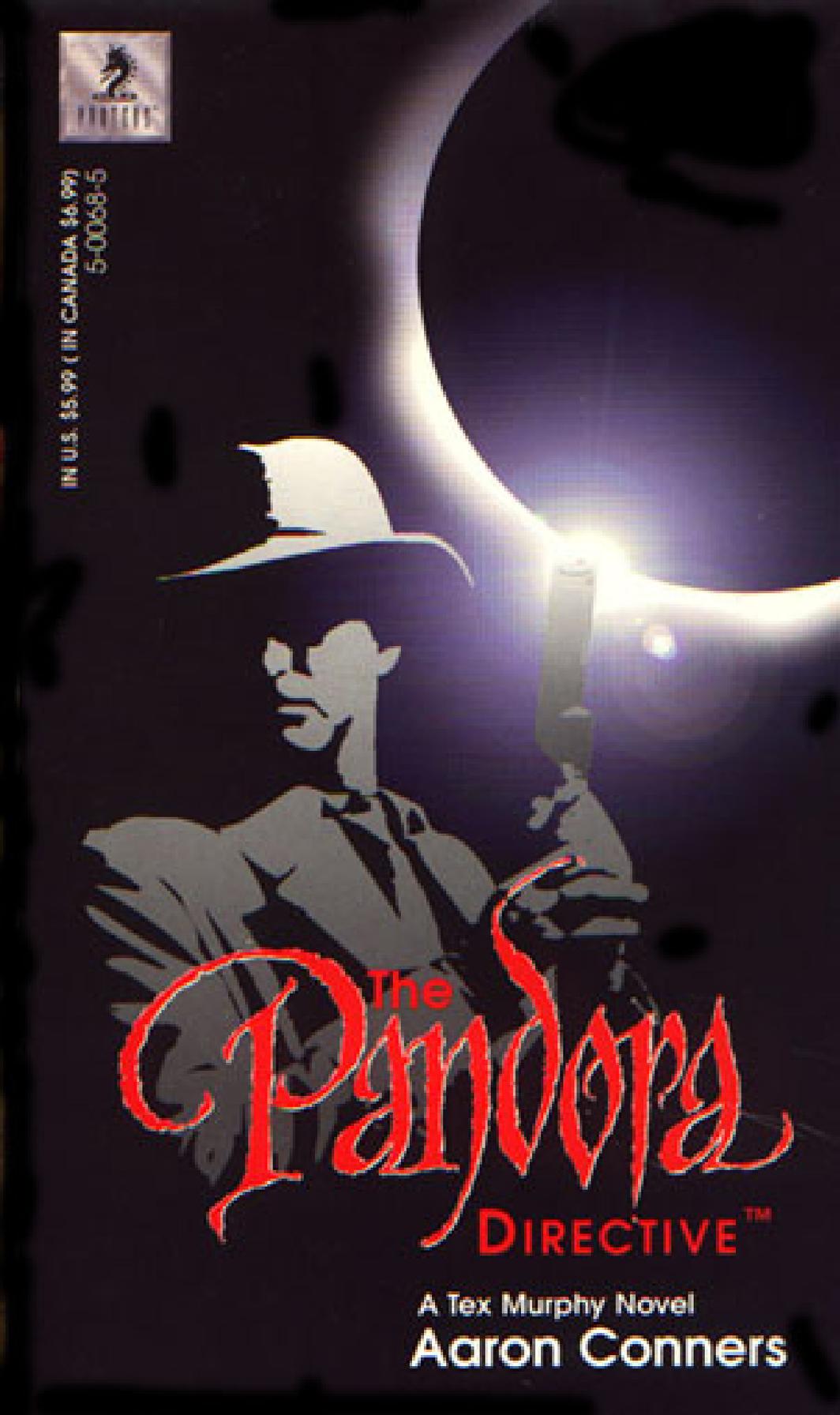




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The  
**Pandora**  
DIRECTIVE™

A Tex Murphy Novel  
**Aaron Connors**

# **The Pandora Directive**

**Aaron Connors**

The room could have been the interior of the world's largest garage. Piles of components and shards of strange alien materials were scattered everywhere. In the very centre was what must have been the fairly intact remains of the spacecraft that had crashed at Roswell. It wasn't entirely dismantled, and I could still see the basic shape. The ship looked to be in excellent condition, considering that it had crash-landed. It wasn't saucer-shaped at all, but looked more like a big, metal boomerang. I took a walk around the ship, not seeing anything particularly overwhelming—except, of course, for the fact that it had come from another world.

As I looked around, I had the same sensation I always felt around snakes, except now I couldn't see or hear it. I just knew it was there somewhere, waiting. Out of the corner of my eye, I swore I saw something move. I spun around and stared at one of the corpses. Had it twitched?

