

An abstract painting featuring a central starburst or sunburst pattern in shades of blue and white. The background is composed of broad, overlapping stripes of orange, green, and blue, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall style is expressive and textured.

Police Your Planet

Lester del Rey

FUTUR
PAINTING

POLICE YOUR PLANET

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POLICE YOUR PLANET

Chapter I

ONE WAY TICKET

There were ten passengers in the little pressurized cabin of the electric bus that shuttled between the rocket field and Marsport. Ten men, the driver—and Bruce Gordon.

He sat apart from the others, as he had kept to himself on the ten-day trip between Earth and Mars, with the yellow stub of his ticket still stuck defiantly in the band of his hat, proclaiming that Earth had paid his passage without his permission being asked. His big, lean body was slumped slightly in the seat. There was no expression on his face.

He listened to the driver explaining to a couple of firsters that they were actually on what appeared to be one of the mysterious canals when viewed from Earth. Every book on Mars gave the fact that the canals were either an illusion or something which could not be detected on the surface of the planet.

He glanced back toward the rocket that still pointed skyward back on the field, and then forward toward the city of Marsport, sprawling out in a mess of slums beyond the edges of the dome that had been built to hold air over the central part. And at last he stirred and reached for the yellow stub.

He grimaced at the One Way stamped on it, then tore it into bits and let the pieces scatter over the floor. He counted them as they fell; thirty pieces, one for each year of his life. Little ones for the two years he'd wasted as a cop. Shreds for the four years as a kid in the ring before that—he'd never made the top. Bigger bits for two years also wasted in trying his hand at professional gambling; and the six final pieces that spelled his rise from a special reporter helping out with a police shake-up coverage, through a regular leg-man turning up rackets, and on up like a meteor until.... He'd made his big scoop, all right. He'd dug up enough about the Mercury scandals to double

circulation.

And the government had explained what a fool he'd been for printing half of a story that was never supposed to be printed until all could be revealed. They'd given Bruce Gordon his final assignment.

He shrugged. He'd bought a suit of airtight coveralls and a helmet at the field; he had some cash, and a set of reader cards in his pocket. The supply house, Earthside, had assured him that this pattern had never been exported to Mars. With them and the knife he'd selected, he might get by.

The Solar Security office had given him the knife practice, to make sure he could use it, just as they'd made sure he hadn't taken extra money with him beyond the regulation amount.

"You're a traitor, and we'd like nothing better than seeing your guts spilled," the Security man had told him. "That paper you swiped was marked top secret. But we don't get many men with your background—cop, tinhorn, fighter—who have brains enough for our work. So you're bound for Mars, rather than the Mercury mines. If..."

It was a big *if*, and a vague one. They needed men on Mars who could act as links in their information bureau, and be ready to work on their side when the expected trouble came. They wanted men who could serve them loyally, even without orders. If he did them enough service, they might let him back to Earth. If he caused trouble enough, they could still ship him to Mercury.

"And suppose nothing happens?" he asked.

"Then who cares? You're just lucky enough to be alive."

"And what makes you think I'm going to be a spy for Security?"

The other had shrugged. "Why not, Gordon? You've been a spy for a yellow scandal sheet. Why not for us?"

Gordon had been smart enough to realize that perhaps Security was right.

They were in the slums around the city now. Marsport had been settled faster than it was ready to receive. Temporary buildings had been thrown up, and then had remained, decaying into deathtraps. It wasn't a pretty view that visitors got as they first reached Mars. But nobody except the romantic fools had ever thought frontiers were pretty.

The drummer who had watched Gordon tear up his yellow stub moved forward now. "First time?" he asked.

Gordon nodded, mentally cataloguing the drummer as the cockroach type, midway between the small-businessman slug and the petty-crook spider types that weren't worth bothering with. But the other took it as interest.

"Been here dozens of times, myself. Risking your life just to go into Marsport. Why Congress doesn't clean it up, *I'll* never know!"

Gordon's mind switched to the readers in his bag. The cards were plastic, and should be good for a week or so of use before they showed wear. During that time, by playing it carefully, he should have his stake. Then, if the gaming tables here were as crudely run as an oldtimer he'd known on Earth had said, he could try a coup.

