

Martian Dreams

a novel by
Linda Naughton

© 2007 by Linda Naughton.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher or author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

ISBN: 978-1494416348

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter One

14 December 2180

Caitlin

The explosion came without warning, shattering the quiet night in the domed city. The shockwave turned the southwest corner of the guardhouse into a million shards of brick, mortar and glass. The subsequent fireball stretched out in every direction before collapsing back in upon itself. Caitlin MacIntyre let out a shocked cry and slammed on the brakes, bringing her ambulance to a screeching halt in the middle of Forbes Street. The vehicle was a good fifty yards from the guardhouse, out of any immediate danger, but Caitlin still heard the metallic patter of debris raining down on the roof and hood.

"Holy shit!" The stunned outburst came from Caitlin's partner, Vince Castellano. At thirty-two, Vince Castellano was a few years older than Caitlin, but his youthful good looks belied his age. The olive cast to his skin and his short black hair – combed neatly into place - were a testament to his heritage. Caitlin and Vince were polar opposites in

many ways: Irish and Italian, Protestant and Catholic, reserved and outgoing, pragmatic and optimistic. It was a wonder sometimes that they got along at all, but they had been best friends for ten years.

The guardhouse roof was sagging, half its support gone, and smoke billowed through what was left of the ceiling. It drifted up toward the rafters of the clear city dome high above, where the air scrubbers struggled to keep the ash and fumes from being recycled into the city's breathing supply. Waycross, like all Martian cities, was encased in a massive dome to protect the inhabitants from the inhospitable conditions outside. Fire was an ever-present danger in an enclosed environment such as this, and yet the Waycross Fire and Rescue department was woefully understaffed.

Caitlin reached for the radio microphone mounted on the dashboard, knowing its location instinctively without having to tear her eyes off the burning structure. "Medic 1 to Dispatch: There's just been an explosion at the Fort's guardhouse. We're going to need both engines and the other ambulance. Unknown how many are injured." Caitlin's voice was a pitch higher than normal, her heart pounding wildly. Bombings were disturbingly common in the Martian cities, and the fire department responded to dozens of incidents each year. Even so, Caitlin had only witnessed one other in person. Usually the firefighters arrived after the fact.

She heard the dispatcher acknowledge the message and activate the alert tone for the rest of the department. It would take them at least ten minutes to arrive, and in the mean time Caitlin and Vince would be on their own. It didn't sound like long, but Caitlin knew from experience just how long minutes can seem in an emergency. She started the

ambulance moving again, approaching the fort.

"Can't they wait till morning to pull this shit?" Vince griped, rubbing his eyes wearily. His new baby had been keeping him from getting much sleep at home, and the fire station was his refuge. Now they'd probably be up all night handling the fire. "Wasn't there a ceasefire?"

Caitlin shook her head. "No. They've been talking about it, but the Federation never met the terms." Caitlin followed the news very closely – perhaps even more attentively than most Martian colonists. The political wing of the independence movement made peace overtures in the hopes of getting some concessions: amnesty for political prisoners, investigations into charges of Peacekeeper brutality, and so on. But the Federation refused to compromise, expecting the rebels to lay down their arms in exchange for nothing but more empty promises. It was hardly a surprise when the deal fell through.

There was an electronics factory across the street from the fort, and Caitlin pulled into its loading dock - close enough to the scene to render assistance, but far enough away to be safe in case there was a second attack. The guardhouse was burning brightly now, flames erupting from every opening. "There's no way anyone's alive in there," she murmured, and even Vince didn't contradict her. Broken glass and charred chunks of brick had been hurled for a hundred yards by the blast, making the street look like a war zone. Peacekeeper soldiers charged out of their barracks, many donning full battle gear over their black uniforms as if they feared the bombing was the prelude to an invasion. One tried to get close enough to the fire to help the men inside, but the oppressive heat quickly turned him back.

Caitlin hopped out of the ambulance cab and started

fetching the equipment they would need. She grabbed a helmet and flame-resistant bunker jacket for each of them from the driver's side compartment, and went to join Vince on the other side. She had just come around the front of the truck when she noticed a Peacekeeper pointing at the ambulance from across the street. From the way he was shouting at the other soldiers, she assumed he was in charge, but he was wearing civilian clothes. His short black hair was slightly longer than the standard Peacekeeper buzz cut. About the only thing that identified him as a soldier was the pistol in his hand.

The officer gathered up two other soldiers and began marching toward the ambulance. Frowning, Caitlin wondered what they wanted. Probably just to hassle us for not rushing into the burning guardhouse to "save" their friends, she thought. She braced herself for an argument and mentally prepared her responses. *It's too dangerous*, she would tell him. *We need to wait for the fire engines to arrive*. She wouldn't tell them that there was little hope of anyone surviving that inferno; that if his friends were lucky, the explosion got them before the fire did.

