

PIRATES OF MARS

Chris Gerrib

To my parents

Special Thanks

A special thank you goes out to Jackie Powers, Literary Midwife and all-around good egg, for her efforts in bringing this novel to the world. Thanks also go out to Ron Miller, who did the cover for this book, and for his kind words about my “practice novel” *The Mars Run*. His validation of my efforts went a long way towards making this book happen. I would be remiss if I didn’t thank Jeff Duntemann, Jim C. Hines and Richard Chwedyk, authors who provided valuable workshop assistance, albeit not on this novel. I would also like to thank Dr. Jerry Pournelle for letting me use his Iron Law of Bureaucracy.

A Word About Names and Concepts

The character Rachel in this book and the character “J. R.” in my practice novel *The Mars Run* are the same people. The real ship *Charles S. Price* rolled over in a storm on Lake Huron in 1913, taking her crew of 28 with her.

Luidas “Lu Can Do” Volodka was a friend of mine and a damned good Rotarian. He wasn’t the guy up front handing out the big check, rather he was the guy taking the picture. Lu did the unglamorous jobs that, if done right got a line in the program and if done wrong made your name Mudd. I served with a short, “black Irish” fireplug of a man named Kelly. We served on the *USS Jack Williams*, a ship named for a corpsman who went ashore on Iwo Jima and came off the beach in a box. They gave Jack’s Medal of Honor to his family. Tony Chen is a professor at the College of DuPage.

Janet Pilgrim is the stage name of the second woman to appear naked in Playboy magazine. Marilyn Monroe was the first, of course, and that wasn’t her real name either. I read of some celebrity naming her daughter “Arminta” and shortening it to “Minty.” Since it led to one of those Ian Fleming-inspired double entendres, I borrowed it immediately.

The “Somali Rules” for piracy was taken from real-world research as reported on the blog Lawyers, Guns and Money (lawyersgunsmoneyblog.com). Marty Mackovic is my grandfather, and appears in the book because my mother bought Tuckerization rights at a Rotary charity auction. Roger McNally is Rand’s cousin, while Penny Sharpe is my neighbor, and the realtor who found me my house.

In a previous draft of this book, I needed a private detective. Since a Rotarian of my acquaintance was a PI, Mike Slevnik made the book. When circumstances changed, the character became a Colonel. I went to school with twins named Scott and Todd, so that was an easy call to make.

Jim C. Hines you’ve met in the Special Thanks section. His friend, the writer Tobias Buckell, was born and raised in the Caribbean, and if I recall correctly named a spaceship the *Dread Ayatollah* in one of his books.

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Chapter 1

**Thursday, 30 Virgo Year 52 15:30 Martian Zulu Time (local)
(March 1, 2074, 15:30 GMT)**

Container Cargo Ship *Charles S. Price*, approaching Mars

I GOT A DEGREE IN ART HISTORY FOR THIS? Rachel Storey wondered, shivering in the cold and dark mid-deck of the *Charles S. Price*. One of the ship's officers had cut the power, rendering the *Price* a death-trap.

If we don't get power on, this ship's gonna crater into Mars. Rachel winced at the thought. The last failed attempt at piracy had nearly cost her life.

Get a move on!" Rachel barked at one of her fellow pirates. "I'm not going down with this ship."

"Movin' these Mex-cans all trussed up ain't easy," came the reply. "And besides, I don't work for you. You're just the damn bus driver."

Rachel glared at the speaker, his hair and features bleached by too much contact with Martian sand. Regarding her role in this attack, he was right. But she was damned if she was going to take crap from some sand-blond scavenger. "Dave Eggman, if I wanted to hear your shit I'd have asked for it. Now get the lead out!"

Eggman pushed the bound and hooded prisoner, formerly a crewmember of the *Price*, up into the zero-gee environment of the mid-deck. He pushed too hard, of course, and the man bounced helplessly off of the far side of the corridor, smashing into a purple color-coded pipe. This elicited a stream of curses in Spanish. Rachel ignored the words and, bracing off of a stanchion, shoved the man down the tube-like corridor.

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“Incoming!” she shouted, alerting the pirate at the other end of the corridor. *Pirates! Hab. Bunch of incompetent, trigger-happy mouth-breathing boobs.*

“Got him, boss,” the crewman shouted.

“That’s the last of them,” Eggman said.

The last one alive, he meant. The Price’s Master and Chief Engineer were dead. How had Eggman put it? “They had elected to shoot it out. They lost the election.”

Rachel smiled at that. Eggman did occasionally have a way with words.

Chuckles, their leader, poked his head in the corridor. His face was flushed despite the cold, and his strawberry blonde hair was matted with sweat.

“What in the fuck are you doing?”

“Evacuating the hostages,” Rachel replied. You idiot, she added mentally. *If only he was half as smart as his dad.* “You coming?”

“Hell no. Who gives a shit about the crew?”

“The insurance company does,” Rachel said. “Remember? The plan was to ransom them back.”

“Your plan,” Chuckles said. “All we want is the special cargo.”

The special cargo, Rachel thought. The mysterious container that their investors, presumably representing the Martian branch of some criminal gang, were paying extra for them to hijack. *All I want is enough cash to get out of Bensonville.*

“Have any luck finding it?” Rachel asked.

Chuckle’s scowl deepened. “No, and you moving the crew means I can’t question them.”