"... be at Mother Corey's soon," the fat little drummer babbled on. "Notorious—worst place on Mars. Take it from me, brother, that's something! Even the cops are afraid to go in there. See it? There, to your left!"

The name was vaguely familiar as one of the sore spots of Marsport. Bruce Gordon looked, and spotted the ragged building, half a mile outside the dome. It had been a rocket-maintenance hangar once, then had been turned into temporary dwelling for the first deportees, when Earth began flooding Mars. Now, seeming to stand by habit alone, it radiated desolation and decay.

He stood up, grabbing for his bag, and spinning the drummer aside. He jerked forward, and caught the driver's shoulder. "Getting off!"

The driver shrugged his hand away. "Don't be crazy, mister! They—" He turned, saw it was Gordon, and his face turned blank. "It's your life, buster," he said, and reached for the brake. "I'll give you five minutes to get into coveralls and helmet and out through the airlock."

Gordon needed less than that; he'd practiced all the way from Earth. The transparent plastic of the coveralls went on easily enough, and his hands found the seals quickly. He slipped his few possessions into a bag at his belt, slid the knife into a spring holster above his wrist, and picked up the bowl-shaped helmet. It seated on a plastic seal, and the little air compressor at his back began to hum, ready to turn the thin wisp of Mars' atmosphere into a barely breathable pressure. He tested the Marspeaker—an amplifier and

speaker in another pouch, designed to raise the volume of his voice to a level where it would carry through even the air of Mars.

The driver swore at the lash of sound, and grabbed for the airlock switch.

Gordon moved down unpaved streets that zig-zagged along, thick with the filth of garbage and poverty—the part of Mars never seen in the newsreels, outside the shock movies. Thin kids with big eyes and sullen mouths crowded the streets in their airsuits, yelling profanity. The street was filled with people watching with a numbed hunger for any kind of excitement.

It was late afternoon, obviously. Men were coming from the few bus routes, lugging tools and lunch baskets, slumped and beaten from labor in the atomic plants, the Martian conversion farms, and the industries that had come inevitably where inefficiency was better than the high prices of imports. The saloons were doing well enough, apparently, from the number that streamed in through their airlock entrances. But Gordon saw one of the bartenders paying money to a thickset person with an arrogant sneer; he knew then that the few profits from the cheap beer were never going home with the man. Storekeepers in the cheap little shops had the same lines on their faces as they saw on those of their customers.

Poverty and misery were the keynotes here, rather than the evil half-world the drummer had babbled about. But to Gordon's trained eyes, there was plenty of outright rottenness, too.

He grimaced, grateful that the supercharger on his airsuit filtered out some of the smell which the thin air carried. He'd thought he was familiar with human misery from his own Earth slum background. But there was no attempt to disguise it here.

Ahead, Mother Corey's reared up—a huge, ugly half-cylinder of pitted metal and native bricks, showing the patchwork of decades, before repairs had been abandoned. There were no windows, though once there had been; and the front was covered with a big sign that spelled out *Condemned*. The airseal was filthy, and there was no bell.

Gordon kicked against the side, waited, and kicked again. A slit opened and closed. He waited, then drew his knife and began prying at the worn cement around the airseal, looking for the lock that had been there.

The seal suddenly quivered, indicating that metal inside had been withdrawn. Gordon grinned tautly, stepped through, and pushed the blade against the inner plastic.

"All right, all right," a voice whined out of the darkness. "You don't have to puncture my seal. You're in."

"Then call them off!"

A wheezing chuckle answered him, and a phosphor bulb glowed weakly, shedding some light on a filthy hall. "Okay, boys," the voice said, "come on down. He's alone, anyhow. What's pushing, stranger?"

"A yellow ticket," Gordon told him, "and a government allotment that'll last me two weeks in the dome. I figure on making it last six here, and don't let my being a firster give you hot palms. My brother was Lanny Gordon!"

It happened to be true, though Bruce Gordon hadn't seen his brother from the time the man had left the family, as a young punk, to the day they finally convicted him on his twenty-first murder. But here, if it was like places he'd known on Earth, even second-hand contact with "muscle" was useful.