"Step away from the vehicle! Drop the bags and raise your hands!" The officer's shout took Caitlin completely by surprise, and at first she didn't know how to react. He quickened his pace, leveling his pistol at Vince.

Vince glanced at her, his face mirroring her own confusion, and all she could do was shake her head in bafflement. Vince dropped the medical kit he was holding and stepped forward cautiously, his hands out to the sides in a non-threatening gesture. "What's the problem?"

The officer didn't answer. He closed on Vince, weapon still trained on him, and ordered, "On the ground!"

Now!" Caitlin flinched as the pistol drifted in her direction. "You, too!"

The Peacekeepers were now just a few feet away from Vince. One of them was a Hispanic man who wore a muscle shirt in addition to his standard-issue black uniform trousers. He was a powerfully built individual, taller even than Vince, with a broad chest and arms that would make any weightlifter proud. "He said on the ground, asshole!" Without slowing down, the soldier swung his rifle and clubbed Vince in the midsection. Vince doubled over, dropping to his knees and gasping for air. The soldier pushed him facedown onto the ground, shouting, "You deaf? Or just stupid?" He kicked Vince in the side and then slipped zip-ties around his hands.

"Stop it!" Caitlin dropped the bunker gear and charged forward without thinking. She stopped short, skidding to a halt, as the officer turned his pistol on her. A jolt of fear overcame her anger and she raised her hands, fists clenched in helpless frustration. "What the hell is the matter with you? We're paramedics, for God's sake!"

The officer sized her up with a piercing, dark-eyed stare. He was ruggedly handsome, with thick eyebrows and a shadow of stubble on his jaw. Now that he was closer, Caitlin noticed the military police badge dangling from a chain around his neck. "Lucky for us you just *happened* to be driving by."

Caitlin cast a concerned glance at Vince, who was still trying to catch his breath. Another Peacekeeper stood watch over him, as if he were some kind of dangerous prisoner instead of an innocent paramedic. The Hispanic soldier turned his attention to Caitlin. Grabbing her arm hard enough to leave a bruise, he turned her around and shoved her face-first against the side of the ambulance. Caitlin

couldn't believe this was happening. What the hell were they doing? But then the sinking realization hit her. "My God, you think we had something to do with this?"

Smirking, the officer ignored her. "Santiago, have EOD secure that truck, and put them under guard until we can check out their story." Caitlin stared at him, stunned speechless. This was surreal. Everyone in the city was always complaining about the fire department taking too long to respond. Now they happened to be in the right place at the right time, and they were getting arrested for it.

"This is insane!" Caitlin protested as the officer started walking away. "We were on our way back from a call at Ferro Electronics. Check with the dispatcher!" But the officer wasn't listening; he was already busy shouting orders to some other Peacekeepers.

Santiago's low voice rumbled in her ear. "Don't worry, chica, we'll check out everything. We're very thorough..." He proceeded to frisk her, taking great relish in demonstrating how thorough he could be. Caitlin gritted her teeth, her cheeks burning. It took all her willpower to keep from spinning around and slapping him. When he was finished, he twisted her arms behind her and Caitlin felt the tight pressure of zip-ties pulled around her wrists. "This way," he said, tugging on her arm so she would follow. The other soldier hauled Vince to his feet and started dragging him toward the sidewalk in front of the fort.

The familiar blast of a fire engine horn echoed in the dome, still some distance away. Caitlin shuddered, feeling a chill despite the heat radiating from the burning guardhouse, and prayed that the Peacekeepers would check out their story before doing anything rash.

#

Jack

Captain Jack Farland glanced over his shoulder, watching as Sergeant Santiago led the two prisoners away. They may very well be who they claimed, but their arrival so soon after the explosion was suspicious. Jack didn't believe in coincidence. Just last month, a group in Lowell had placed a car bomb in a delivery van outside the Peacekeeper base there. The plan had been foiled, but Jack wouldn't put it past the rebels to try the same thing again. You could pack a lot of explosives into the back of an ambulance. He saw the Explosive Ordinance Disposal squad setting up their scanners around the ambulance parked across the street. If there were a bomb inside that truck, they would know soon.

Turning his attention back to the remnants of the guardhouse, Jack shook his head in disgust. What a disaster. The last six months had seen a dramatic rise in rebel activity: sabotage, hit and run attacks on Peacekeeper patrols, raids on outlying supply depots, and now this – a strike against the stronghold of the Federation's garrison in Waycross. The physical damage was minimal; Jack was sure the gate would be back in service by the end of the week. But the psychological effects would linger for months. He could already see the fear etched in the faces of the young soldiers gathered nearby. All they could do was stand and stare, their imaginations running wild. It could have been any one of them in there.

