

ANOTHER MAN'S FREEDOM FIGHTER

LINDA NAUGHTON

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CHAPTER 1

THE EXPLOSION CAME WITHOUT WARNING, shattering the quiet night in the domed city. It turned the southwest corner of the guardhouse into a million shards of brick, mortar, and glass. A fireball stretched out in every direction before collapsing back in upon itself.

Caitlin Farland let out a shocked cry and slammed on the brakes, bringing her ambulance to a screeching halt in the middle of the street. The vehicle was out of immediate danger, but Caitlin still heard the metallic patter of debris raining down on the roof and hood.

“Holy...” The stunned outburst came from Caitlin’s partner, Vince Castellano. Just shy of thirty, Vince had a few years on Caitlin, but his youthful good looks belied his age. His short,

black hair had a case of bed-head after waking in the middle of the night for their previous emergency call.

The guardhouse roof sagged, half its support gone. Smoke billowed through the remnants of the ceiling, up into the rafters of the dome. Waycross, like all Martian cities, was encased in a dome to protect the inhabitants from the inhospitable conditions outside. Fire was an ever-present danger in the enclosed environment. Air scrubbers struggled to keep the ash and fumes from being recycled into the city's breathing supply.

Caitlin reached for the radio microphone mounted on the dashboard, unable to tear her eyes off the burning structure. "Medic Five-One to Dispatch: There's just been an explosion at the fort's guardhouse. Fully involved structure fire; unknown injuries." Her heart pounded in her ears. Bombings weren't unheard of in the Martian cities, the rebels fond of striking against Peacekeeper bases and supply convoys, but Caitlin had only witnessed one other as it happened. 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. Until then, Caitlin and Vince would be on their own. She started the ambulance moving again, steering towards a safe spot across the street and well away from the burning structure.

"So much for getting some rest tonight," Vince griped, rubbing his eyes. His new baby had been keeping him up at home. Now they'd 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."

The political wing of the independence movement had been making peace overtures for months, but the Federation refused to budge. Amnesty for political prisoners? No. Investigations into charges of brutality? As if. They expected the rebels to lay down their arms for nothing but empty promises. It had surprised nobody when the deal fell through.

Flames poured from every opening of the guardhouse. The blast had hurled broken glass and charred chunks of brick for a hundred yards. The street looked like a war zone. Beyond the wall, Peacekeeper soldiers charged out of their barracks as if they feared the bombing was the prelude to an invasion. Many donned full battle gear over their black uniforms. One tried to get close enough to help the men inside, but the oppressive heat turned him back.

"There's no way anyone's alive in there," Caitlin murmured. Even the optimistic Vince didn't contradict her.

Caitlin hopped out of the ambulance cab. She grabbed a helmet and flame-resistant bunker jacket for each of them from the driver's side compartment. She had just come around the front of the truck when she noticed a Peacekeeper across the street pointing at the ambulance. He shouted orders like he was in charge, but he wore civilian clothes. His black hair was longer than the standard Peacekeeper buzz cut. The only thing identifying 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. It's too dangerous, she would tell him. We need to wait for the fire engines to arrive. She wouldn't tell them there was little hope of anyone surviving that

inferno; 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 froze a stunned Caitlin. He quickened his pace, leveling his pistol at Vince.

Vince glanced at her, his face mirroring her own confusion. Caitlin just shook her head. Vince set down his medical kit and took a step forward. He held 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. "On the ground! Now!" Caitlin flinched as he shouted at her, "You, too!"

One of the soldiers wore a muscle shirt with his standard-issue black uniform trousers. Bald and taller even than Vince, he had a broad chest and arms that would make any weightlifter proud. "He said on the ground, asshole!" he snarled.

Without slowing down, the big soldier swung his rifle and clubbed Vince in the midsection. Vince dropped to his knees, doubled-over and gasping for air. The soldier pushed him facedown onto the ground, shouting in a thick British accent, "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 skidded to a halt when the officer turned his pistol on her, fear overcoming her anger. She raised her hands, fists clenched. "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. For the first time, Caitlin noticed the military police badge dangling from a chain around his neck. "We'll see about that. Sykes, detain them. Edwards, check the truck."

Caitlin gaped as the British soldier, Sykes, zip-tied Vince's hands behind him. As the other trooper approached the back door of the ambulance like he was preparing to breach a hostile building, the sinking realization hit her.

"You think we had something to do with this?" Grabbing her arm hard enough to leave a bruise, Sykes jerked her around and shoved her face-first against the side of the ambulance. "This is insane!"

Sykes' voice rumbled in her ear, "Right, because the insurgents have never laid a trap before." Caitlin felt the pressure of zip-ties pinch her wrists.