It seemed to work. A huge man oozed out of the shadows, his gray face contorting its doughy fat into a yellow-toothed grin, and a filthy hand waved back the others. There were a few wisps of long, gray hair on the head and face, and they quivered as he moved forward.

"Looking for a room?" he whined.

"I'm looking for Mother Corey."

"Then you're looking at him, cobber. Sleep on the floor, want a bunk, squat with four, or room and duchess to yourself?"

There was a period of haggling, followed by a wait as Mother Corey kicked four grumbling men out of a four-by-seven hole on the second floor. Gordon's money had carried more weight than his brother's reputation; for that, Corey humored his guest's wish for privacy. "All yours, cobber, while your crackle's blue."

It was a filthy, dark place. In one corner was an unsheeted bed. There was a rusty bucket for water, a hole kicked through the floor for waste water. Plumbing, and such luxuries, apparently hadn't existed for years—except for

the small cistern and worn water-recovery plant in the basement, beside the tired-looking weeds in the hydroponic tanks that tried unsuccessfully to keep the air breathable.

"What about a lock on the door?" Gordon asked.

"What good would it do you? Got a different way here, we have. One credit a week, and you get Mother Corey's word nobody busts in. And it sticks, cobber—one way or the other."

Gordon paid, and tossed his pouch on the filthy bed. With a little work, the place could be cleaned enough.

He pulled the cards out of his pouch, trying to be casual. Mother Corey stood staring at the pack while Bruce Gordon changed out of his airtight suit, gagging faintly as the full effluvia of the place hit him. "Where does a man eat around here?"

Mother Corey pried his eyes off the cards and ran a thick tongue over heavy lips. "Eh? Oh. Eat. There's a place about ten blocks back. Cobber, stop teasing me! With elections coming up, and the boys loaded with vote money back in town—with a deck of cheaters like that—you want to *eat*?"

He picked the deck up fondly, while a faraway look came into his clouded eyes. "Same ones—same identical ones I wore out nigh twenty years ago. Smuggled two decks up here. Set to clean up—and I did, for a while." He shook his head sadly, and handed the deck back to Gordon. "Come on down. For the sight of these, I'll give you the lay for your pitch. And when your luck's made or broken, remember Mother Corey was your friend first, and your old Mother can get longer use from them than you can."

He waddled off, telling of his plans to take Mars for a cleaning, once long ago. Gordon followed him, staring at the surrounding filth.

His thoughts were churning so busily that he didn't see the blonde girl until she had forced her way past them on the stairs. Then he turned back, but she had vanished into one of the rooms.

Chapter II

HONEST IZZY

A lot could be done in ten days, when a man knew what he was after. It was exactly ten days later. Bruce Gordon stood in the motley crowd inside the barnlike room where Fats ran a bar along one wall, and filled the rest of the space with assorted tables—all worn. Gordon was sweating slightly as he stood at the roulette table, where both zero and double-zero were reserved for the house.

The croupier was a little wizened man wanted on Earth. His eyes darted down to the point of the knife that showed under Gordon's sleeve, and he licked his lips, showing snagged teeth. The wheel hesitated and came to a halt, with the ball trembling in a pocket.

"Twenty-one wins again." He pushed chips toward Gordon, as if every one of them came out of his own pay. "Place your bets."

Two others around the table watched narrowly as Gordon left his chips where they were; they then exchanged looks and shook their heads. In a Martian roulette game, numbers with that much riding just didn't turn up. The croupier shifted his weight, then caught the wheel and spun it savagely.

Gordon's leg ached from his strained position, but he shifted his weight onto it more heavily, and sweat popped out on the croupier's face. His eyes darted down, to where the full weight of Gordon seemed to rest on the heel that was grinding into his instep. He tried to pull his foot off the button that was concealed in the floor.

The heel ground harder, bringing a groan from him. And the ball hovered over Twenty-one and came to rest there once more.

Slowly, painfully, the little man counted stacks of chips and moved them across the table toward Gordon, his hands trembling.

Gordon straightened from his awkward position, drawing his foot back, and reached out for the pile of chips. Then he scooped it up and nodded. "Okay. I'm not greedy."