“Charles Benson Junior,” Rachel said, using his full name, “you can question them all you want. They don’t know. Hell, if Bam Bam doesn’t know, how would some Able Spacer?”

Chuckles scowled some more at that. Brenda “Bam Bam” Lords, Third Mate on the *Price*, had been their inside person, and instrumental in getting them onboard. Now she was trying to get ship’s power restored before they literally cratered into Mars. Unsuccessfully, so far.

“Don’t matter. Why don’t you look at the computer?”

Because I’m not a computer expert, she thought. “*Cranston* needs to get gone soon,” she said, gesturing towards the docking collar at

the far end of the corridor where their tiny mother ship was attached.

“You got time.”

“Barely,” Rachel said. She yelled down the corridor at her crewmember, anchored at the docking collar leading to the *Cranston*. “Get them secured and get ready to leave!”

Chuckles ducked back down the ladderway wordlessly, followed by Eggman. Rachel descended last, and quickly arrived at the main crew deck of the *Price*.

Like most deep space ships, that part of the ship was a cylinder, spun to produce artificial gravity.

“Like a bug in a can,” Rachel said under her breath, stepping on the floor of the main crew area.

“Huh?” Chuckles said, his breath fogging in the cold.

“Nothing,” Rachel replied. She looked down the long main corridor, struggling to override the appearance that the corridor curved uphill. It wasn’t—by the time you got somewhere, the spin put you at the bottom again—but Rachel found it disorienting, especially when the ship was dark, illuminated only by emergency lighting.

Something popped loudly, and everybody jumped a little bit.

“Thermal contraction,” Eggman said.

He’s probably right, Rachel thought. With no fans humming, all sorts of noises that would normally be masked weren’t. *A dead ship, and if I don’t get off soon, I’ll die with it.*

They came to a door off of the main corridor and stepped into the “day bridge” of the *Price*. There was a separate “maneuvering bridge” for docking and close work, a zero-gee space with a real window looking out into space, but this room was used most of the time while underway.

The room wasn’t ever that brightly-lit, but with the loss of ship’s power it was even darker than usual. The number of amber and red warning lights from the various mostly-useless consoles gave the room a reddish tinge. The far end of the wall was dominated by a digital display. With main power off, most of the sensors were down, so the display was largely dark. However, the navigational computer was up, and a schematic showing their position in relationship to Mars was clearly visible. Also visible on

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the display was a flashing yellow warning, reading “collision imminent” in both English and Spanish.

“Any luck on the computer?” Chuckles asked.

“Not a computer problem,” Bam Bam said, looking up from her console. She was clearly frustrated as she pushed a shock of black hair out of her face. “It’s a reactor problem. I’ve got maneuvering control, but with no power, I can’t move anywhere.”

“What’s wrong with the reactor?” Eggman asked.

“If I knew that, I’d fix it!” Bam Bam said.

“What about the special cargo?” Rachel asked.

“I have no idea.” She waved at a desk off to the side. “Cargo manifest is on the Master’s computer.”

“So?” Chuckles asked.

“It’s down,” Bam Bam said. “Shut down automatically when we lost power to save juice for critical shit. Besides which I’ll need the Old Lady’s login.”

“Can you bring it back up?” Rachel asked.

“Give me fifteen minutes, sure,” she replied. “Fifteen minutes I haven’t had.”

Fifteen minutes they didn’t have, Rachel thought, not counting the time they’d waste to crack the passwords and find the manifest.

“Charles,” Rachel said. “We have to leave. Now.”

“Why?” he asked.

“If we don’t leave soon, we’ll be too close to Mars for the *Cranston’s* engines to pull us clear.”

“Not a good idea to leave,” he said. “The investors...”

“Fuck the investors,” Eggman said. “What are they going to do...”

“If we don’t pay them?” Chuckles said, his face drained of color. “If we’re lucky, they’ll just kill us quick. If not...”

Who exactly is bankrolling this operation? It was hard to scare stupid, and anybody capable of scaring a rock with lips like Chuckles had to be a serious Mike Foxtrot.

“We need a tow, Captain,” Eggman said, looking at Rachel.

“Don’t get stuck on stupid,” Rachel said. “*Cranston’s* barely got enough delta vee to get clear herself, let alone pull this out.” The ship class was referred to as a Mosquito by its manufacturers, and not without reason.

“Then we just give them back their money,” Eggman said. “Sell the *Cranston*.”

Chuckles just glared at Eggman. Probably blew through most of the cash already, Rachel thought.

“Let’s call for help,” Bam Bam said.

“Call who?” Eggman asked.

Good question, Rachel thought. There were hundreds of settlements on Mars, technically under the control of dozens of countries on Earth. In practice, most of the settlements were on their own, and cared little for anything that happened outside their airlocks. Hell, Bensonville, the one-airlock town that was sponsoring this outing, was a good example of that.

“Space Rescue,” Bam Bam suggested.

“Those Boy Scouts?” Eggman said.

“Why not?” Bam Bam said.

“Anybody got any better ideas?” Chuckles asked. Nobody said anything. “Okay, then, let’s make the call.”

“I got to get gone,” Rachel said. “Or Space Rescue will be pulling two ships out of the shit.”

“Go,” Chuckles replied.

Rachel left, thinking that she’d never heard of a stupider idea in her life. But at least she’d get out.