This book is dedicated to Gail Peterson (for the motivation); Chris Jones (for inspiration); Rob Peterson (for good Scotch and smoked); Mike, Jeanette, Bruce, Ivar, and Steve (for miscellaneous banter, etc.); and especially for my sweet Krissant for all the above and more.

# Prologue

The world took a bullet in the head and now Old San Francisco floats face down in a red sea sky. No one ever really explained what happened. But now the heavens above are a bloody blanket, and the air we breathe is thick with radiation.

This year we bid adieu to the ozone layer and enact a time reversal. At least we don't have to reset our watches. The banks still open for business at nine, only now it's 9:00pm. The Surgeon General decided that sunlight was becoming almost as hazardous as cigarette smoking and real butter. It doesn't matter to me. I've never kept regular hours.

My name's Tex Murphy and I'm a PI. Somebody somewhere screwed up and sent me here about a century too late. I should be driving a 38 Packard with a running board and whitewalls. Instead, I fly a 38 Lotus speeder. At least I wear the right uniform—soft felt fedora, silk tie, rumpled overcoat, and wing tips.

It's April 2043, forty five years since World War III came and went. New San Francisco rose from the ashes, but it was reborn without any of the style or flavour of the old city. So I hang my hat at the Ritz Hotel, in a particularly run-down section of Old San Francisco. I'm one of the few non-mutants in this part of town, but that doesn't bother me. Some of my best friends are mutants. Besides, the rent is cheap and my apartment is big enough to hold my office.

Nothing much has changed since I moved to the city 20 years ago. All I ever need is a good bottle of bourbon, a fresh pack of Luckies, a decent haircut, and one more case.

# Chapter One

Chelsee Bando looked deep into her vodka tonic. “I don’t know.. maybe Phoenix.”

I flicked my thumbnail across the match tip and winced as a kernel of phosphorus lodged under the nail, then burst into flame. “So you want to move to the desert.” I lit my cigarette and took a deep drag. “Do you think you’re ready to face the danger and excitement of central Arizona?”

Chelsee looked up at me with those frosty blue eyes. As usual, my thighs quivered. She took a slow sip of Stohli and shrugged. “I’ve got an old college friend down there. We’ve kept in touch... she says it’s nice.”

“I can imagine. Square dancin’, ten gallon hats, huntin’ armadillos...”

Chelsee cut in, “... macho yokels with names like Tex.”

I leaned back and grinned. Chelsee smiled back, almost stubbornly. We raised our glasses and toasted, silently.

“OK, so why leave San Francisco? A city so wonderful that I choke up whenever I talk about it.”

Chelsee ran her finger tip around the rim of her glass in a way that made me quite jealous. “Is not here that’s the problem. It’s just... I feel like I’m stuck. Except, of course, for slowly sliding into another age bracket.”

“Listen, Chelsee. Age is nothing. It’s all in the attitude. Look at me. You don’t see me moaning about being 28, do you?”

She smiled despite herself and turned toward the window. “Oh, please. If you’re 28, I’m a nun.”

I leaned forward and crossed my arms on the table. “Well, like I said, it’s totally subjective. I think you’re ageing very gracefully. You don’t look a day over thirty.”

Chelsee turned back and gave me one of those looks. “I turn 30 tomorrow.”

My collar suddenly felt a bit warmer. “Did I say 30? I meant 26. I always get those two mixed up.”

Chelsee turned back toward the window. I wasn't sure if I'd actually offended and her or if she was just trying to make me feel like an idiot. Either way, it made me want talk fast. "Look, Chelsee, the bottom line is, if you weren't a nun, I'd chase you up to my love nest and..."

"Spare me the details, Tex."

Chelsee glanced from the window directly to her watch. "It's getting late—I'm going home."

She got up and out of the booth and slipped on her coat. I tried to get her to look at me. She was even more difficult to read today than usual. As for me, if I'd had a tail, I would have been wagging it.

"Big date, eh?"

Chelsee threw her purse over her shoulder and looked down at me in a distinctly caustic manner. "Oh, yeah. Cary Grant... and a pint of Haagen Dazs. Hold me down." She picked up her vodka tonic, drained it, then slammed it back to the table. "See you later."

I watched her walk to the door, hoping she would pause, turn, and throw me a wink.

She didn't. I turned back to the table and buried the live end of my Lucky in the teeming ashtray.

"What a schmuck!"

I looked over to see Rook Garner swirled around on his usual bar-stool, smugly reclining on his elbows—a wrinkly little bastard in sensible shoes. How could I have missed the psychosomatic scent of vinegar in the air? Suddenly, I felt defensive. "What?!"