The strain of watching the games until he could spot the fix, and then holding the croupier down, had left him momentarily weak, but Gordon could still feel the tensing of the crowd. Now he let his eyes run over them—the night citizens of Marsport, lower-dome section. Spacemen who'd missed their ships; men who'd come here with dreams, and stayed without them—the shopkeepers who couldn't meet their graft and were here to try to win it on a last chance; street women and petty grifters. The air was thick with their unwashed bodies—all Mars smelled, since water was still too rare for frequent bathing—and their cheap perfume, and clouded with cheap Marsweed cigarettes.

Gordon swung where their eyes pointed, until he saw Fats Eller sidling through the groups, then let the knife slip into the palm of his hand as the crowd seemed to hold its breath. Fats plucked a sheaf of Martian bank notes from his pocket and tossed them to the croupier.

"Cash in his chips." Then his pouchy eyes turned to Gordon. "Get your money, punk, and get out! And stay out!"

For a moment, as he began pocketing the bills, Gordon thought he was going to get away that easily. Fats watched him dourly, then swung on his heel, just as a shrill, strangled cry went up from someone in the crowd.

The deportee let his glance jerk to it, then froze. His eyes caught the sight of a hand pointing behind him, and he knew it was too crude a trick to bother with. But he paused, shocked to see the girl he'd seen on Mother Corey's stairs gazing at him in well-feigned warning. In spite of his better judgment, she caught his eyes and drew them down over curves and swells that would always be right for arousing a man's passion.

He glanced back at Fats, who had started to turn again. Gordon took a step backwards, preparing to duck. Again the girl's finger motioned behind him; he disregarded it—and then realized it was a mistake.

It was the faintest swish in the air that caught his ear; he brought his shoulders up and his head down. Fast as his reaction was, it was almost too

late. The weapon crunched against his shoulder and slammed over the back of his neck, almost knocking him out.

His heel lashed back and caught the shin of the man behind him. Gordon's other leg spun him around, still crouching; the knife in his hand started coming up, sharp edge leading, and aimed for the belly of the bruiser who confronted him. The pug saw the blade and tried to check his lunge.

Gordon felt the blade strike; but he was already pulling his swing, and it only gashed a long streak. The thug shrieked hoarsely and fell over. That left the way clear to the door; Bruce Gordon was through it and into the night in two soaring leaps. After only a few days on Mars, his legs were still hardened to Earth gravity, and he had more than a double advantage over the others.

Outside, it was the usual Martian night in the poorer section of the dome, which meant near-darkness. Most of the street lights had never been installed—graft had eaten up the appropriations, instead—and the nearest one was around the corner, leaving the side of Fats' Place in the shadow. Gordon checked his speed, threw himself flat, and rolled back against the building, just beyond the steps that led to the street.

Feet pounded out of the door above as Fats and the bouncer broke through. Gordon's hand had already knotted a couple of coins into his kerchief; he waited until the two turned uncertainly up the street and tossed it. It struck the wall near the corner, sailed on, and struck again at the edge of the unpaved street with a muffled sound.

Fats and the other swung, just in time to see a bit of dust where it had hit. "Around the corner!" Fats yelled. "After him, and shoot!"

In the shadows, Gordon jerked sharply. It was rare enough to have a gun here; but to use one inside the dome was unthinkable. His eyes shot up, to where the few dim lights were reflected off the great plastic sheet that was held up by air pressure and reinforced with heavy webbing. It was the biggest dome ever built—large enough to cover all of Marsport before the slums sprawled out beyond it; it still covered half the city, and made breathing possible here without a helmet. But the dome wasn't designed to stand stray bullets; and having firearms inside it—except for a few chosen men—was a crime punishable by death.

Fats had swung back, and was now herding the crowd inside his place. He might have been only a small gambling-house owner, but within his own circle his words carried weight.

Gordon got to his hands and knees and began crawling away from the corner. He came to a dark alley, smelling of decay where garbage had piled up without being carted away. Beyond lay a lighted street, and a sign that announced *Mooney's Amusement Palace—Drinks Free to Patrons!* He looked up and down the street, then walked briskly toward the somewhat plusher gambling hall there. Fats couldn't touch him in a competitor's place.