Vince said through gritted teeth, "We were on our way back from a call. Check with the dispatcher, for God's sake."

Sykes didn't answer. He tugged her arm once more, shoving her down next to Vince. Caitlin winced as her knees bruised against the pavement.

"You all right?" she asked Vince.

"Quiet," Sykes warned, punctuating the word with a shove that had her struggling to keep her balance.

"PK bastards," Caitlin mumbled under her breath.

Sykes grabbed her chin in a vice-like grip and cranked her head back against his knee. Caitlin gasped and tried to pull free, but she had no leverage. The big man's voice rumbled by her ear. "What was that now?"

"That's enough, Sergeant," the officer said. Sykes squeezed her chin once more before releasing it.

A few minutes passed, neither of them daring to speak, until finally the other soldier climbed down from the ambulance. "Captain Decker? Truck is clear. The dispatcher confirms their story."

The officer—Decker—seemed almost disappointed. “Cut them loose, Sergeant.”

Sykes hauled Caitlin to her feet first, making sure she saw the blade he used to cut her free from the zip ties. “You sure we can’t find a reason to haul them in? This bint’s got a mouth on her.”

Caitlin just glared at him, clenching her jaw to keep herself from saying something that would land her in a Peacekeeper holding cell.

It was Vince who spoke up, still grimacing from the shot to the ribs. “Look, we don’t want any trouble. We’re just doing our jobs.” He rubbed his wrists once the restraints were removed.

Decker’s mouth twisted in a cold, mirthless smirk. The crack of a gunshot split the night air, cutting off any reply. It sounded close, like it had come from their side of the street.

Caitlin ducked, scanning the darkened buildings. Movement caught her eye in the shadows, followed by the staccato sound of automatic gunfire. The flash from the muzzle of a rifle illuminated a masked figure in an alley, firing on the soldiers near the ruined gate. More shooting erupted from further down the street.

Caitlin’s stomach dropped through the floor as she realized they’d stumbled into a full-on rebel attack.

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“Take cover! Damn it, get into cover!” Captain Jack Decker shouted at the soldiers caught flat-footed in the street as the gunfire erupted around them. He saw fear etched into the faces of the young troopers scrambling behind concrete barricades

lining the fort's short driveway. The guardhouse still blazed behind them, silhouetting them in an eerie light.

Sergeant Sykes knelt beside the ambulance's front bumper, firing a few quick rounds at the muzzle flashes. Jack stood behind him, scanning the buildings. The insurgents kept moving and popping up in different places, but Jack guessed there were maybe five total. Only a handful against the several hundred soldiers in the fort, but hit-and-run tactics were their specialty. The Peacekeepers had guards on the walls, patrols in the area, and cameras watching the surrounding buildings 24/7. Somehow, it still wasn't enough to defend against these damned guerrillas.

At the back of the ambulance, Corporal Edwards leaned out to fire. He crumpled without a sound, clutching at his neck.

"Edwards!" Jack shouted. The young corporal didn't answer.

Jack and Sykes returned fire at the muzzle flare, but couldn't see if they'd hit anything.

The two medics they'd detained earlier scrambled to Edwards's side. The woman clamped her hand against the neck wound. Even in the flickering glow of the fire, Jack could see the growing pool of blood beneath Edwards's head.

The other soldiers in front of the fort had started firing back. Sustained gunfire splintered bricks and shattered windows in the industrial buildings lining the street across from the fort. The insurgents' attack slacked off, and they soon slunk away into the darkness. Without the muzzle flashes to aim for, the soldiers had no targets. Calls to cease fire rose from the squad leaders.

Jack moved to where the medics were working on Edwards.

The female medic rocked back on her heels, removing her hand from the wounded soldier's neck. She lifted her eyes to

Jack's and shook her head. "I'm sorry; there was nothing we could do. The bullet severed his artery."

Jack's jaw clenched, the rage building. The last six months had seen a dramatic rise in insurgent activity: sabotage, attacks on Peacekeeper patrols, raids on outlying supply depots, and now this—a strike against Fort McChord itself. As head of the fort's counter-terrorism task-force, Jack led a team that had thwarted more attacks than any other group on Mars. Tonight, though, they'd failed. He looked down at Edwards, thinking of the young soldier's wife and the second baby they had on the way.

Tonight was personal.

Sykes appeared beside him. "What now, Captain?"

Jack activated the radio microphone clipped to his collar. "Citadel One to control. We need a perimeter west of the fort and all available patrols to start a search grid. We have approximately five armed insurgents moving westward." He heard the command center acknowledge his report, then a flurry of radio traffic as other squads received their assignments.

"Come on," Jack said to Sykes, "We're going after the assholes that did this."

Don't Let the Story End There

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