

# RED PLANET NOIR

D. B. GRADY



Brown Street Press, Inc.

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-0-9641674-3-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009941729

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Brown Street Press, Inc.  
3070 Lakecrest Circle, Ste 400-171  
Lexington, KY 40513

[www.brownstreetpress.com](http://www.brownstreetpress.com)

*To Kelly*

# CHAPTER 1

When the phone rang, I was half-drunk, half-dressed, half-asleep, and half expecting it to be the phone company reminding me that the bill was past due. I didn't have any money because I didn't have any clients, and I wouldn't have any clients if they cut my line, which I had told them only last month and the month before that. They were becoming a nuisance.

So I pulled on a shirt that wasn't very dirty, but smelled of Scotch and strippers, my signature cologne, and pressed the Answer button. A figure flickered on the telephone screen. The phone company only hired brunettes, because that's what the owner liked to fool around with, and only hired men, for the same reason. She was neither, and carried her curves as if to prove the point.

"Mike speaking," I said, fishing a lighter from my shirt pocket.

"Mike Sheppard, the private investigator?" she asked.

"That's what they stenciled on my door," I said, striking a Lucky, trying hard not to leer. Women like her didn't call men like me for business and they certainly didn't call for pleasure. She was either selling umbrellas or insurance; probably pretty good at it. I took a long drag. I bet she smelled great.

"My name is Sofia Reed."

"I'm not interested in buying—"

"Do you still take cases?" she asked.

I sat up and ran a hand through my thinning hair, taming it. "Yes," I said. "Yeah, all the time. You're lucky you caught me. I was just—"

"I heard that you're the best in the city. I need you."

She must not have seen the news lately. "I need you, too," I said. "I mean, yes, I'm the best in the city."

"It's about my father," she said, her voice wavering. She blinked in hard repetition.

"Is he all right?" I asked.

"He's dead," she said.

He was still doing better than me. I nodded with empathy, and took an understanding drag on my cigarette. A teardrop rolled down her face, cutting a salty pink trail through her rouge-laden cheeks.

She continued. "You don't recognize me, do you?"

I shook my head slowly and hunched into the telephone screen. I wouldn't have forgotten her if I'd had a lobotomy. She had the kind of lips that could stop a prison riot.

"It happened three weeks ago. My father was the colonel on Mars who was murdered." She dabbed an eye with a handkerchief. "Does any of this sound familiar?"

"I, well, no, I've been too busy, you know, with cases to follow the news."

"I don't expect Earth takes much interest in our affairs, anyway, with your war and all."

It wasn't that. I didn't take interest in the war, either. "So your father was murdered and the police can't solve the case?"

"The police aren't trying," she said. "They're calling it suicide."

"What did the coroner say?" asked Dolores Yu from behind a cash register at the K&B drugstore.

"He agreed with the cops," I said. "Suicide. Probably called it 'self-inflicted cranial lead poisoning' or something, though. Single gunshot wound to the head. The old man was still clutching iron when the cops found him. There was even a suicide note."

"And she thinks it's a murder because?"

"Because her daddy would never do such a thing," I said, scanning the candy rack.

"Right. And this Reed woman wants you to go behind the badge's back and start sniffing around? Mars is a police state, you know. The Air Force runs everything out there."

"So?" I said, selecting a chocolate bar.

"Don't you watch the news anymore?"

"I've been avoiding it since the Alderman started running for DA. They keep bringing up our little encounter."

Dolores nodded. "Her father was overseer, the head of the police, El

Presidente of the Martian banana republic. There were crosshairs tattooed on his forehead. If the cops are calling it a suicide, it was a suicide. If it was murder, it was still a suicide. There's a reason she had to search a New Orleans phone book to find a private detective. Nobody on her whole damn planet wanted this case."

"Well I need this case, Dol. We need this case."

I told her what Sofia was offering.

"And she fronted half?" asked Dolores.

"Plus expenses." I unwrapped and bit into the candy.

Dolores grunted. "That's a lot of cotton. More than enough to pay off your shylocks. How's your hand doing, anyway?"

I held out my right thumb. The bone had healed crooked just below the knuckle, and it still hurt to bend. "He threatened to break my nose next time."

"Nobody would notice," said Dolores. She pulled a carton of Lucky Strikes from beneath the counter. "Still, I'm glad you won't have to worry about that anymore."

"It's enough money to hire you back, too," I said.