Inside Mooney's, he headed quickly for the dice table. He lost steadily on small bets for half an hour, admiring the skilled palming of the "odds" cubes. The loss was only a tiny dent in his new pile, but Gordon bemoaned it properly—as if he were broke—and moved over to the bar. This one had seats. The bartender had a consolation boilermaker waiting; he gulped half of it before he realized it had been needled with ether.

Beside him, a cop was drinking the same slowly, watching another policeman at a Canfield game. He was obviously winning, and now he got up and came over to cash in his chips.

"You'd think they'd lose count once in a while," he complained to his companion. "But nope—fifty even a night, no more ... Well, come on, Pete. We'd better get back to Fats and tell him the swindler got away."

Gordon followed them out and turned south, down the street toward the edge of the dome and the entrance where he'd parked his airtuit and helmet. He kept glancing back, whenever he was in the thicker shadows, but there seemed to be no one following him.

At the gate of the dome, he looked back again, then ducked into the locker building. He threaded through the maze of the lockers with his knife ready in his hand, trying not to attract suspicion. At this hour, though, most of the place was empty. The crowds of foremen and deliverymen who'd be going in and out through the day were lacking.

He found his suit and helmet and clamped them on quickly, transferring the knife to its spring sheath outside the suit. He checked the tiny batteries that were recharged by generators in the soles of the boots with every step. Then

he paid his toll for the opening of the private slit and went through, into the darkness outside the dome.

Lights bobbed about—police in pairs, patrolling in the better streets, walking as far from the houses as they could; a few groups, depending on numbers for safety; some of the very poor, stumbling about and hoping for a drink somehow; and probably hoods from the gangs that ruled the nights here.

Gordon left his torch unlighted, and moved along; there was a little illumination from the phosphorescent markers at some of the corners, and from the stars. He could just make his way without marking himself with a light.

Damn it, he should have hired a few of the younger bums from Mother Corey's. Here he couldn't hear footsteps. He located a pair of patrolling cops, and followed them down one street, until they swung off. Then he was on his own again.

"Gov'nor!" The word barely reached him, and Bruce Gordon spun around, the knife twitching into his hand. It was a thin kid of perhaps eighteen behind him, carrying a torch that was filtered to bare visibility. It swung up, and he saw a pock-marked face that was twisted in a smile meant to be ingratiating.

"You've got a pad on your tail," the kid said, again as low as his amplifier would permit. "Need a convoy?"

Gordon studied him briefly, and grinned. Then his grin wiped out as the kid's arm flashed to his shoulder and back, a series of quick jerks that seemed almost a blur. Four knives stood buried in the ground at Gordon's feet, forming a square—and a fifth was in the kid's hand.

"How much?" he asked, as the kid scooped up the blades and shoved them expertly back into shoulder sheaths. The kid's hand shaped a C quickly, and Gordon slipped his arm through a self-sealing slit in the airtight suit and brought out two of them.

"Thanks, gov'nor," the kid said, stowing them away. "You won't regret it." Gordon started to turn. Then the kid's voice rose sharply to a yell. "Okay, honey, he's the Joe!"

Out of the darkness, ten to a dozen figures loomed up. The kid had jumped aside with a lithe leap, and now stood between Gordon and the group moving

in for the kill. Gordon swung to run, and found himself surrounded. His eyes flickered around, trying to spot something in the darkness that would give him shelter.

A bludgeon was suddenly hurtling toward him, and he ducked it, his blood thick in his throat and his ears ringing with the same pressure of fear he'd always known just before he was kayoed in the ring. Then he selected what he hoped was the thinnest section of the attackers and leaped forward. With luck, he might jump over them, using his Earth strength.

There was a flicker of dawnlight in the sky, now, however; and he made out others behind, ready for just such a move. He changed his lunge in mid-stride, and brought his arm back with the knife. It met a small round shield on the arm of the man he had chosen, and was deflected at once.

"Give 'em hell, gov'nor," the kid's voice yelled, and the little figure was beside him, a shower of blades seeming to leap from his hand in the glare of his bare torch. Shields caught them frantically, and then the kid was in with a heavy club he'd torn from someone's hand.

