is Top Secret. Its purpose is to research long distance space travel.” I paused and let him chew on it for a while, but it seemed Mani also wanted to weigh in...

“So, you might actually be able to help them discover what we Theosians already know.” Her tone was slightly snarky, but that was typical of Mani. “Meaning, how to travel across the galaxy and beyond?”

“Exactly,” I answered with a grin. I decided it was more than time to finish devouring my cone. Everyone else seemed to make the same decision, as the conversation paused and we scarfed them down.

“Wow,” Cole said, finally breaking the silence. “Will you be moving to Washington, D.C.?” He looked a bit on the sad side as he slurped his pop.

“No,” I answered. “They want me to keep my cover as a university student. I will stay right where I am and do my research in an outbuilding on campus. The dean of the Chemistry department is also on the government payroll. I guess it’s kind of like a secret society.”

“Damn,” said my astonished friend. “Does every university have this secret society?”

“I’m not privileged enough to know all that.” I looked around at all of them, deciding on the spot that it was time to be serious. “Listen, the government is not only trusting me, but my friends, too. You guys

don't know it, but they have already thoroughly checked out all of you."

They all started talking at the same time: "Wait a minute." "What do you mean checked us out?" "How did they do that without us knowing?" All their questions seemed to jumble together. The only one who wasn't asking anything was Emma. She just smiled as they all ranted.

I held my hand up to stop them. "Listen. Listen, please. It's all completed. All you guys need to remember is that what I just told you goes no further." I gave each of them a stern look in the eyes. "Do you all understand? My future as a scientist depends on this never being shared with anyone other than the five of us. Is that clear?"

They all still looked like frozen gotlets from my home planet, Theos. I guess the best Earth comparison would be "deer in the headlights." Or is that horses? Anyway, everyone looked sad. I wiped imaginary ice cream off the table in front of me with a paper napkin while I tried to figure out what to say next. Luckily, Emma jumped in and helped.

"This is a really awesome opportunity for Josh. I'm going to miss working with him in the library, but we are his friends. Ya know? The people who love and support him?" Her eyes glanced from one to the other.

"So, you won't be moving to D.C. then?" Cole asked a second time.

"No," I said emphatically. "I will go there from time to time, though."

“This is crazy,” said Cole. “I have a million questions.”

“You might as well save them,” I said, grinning. “I probably can’t answer them all.”

Mani's New Place

I loved the weather on Theos, but I had to admit that summers on Earth, in Ohio specifically, were just fantastic. Birds singing; flowers sprouting up; green, full trees; and warm temperatures. With summer all year round on Theos, you really didn't appreciate just how lovely it is, since it never went away. *Yeah, try to remind yourself of this when you're shoveling out your car after it's buried in ten feet of snow! Geez! Ohio's not winning any prizes for its winters!*

Mani had moved into a new place. Having now graduated from high school, she realized her talents could bring her quite a salary, if she had an Earthly college education. So, since she had studied far beyond this level on Theos, I gave in and pulled some strings and got her a lab job in a local petroleum company. One catch: she had to complete her college degree from Earth online. She agreed, and this new job made it possible for her to move into a condo on the outskirts of campus. After all, she didn't want to be too far away from Cole, did she?

"Mani," said Emma between sips of lemonade. "I really love your new place."

"Thanks," said Mani, who then sprung into a long, largely one-sided conversation about wall decorations, furniture, and wall colors.

We all sat on the patio outside Mani's rear sliding doors, in the warmth and sunshine, but protected by an umbrella over our heads. Me, Rick, Emma, Cole, and Mani were snacking on appetizers from a local eatery and all sipping lemonade. I was trying not to squirm though I found my clothing to be a bit uncomfortable. Men's shorts on Earth were made slightly different from those on Theos, but I was trying to get accustomed to the feeling. *I should have brought back some Theosian shorts from our trip!*

"I helped her pick it out," Cole chimed in proudly. "I only wish I were closer to graduation so I could move out of the dorm. But with my heavy schedule this year, I have to be close by."

"I understand," said Mani. "You need to finish your degree."

Cole's head hung low. If I read his expression right, he looked disappointed. But, I wasn't always successful with reading facial expressions.

"Don't worry," she said, covering his hand with hers. "We'll still see plenty of each other."