"Good thing," she said. "The manager here accused me of stealing. I don't know how much longer he'll keep me around. Next week I'm being moved to graveyard. It's punishment, I think. Can you imagine anything worse?"

I held out my thumb, again.

"Well you deserve that," she said. "Stay out of the casinos."

"Nights won't be so bad, Dol. More time to do the crosswords."

"And get mugged."

"But at least you know all the cops," I said.

"All of the cops hate me," she said.

"No, they hate me," I said. "They dislike you."

"I need better friends," she said.

"Friends?" I asked. "When did you get another one?"

"I'm about to lose the one I've got."

"In that case get me a bottle of Scotch, will you?" I said. "Something to dull the pain."

Her brows fell and she eyed me hard, which wasn't nothing. Of her two eyes, one was grown in a bottle and one was built in a lab. The robotic iris flickered between green and red. It was on the fritz, and had been as long as I'd known her. The whites of her organic eye had faded to violet, a side effect of the cheap implant. White scars the size of Jefferson nickels dotted

each of her temples where the bullet passed through. Old war wound.

"That's two bottles in two days," she said, walking over to the shelf of spirits. "You trying to set a record?" She unlocked the cage and pulled a Black Label.

"No. I'm making candleholders. I wanted a matching set. The Scotch goes straight down the drain. Foul stuff, the creature, and bad for the complexion."

She dropped the bottle and the carton of coffin nails into a purple sack. "Are you going to be okay out there? I mean, Mars? You've never left New Orleans before."

"I went to New York for my honeymoon."

"And look how that turned out," she said.

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah. How much for this stuff? Don't forget the candy."

"No charge."

I hoisted the plastic bag with one hand and donned my hat with the other. Outside, wind swept through the rain-slicked streets. A reflection of the violet K&B sign shimmered in puddles along the sidewalk. Pulling my coat tight, I leaned into the door. The wind pushed back.

"Take care of yourself out there, Michael," said Dolores.

"You still believe in me, Dol?"

"I never stopped."

That made one of us.

When my wife left, she must have taken my suitcase. She took everything else and the extra bag would have helped her hold more of my things. I found an old threadbare satchel and stuffed it with the necessities. A change of clothes I judged clean, the carton of smokes, a revolver snapped in its holster, my lucky lighter, and a penknife.

As I packed, an advertisement on the tube plugged the tragic story of Archibald Chang, General of the Third Army, who conquered large swaths of northern China before taking a bolt in the back and being pulled from the front. The special promised newfound reels of grizzly victories, each in the name of American freedom. It was followed by a commercial for professionally installed bomb shelters. I cut the tube at an ad for the open District Attorney seat, and the Alderman smiling into the camera surrounded by his store-bought wife and family.

After filling a flask with Scotch and tossing it into the bag, I took the bottle and a tumbler and leaned against a window overlooking the street

below. The lower-left pane was taped over where my bookie put a rock through it. Scrawled on the rock: "Your thumb is next." He was a man of his word, even if the word was misspelled.

The storm had slowed to a drizzle. A uniformed porter stood in the doorway of the Hotel Monteleone across the street, a cigarette cupped in his hand that he palmed whenever somebody walked by. On the corner, two men chatted, one rocking on his heels and shifting his eyes. They shook hands awkwardly—a drug deal—and turned, walking off in opposite directions. The dealer had been working the corner for eight weeks; the previous record was three. The Carlotta Family liked to put bullets in dealers who didn't offer a cut, so this guy was either on the payroll or tithing like a Believer. He sold to cops and orphans and cabbies and clergy. He had a special relationship with a stripper on Iberville Street, tipped his hat to old ladies, and offered me smokes whenever I couldn't afford them.

There was nothing to eat that night in the Sheppard refrigerator, so I pulled down the Murphy bed disguised as filing cabinets, stripped naked and crawled under the sheets. Dolores was right about Mars. I didn't know what I was getting into. Before the Alderman case, I could have handled it. But not now. Not anymore. I was so sure he did it, so sure of myself. The facts, the motive, and the bloody suit fit that bastard, but the handcuffs were too big. And so he found a suit that fit me perfectly—a lawsuit. And now I was going to bed hungry. Again. Alone.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**D**.B. Grady is a graduate of Louisiana State University and lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana with his wife and family.

He is a former paratrooper with U.S. Army Special Operations Command and is a veteran of Afghanistan.

Grady is a member of the Authors Guild and Bayou Writers Group.

Previous publications include short stories and essays. *Red Planet Noir* is his debut novel.

<http://www.dbgrady.com>