"Get back to your posts!" Jack shouted. "This isn't a show." Those nearest to him scattered, but Jack could tell they didn't go far. He wasn't their commanding officer, and despite the military police badge draped around his neck, his words carried little weight. Scowling, Jack looked around and

spotted another officer standing nearby. "Cerulli!" The man turned upon hearing his name, and Jack closed the distance between them rapidly. "What the hell are all these men doing?"

Captain Anthony Cerulli met Jack's scowl with a glare. "We're a little busy here, Farland."

"Too busy to clear the damn area? You've got at least twenty men doing nothing but wandering around the crime scene. You planning to sell tickets?"

"I've got more important things to worry about than your precious crime scene, Farland. This could be the prelude to another attack. My men have to secure the area."

The fire department was beginning to arrive, the horn on the lead engine blaring to move milling soldiers out of their way. Jack snorted, gesturing in that direction. "Your men are standing around with their thumbs up their asses."

Cerulli frowned, and for a moment Jack thought he would ignore him out of sheer spite. But then Cerulli turned to one of his men and said, "Sergeant, I want this area cleared of non-essential personnel immediately. Set up a perimeter. I don't want reporters or bystanders wandering in."

Jack stepped back as Cerulli directed his men, feeling more frustrated than triumphant. Dealing with Cerulli was always a chore, and Jack frequently had to remind himself that they were on the same side. He knew the reason for the hostility: Cerulli wanted his job. Cerulli had the thankless task of managing the several hundred young enlisted soldiers responsible for security operations in the city. Jack, on the other hand, was a military police officer in charge of Fort McChord's counter-terrorism taskforce. He was as much a detective as he was a soldier, and his small, highly skilled team had thwarted more terrorist attacks than any other group on

Mars. It was a glamorous position, and it put him on the fast track to Major.

Still, it was not without its problems. Today's attack was a black eye for the taskforce. More than that, though, Jack saw it as a personal failure. He wanted the bastards that did this. He wanted them badly.

Jack moved closer to the guardhouse. He could feel the heat on his face, even from a distance. The building was completely engulfed in flame, with thick black smoke pouring from the roof and windows. The fast-moving nature of the fire suggested an incendiary bomb, which would help them narrow down the origin of the explosives. The wreckage would be filled with clues – the type of bomb, the placement, the timer. Every piece of debris was evidence that would ultimately help them find the men responsible.

The firefighters had started dragging hose lines around the building to hit the fire from multiple sides, and there was a sudden flurry of activity near the rear of the building. It was difficult to make out much of anything with all the smoke, but Jack did see a firefighter rush to the area carrying a long, flat board stretcher. One of the nearby soldiers gasped, "They found someone!"

Jack moved to a better vantage point, and watched as two firefighters carried out a man on the stretcher. Jack knew they wouldn't move the body unless the man was still alive, but he couldn't fathom how anyone had survived that fire. A second ambulance had arrived, and they lifted the patient inside and closed the back doors. The ambulance didn't leave right away, though. Presumably they were working to stabilize the soldier before taking him to the hospital.

One of the firefighters started back to the fire, but

Jack caught his arm and stopped him. "Where'd you find him?"

The firefighter glanced at the badge hanging from Jack's neck before answering. "Around back. It looks like the explosion blew him out one of the windows. The other five are still inside. We won't be able to get to them until the fire's knocked down."

Jack frowned, "Wait – did you say five?"

Shrugging, the firefighter said, "That's what they told me. They said it happened right at shift change."

Jack let go of the man's arm, his mind racing. Six men. The rebels might have just gotten lucky, but again - Jack didn't believe in coincidence. They had planned this. He stepped away from the ambulance, his eyes scanning the buildings across the street from the fort.

Having turned over the prisoners to some of Cerulli's men, Santiago came up beside him. He immediately noticed the intense expression on Jack's face. "What's going on, Captain?"

"They were watching," Jack said, the realization crystallizing in his mind. "They had someone watching the guardhouse so they could time the attack perfectly – at the exact moment when there would be six soldiers instead of three." His eyes focused on the buildings directly across from the fort. Any one of them would have had a clear view of the guardhouse.

Jack hurried past one of the fire trucks, searching for the other captain. Finally he spotted him. "Cerulli! The bombers may still be in the area. We need to set up a search grid. Have all available patrols start checking the streets and buildings to the west."

Cerulli, as usual, had decided to be a pain in the ass.

"What makes you think they stuck around? Whoever it was is probably long gone. I'm not going to send my men on some wild goose chase."

Jack had neither the time nor the inclination to explain things to the captain. "Fine, but the longer you spend dicking around, the further away they're going to get." Without waiting for Cerulli's reply, he drew his pistol from its holster and checked the safety. "Come on," he said to Santiago, "We're going after the son of a bitch that did this."

Don't Let The Story End There

Thank you for reading. If you enjoyed this sample, you can purchase the full novel online. Visit <http://www.wordsmyth.org/martiandreams/> for more information.