She smiled at him, but underneath I suspected something else was going on inside of her. Though my ability to read Earth people hadn't improved much, this was Mani. I knew her, and something was bothering her. When everyone else was either looking at their plates or checking social media on their cell phones, she caught me looking at her, then quickly diverted attention to something else. *Now that's not Mani's happy face for sure!*

“Well, I’ll just go in and make some more lemonade.” Mani’s eyes fell onto the center of the table, after which she popped up out of her chair, grabbed the large glass pitcher, and started to walk toward the sliding doors, which led right into the dining room. Cole quickly jumped up to follow her.

“Here, let me get the door for you.” He slid the door open as she walked through, then followed in behind. I looked at Emma and Rick and immediately felt the desire to acquire additional information on the matter.

“OK. What gives?” I asked them.

“What?” Emma replied.

“What’s bothering Mani? I mean, I know there’s all sorts of women stuff I don’t get, but it seems to me there’s something on her mind other than her new job and this condo,” I explained.

Emma took a deep breath and sighed. “Yeah, I think you’re right,” she answered. “I think Cole’s getting serious and she’s not ready. I can’t be certain, but that’s my guess.”

“Well,” I said. “He’s still in school, so it’s not like their relationship can be any more serious right now. Right? What’s she all worried about?”

“Now...” Emma seemed to be getting ready to scold me. “I know how things work on Theos and I know on your planet there is some kind of period of time before couples marry, just like here on Earth. I just can’t remember what it’s called...”

“Oh, you mean moulaton? When a couple announces they are planning to get married?”

“Something like that.” Emma continued, “Here on Earth, one asks the other to marry them. It’s usually the man, but it can be either. If the other answers yes, then they are engaged.”

“I know how engagements work on Earth, Emma,” I stated. “You forget all the studying I did before I came here.” But when my ego took a break, what she was saying set in. Shocked wasn’t a strong enough word to describe how I felt. “Is Cole thinking about asking Mani to marry him? I’m his best friend; why am I finding this out from you and not him?” *Are you kidding me? How could I have missed that?*

“Josh, I know you will find this hard to believe, but this is not about you,” Emma retorted with an ornery smile.

Rick laughed. “I think I know what Emma is getting at.” He looked from me to Emma. “You think she’s afraid that he’ll ask her, don’t you?”

“You got it!” Emma said, snapping her fingers.

“Afraid? Mani?” I teased. “Mani isn’t and has never been afraid of anything. Ever! Period!” *And they think I don’t pick up on personal details! I know that much about Mani, for sure.*

“Josh might have you there, Emma,” Rick agreed. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned about Mani, it’s that fear has no place in her world.”

“OK, you Theosian geniuses. You just don’t get it, do you?” Emma asked.

I looked at Rick. His face looked as blank as my mind was at that very second. *OK. What am I missing?*

“Listen and learn,” Emma instructed. “Mani is afraid of Cole asking her because she’s not ready and she doesn’t want to have to say no because it would break his heart.”

“Well, that’s an easy fix,” I said confidently. “I’ll just take him aside and tell him not to ask her.”

“No you won’t!” Emma just about yelled. “Don’t either of you say a word to either of them. This requires the soft touch of a woman.” Her eyes were fiery. “*I will handle it.*”

“Are you sure? I can just...”

But Emma cut me off sternly:

“No, you won’t.” She looked back and forth between Rick and me. “Neither of you do or say anything to either of them about this. Is that clear?”

We looked her straight in the eyes. I got the feeling, at that moment, that we had to. *I don’t understand how, but I think Emma just scared me a little. Never admitting that one!*

Rick must have felt the same, because we both answered simultaneously before going back to eating appetizers.

“Got it!”

3

EMMA

I have to honestly say that sometimes I wonder if the male sex actually has a brain. I know Josh is a genius and all, but come on! Does he really think it would be a good idea for him to butt in and tell Cole Mani doesn't want to marry him? He sure is smart when it comes to space and science and all that. But, when it comes to relationships, wow—he doesn't have a clue.

On the drive home from Mani's new place, Josh was weirdly quiet. He was driving safely and all, but his mind sure wasn't there. I tried being patient but...yeah...that didn't last long.

"So, what is it?" I asked. He didn't seem to hear me. I had to repeat it. "Josh," I said, a bit firmer. "What's on your mind?"

He jolted, turned his head toward me with a jerk. "What do you mean?" He then looked back at the road, turned and parked in the lot beside my apartment.

"It's obvious that something's on your Theosian mind, so give it up," I said as we got out and grabbed our items to take inside.

"Well," he stammered. "I know you said it was dumb, but I am a little upset that everyone else knew Cole was thinking of asking Mani to marry him but me."