Rook shook his head and turned back to his beer mug. "You're the PI. Figure it out for yourself."

Behind the bar, Louie showed off his big, ugly grin and idly polished a shot glass. "How are things going with Chelsee, Murphy?"

"Why? You thinking of making your move, Louie?"

"No. Just wondered how she was holding up—big Three-oh and all."

Rook barked at me over his shoulder. "If I were your age, I'd already had a ring on that girl's finger. You would too, if you had any sense."

Louie chuckled and said the shot glass under the counter. "Rook seems to think you don't know how to romance a lady."

A snorting sound came from rocks general direction. "He doesn't know squat!"

A gravelly voice piped up from the end of the bar. "Maybe she just doesn't like him like that."

A lavishly powdered hooker was curled around a cracked vinyl seat, looking to trade her soul for spirits, if she could find a taker. She took a drag off a

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thin, brown cigarette crammed into a cheap, plastic holder. “Love or money. Got to be one or the other. Nothing personal, but he ain’t no Adonis.” She paused to take a slug of quadruple malt. “Probably too old for her, too.”

Too old? I was stunned. Rook jumped in. “I was 32 years older than my second wife. And she was a real beauty.”

“Age don’t matter... unless you ain’t got two dimes to rub together. This fella don’t like he can support himself, not to mention the girl.”

The hooker picked up her drink and sashayed away from the bar. I pulled another lucky out of the crumpled pack. Being assaulted by a hooker—or Rook, for that matter—didn’t really bother me, but I was being stupid, chasing after a kid like Chelsea. I was speeding toward my 40th birthday like a derailed train, though a dab of white-out on my birth certificate had made that my own little secret.

I tossed back the rest of my bourbon. My bladder suddenly felt like a medicine ball. I slid out of the booth and tipped my hat to Louie and Rook. “If you gentlemen will excuse me, I need to powder my nose. You know how it is for us older guys.”

As I left the men’s room a few minutes later, I passed a figure sitting motionless in a dark corner of the cafe. This man’s face was obscured, but I could feel his eyes on me as I walked back to my booth. When I sat down, I kept him casually in my peripheral vision. Every few seconds, his arm would lift and a tiny light would flare up, followed by a stream of smoke. Even from across the room, there was no mistaking the smell—Cubanas. Expensive, and hard to get in this part of the world. They were the best smoke a man could have—rich, full-bodied. My mouth watered ever-so-slightly.

Despite the cigar smoker’s evident taste, I don’t like people watching me. I turned to the window and looked out into the street. My mind wandered over past few months, since the incident on the Moon Child. My last case had almost been my last case. But that’s another story. Someday I’ll Find a Watson and have him start cataloguing all of my exciting adventures. Of course, it’ll be tough to keep him supplied with enough good material, not to mention a salary. Business had picked up for a while, but now I was between jobs. I spent all my money, and I was behind again on my bills. The Cubana certainly smelled good. My nose felt like it was wrapping around my face, like a flower turning toward the Sun.

“The gentleman in the corner wants to know what you’re drinking.” Glenda’s pencil was poised over her notepad. She chewed her gum furiously, sounding like someone twisting bubble-wrap.

“He wants to buy me a drink?”

She shrugged without looking at me. A sudden thought. “Uh, he isn’t,

well, you know... is he?"

"Nah. but he smells like money."

"Hmm. In that case, I'll have bourbon."

"Jim, Jack, rocks, water, soda, or neat?"

"No, Yes, no, no, no, yes."

Glenda nodded, made a loud popping sound, and walked off. The stranger in the corner didn't move. I packed another Lucky Strike and fired it up. It tasted nothing like a Cubana.

The waitress returned and slid a partially filled glass in front of me. I picked it up, swirled it round, then raised it toward the dark corner. The man motioned slightly with his hand as a fresh stream of smoke emerged from the shadows. I took a sip—first the smell, then the burning in my throat, finally the warmth in my belly. Drawing deeply on my smoke, I turned back to the window.

It was late. People passed by the bar without glancing in, each one going somewhere important. A leggy redhead strode past, with pouty lips and bouncing hair. I swivelled involuntary, tweaking my lower back and almost spilling my precious bourbon. A voice brought me back just as quickly.

"How is the bourbon?"

I looked up. The man's face was unfamiliar, but the cigar in his hand was an odd friend. He was of indeterminate age—probably a little older than you think.

"I'm convinced that God himself invented bourbon, thank you. Care to join me?"

He nodded, placed his coat and hat carefully on the rack by the booth, then lowered himself on to the vinyl seats across from me. "I hope my cigar doesn't bother you. It's terrible habit."

"I've always wanted to make a terrible habit of smoking Cubanás. Unfortunately, it's an addiction I can't afford."