Gordon had no time to consider his sudden traitor-ally. He bent to the ground, seizing the first rocks he could find, and threw them. One of the hoods dropped his club in ducking; Gordon caught it up and swung in a single motion that stretched the other out.

Then it was a *melée*. The kid's open torch, stuck on his helmet, gave them light enough, until Gordon could switch on his own. Then the kid dropped behind him, fighting back-to-back. Here, in close quarters, the attackers were no longer using knives. One might be turned on its owner, and a slit suit meant death by asphyxiation.

Gordon saw the blonde girl on the outskirts, her face taut and glowing. He tried to reach her with a thrown club wrested from another man, but she leaped nimbly aside, shouting commands.

Two burly goons were suddenly working together. Gordon swung at one, ducked a blow from the other, and then saw the first swinging again. He tried to bring his club up—but knew it was too late. A dull weight hit the side of his head, and he felt himself falling.



It took only minutes for dawn to become day on Mars, and the sun was lighting up the messy section of back street when Bruce Gordon's eyes opened and the pain of sight struck his aching head. He groaned, then looked frantically for the puff of escaping air. But his suit was still sealed. Ahead of him, the kid lay sprawled out, blood trickling from an ugly bruise along his jaw.

Then Gordon felt something on his suit, and his eyes darted to hands just finishing an emergency patch. His eyes darted up and met those of the blonde vixen!

Amazement kept him motionless for a second. There were tears in the eyes of the girl, and a sniffling sound reached him through her Marspeaker. Apparently, she hadn't noticed that he had revived, though her eyes were on him. She finished the patch, and ran perma-sealer over it. Then she began putting her supplies away, tucking them into a bag that held notes that could only have been stolen from his pockets—her share of the loot, apparently.

He was still thinking clumsily as she got to her feet and turned to leave. She cast a glance back, hesitated, and then began to move off.

He got his feet under him slowly, but he was reviving enough to stand the pain in his head. He came to his feet, and leaped after her. In the thin air, his lunge was silent, and he was grabbing her before she knew he was up.

She swung with a single gasp, and her hand darted down for her knife, sweeping it up and toward him; he barely caught the wrist coming toward him. Then he had her firmly, bringing her arm back and up, until the knife fell from her fingers.

She screamed and began writhing, twisting her hard young body like a boa constrictor in his hands. But he was stronger. He bent her back over his knee, until a mangled moan was coming from her speaker; then his foot kicked out, knocking her feet out from under her. He let her hit the ground, caught both her wrists in his, and brought his knee down on her throat, applying more pressure until she lay still. Then he reached for the pouch.

"Damn you!" Her cry was more in anguish than it had been when he was threatening to break her back. "You damned firster, I'll kill you if it's the last thing I do. And after I saved your miserable life...."

"Thanks for that," he grunted. "Next time don't be a fool. When you kill a man for his money, he doesn't feel very grateful for your reviving him."

He started to count the money. About a tenth of what he had won—not even enough to open a cheap poker den, let alone bribe his way back to Earth.

The girl was out from under his knee at the first relaxation of pressure. Her hand scooped up the knife, and she came charging toward him, her mouth a taut slit across half-bared teeth. Gordon rolled out of her swing, and brought his foot up. It caught her squarely under the chin, and she went down and out.

He picked up the scattered money and her knife, then made sure she was still breathing. He ran his hands over her, looking for a hiding place for more money; there was none.

"Good work, gov'nor," the kid's thin voice approved, and Gordon swung to see the other getting up painfully. The kid grinned, rubbing his bruise. "No hard feelings, gov'nor, now! They paid me to stall you, so I did. You bonused me to protect you, and I bloody well tried. Honest Izzy, that's me. Gonna buy me a job as a cop. That's why I needed the scratch. Okay, gov'nor?"

Gordon hauled back his hand to knock the other from his feet, and then dropped it. A grin writhed onto his face, and broke into sudden grudging laughter.

"Okay, Izzy," he admitted. "For this stinking planet, I guess you're something of a saint. Come along, and we'll both apply for that job—after I get my stuff."

He might as well join the law. Security had wanted him to police their damned planet for them—and he might as well do it officially.

He tossed the girl's knife down beside her, motioned to Izzy, and began heading for Mother Corey's.