“I don’t know what you mean by everyone,” I corrected him. “Rick didn’t know and Cole obviously doesn’t know, so it looks like you are not the only one who didn’t know.”

“OK. OK,” he said with a sort of whine. “It wasn’t everyone. But, he’s my best friend. Shouldn’t he have told me or shouldn’t I have known somehow?”

“I think you’re overreacting, Josh.” As we entered the door to his apartment, I tried to be a little more compassionate than I’d been at Mani’s. “Josh, friendship doesn’t always work that way. Besides, the reason I knew was because girls just pick up on that sort of stuff better and quicker than guys. It’s just the way it is.”

We put away the leftovers we’d brought back with us then sat down on the couch. He moved up close to me and put his arm around me, like he usually did. “Are you sure that’s what’s happening with them?” he asked.

“You can trust my instinct on this, Josh. I’m sure.” As I spoke I looked up at him and began getting lost in his bright, sparkling eyes. He got the message and planted one right on me.

New Adventures. New Anxieties.

The next day was orientation day at my new job, via a virtual platform. I sat in an office in the science lab on campus and logged on to a video conference call with three other people, all above me in seniority. After the required discussions about security and safety, our talk turned a bit less formal.

I did my best to try and remember everyone's names. George was tall and round and always talking about his wife, Stella. With 20 years of experience in space travel research, he had a long list of credentials, awards, and special commendations. Surprisingly, though, he never treated me like a stupid, young scientist with little-to-no experience (in accordance with what they “knew” about me).

While George looked all his 48 years, Jeannie to me, barely looked a day over 30, if that. I was about to ask her how old she was when I remembered that Cole had taught me that doing so to Earth females was nothing short of requesting to be slapped. She had sparkling blue eyes and sleek golden hair that glistened under light. *Sure is hard to not look at her without thinking what a beauty she is. After all, she's probably not many years older than me...*

A specialist in languages and the nuances of social interactions, it seemed she had a PhD in Psychology and another in Sociology. George said her specialty

was societal development. *Looks like they fully expect to meet new societies. Otherwise, it wouldn't make much sense to have her on this team!*

Uh—careful Josh, can't slip up and say something that will give away that you aren't from around here. Jeannie is sure to catch any little slip-ups you might make. She was always talking about her 24-year-old daughter, and it was hard not to imagine what a beauty she probably was, given her mother's good looks. I could almost hear Cole saying, "Down Boy!"

Nathan was only 1-2 years older than me. Seemed he was the university choice from 2 years ago. I was told that no one had caught their eye again until this year, when I was invited to join. Nathan had finished 2 undergraduate degrees while working for the U.S. on this space travel research committee. *Hmmm. Only 2 degrees? Must be lazy!*

"Alright," George spoke authoritatively. "Now, since we all understand that no communication is to occur outside this secure system, we can now get on to the topics of our research."

As I listened to the ensuing report, something suddenly occurred to me: *This is really big stuff! Wow. I never would have guessed Earth to be this ambitious...or this advanced. They know way more than they tell the general public! You wouldn't see or hear any of this on NASA websites or television news reports. For good reason, I'm sure.*

The summer seemed over in a flash. Emma and Cole started preparing for the start of next semester, their junior year. I overheard them talking about their classes and classmates. While I was working hard not to be what Emma called a “controlling jerk of a boyfriend,” I guess I'd never really thought about guys being in her classes and study groups before. I'm sure guys were *always* in her classes. They had to be. But, all of the sudden the thought didn't sit well with me. And until this year, Emma hadn't joined study groups, at least not that I knew of. Evidently, she would this year.

“This advanced class they call 'The Evolution of Dance' is supposed to be super hard. That's what everyone says, anyways. I'm sure glad I already found a place in a study group.” Emma was looking through textbooks she had just purchased. I meanwhile was skimming over the assigned reading George had emailed to each of the committee members—and half-listening, I guess. “Josh,” Emma said with her voice slightly raised. “Are you even listening to me?”

“Of course I am,” I said. But—guess I should have looked up when I said that. If I had, I might have ducked beneath the notebook flying across the room in my direction. “What the—?” I yelled as it bounced off the side of my head and fell at my feet.

“I could have been saying anything. But, you have no idea what it was because you weren't listening, were you?” *Do all humans' eyes grow in size when they are angered?*

OK, I thought. What would be the right approach here? I can either admit she was right and apologize, or I can spit back the few words I think I heard and take my chances of them being correct. If I didn't hear right, well...that could lead to a lot of ugliness. But—I'm feeling lucky. I'll choose the latter!

"I heard you, Emma. You were talking about one of your classes," I said, wondering if it was enough to get me out of trouble.

"Yes," she said, a little less steam in her voice. "I was telling you that I'm glad I found a study group. I think it will help..."

Phew! Trouble averted! She continued for a few minutes, and soon I looked back at my email and continued to read. But it wasn't long before I realized she had been repeating something over and over. It was a name. Being the attentive boyfriend that I am...I directed my attention her way and again started listening to her every word...

"Jason is super smart. He's gotten tons of A's and Debbie says his study group is the best one..." She was going on and on!

"Um," I interjected. So, you are in Jason's study group?"

"Yep," she answered, not looking up from the textbook in her hand.

"And," I continued, "Debbie and Jason are dating, right?"

Emma set the textbook down and started to prepare her binders for her classes by stacking them on her desk, along with the associated textbooks. "No,

silly,” she said, not looking up and totally unaware of where I was going. “Don’t you remember me telling you that Debbie is seeing Roger? You know, he’s the resident assistant in the dorm next to hers.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to convincingly play along. “Oh, that’s right.” I paused before deciding on my next inquiry: “And Jason is dating who?”

She still didn’t look up, so I knew my questions so far were not setting off any alarms. “Nobody, I think. I mean, I would be surprised if he was dating anyone. I don’t know how anyone gets such perfect grades if they aren’t studying all the time. I can’t imagine he has time to think about anything but his schooling.”

Yeah. Right. Call me jealous, but unless he’s gay or blind, I can’t imagine he would take one look at Emma and not salivate. All men, Theosian and Human, would. Emma is just plain beautiful. Just look at her!

“Maybe sometime I can meet your friends from your classes?” I asked, hiding my jealousy and fear of losing her quite well, if I do say so myself.

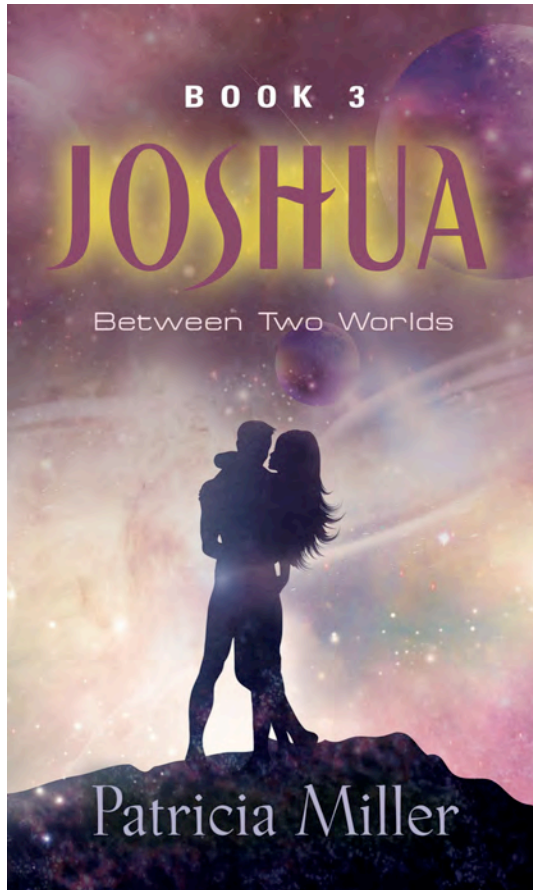
Putting the last of her notebooks and folders atop the stack on her desk, she walked over to me, leaned down, and kissed me gently. She then smiled and spoke softly: “Of course you can. Maybe meeting them would remove the fear you have of Jason being after me.” She snickered, tapped me playfully on the nose, and walked off giggling into the kitchen.

After a pause, I squawked: “I never said I was afraid of that!” My once “nonchalant” voice had gone missing. She poked her face around the corner.

“You didn’t have to,” she smirked, and disappeared again.

Do I respond? Just let it go? I didn’t get to decide, as my cell phone buzzed, indicating an incoming text message. I quickly read it. It didn’t exactly leave me with a good feeling. It was Mani.

TROUBLE IN THE LAB. I’M HERE BY MYSELF. COME NOW!



Joshua, a brave, teenage alien scientist risks everything to make a life on Earth. Between strange space communications and intergalactic deception, things get really crazy and Joshua finds himself making the most crucial decisions of his life.

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