"Ah... A man who knows his tobacco. My name is Gordon Fitzpatrick. It's a pleasure indeed to meet you, sir." Fitzpatrick reached across the table to shake my hand. His hands were soft and unscarred—hands that had never done anything more strenuous than pick up a cup of tea.

"My name's Murphy. Call me Tex if you like."

I looked down at my glass. It was almost empty. "Do you often buy bourbon for complete strangers?"

"Only occasionally. Since I can't drink, myself, I sometimes it enjoy the vicarious experience. Besides, you looked like you could use a drink."

"People have been telling me that for years." I drained my glass.

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Fitzpatrick watched, amused, as the last few drops hit my tongue. On cue, Glenda arrived with another glass. I looked down at the glass, then up at my companion. “If I were a woman, I’d think you were trying to soften me up. What is it you want, Mr Fitzpatrick?”

With a slight smile, Fitzpatrick ground the Cubana stub into the ashtray until it quit smoking. “I like a plain speaker, Mr Murphy. Let’s be frank with each other. I’m looking for an old acquaintance of mine. A Dr Thomas Malloy. Until recently, he lived in the Ritz Hotel, not far from here. Do you know of him?”

The Ritz had a pretty high turnover, and I’d never made up point of getting to know the other tenants. It was the kind of place where people came when they didn’t want to be found. The name didn’t ring a bell, but then I’d never been good with names. “Sorry. Never heard of the guy.”

“Ah... that’s a shame. It’s quite important that I find him.” Fitzpatrick rose slowly and reached for his coat and hat. He was either a polished bluffer, or knew when to cut his losses. Either way, he smoked Cubanas. He also seemed to need help and, after sitting across from him for five minutes, I desperately wanted one of his cigars. I decided to offer my services.

“Look, Mr Fitzpatrick, I’m a licensed private investigator. I also live at the Ritz Hotel. If you’re looking for help, maybe I could find this Dr Malloy for you.”

Holding his coat and hat, Fitzpatrick lowered himself back into the booth. His face was lit up like a hundred watt bulb. “A private detective! Delightful! I didn’t know that one could make a living as a flatfoot in the twenty-first century.”

“Well now, I didn’t say I made a living at it. I just got a licence.”

“So, you only gumshoe part-time? What else do you do?”

“Well, drinking takes up a lot of my time. Avoiding bill collectors and the IRS also keeps me fairly busy.”

Fitzpatrick seemed delighted. “Well, Mr Murphy, it seems that we could do each other some good. I need assistance and you, apparently, need income. Perhaps we should shake on it—or would you like the details first?”

This seemed too good to be true, so it probably was. But Fitzpatrick seemed more than willing to solve at least some of my money problems. Reaching into my overcoat, I found a dog eared, coffee-stained business card. I apologetically handed it to my future client.

“I prefer to do business in my office. Why don’t we meet there tomorrow morning? Bring anything that might help. We’ll wait to discuss payment, but I think you’ll find my rates reasonable. In fact, if you bring a few of those Cubanas along, I’ll give you the special Friends of Tex discount.”

# Chapter Two

“This is wonderful.” the old man looked around my digs like a kid at a petting zoo. “I feel as though I were in one of the detective movies I enjoyed as a boy.”

I nodded, as conversationally as possible. Fitzpatrick had knocked on my office door during a period of valuable REM sleep, and I wasn't fully conscious. Fortunately, he'd brought along a box of Cubanas and, together with a cup of thick coffee, high-quality nicotine for breakfast was bringing me around. My future client seemed as chipper as a poker player holding a royal flush.

“Why, I'd half-expected to see the name Samuel Spade printed on the door.”

“I always believe that setting and the ones I essential to reaching a desirable clientele.”

“Without a doubt.” he brushed a piece of lint from his hat. He seemed to enjoy my film noir philosophy as much as I was enjoying his cigars. I took another puff.

“I don't know about you, Mr Fitzpatrick, but I've always felt I belonged in the Thirties. 1930s, that is. Ever since I can remember. When the other kids were locked on to Sesame Street Interactive, I was reading Hammett and Chandler. Real paper books, of course.”

“Naturally.”

“So... now I'm a private detective.”

Fitzpatrick seemed almost envious. “It must be quite exciting.”

I took another long draw of the Cubana. “Well, let's just say it's a good thing I enjoy the work; it sure as hell doesn't pay very well.”

Fitzpatrick nodded sympathetically and reach delicately inside his coat. “That must be my cue.” his hand emerged holding a calfskin chequebook. My heart fluttered. I tried not to breathe heavily.

“I charge \$500 a day, plus expenses. Contingent, of course, upon my taking

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your case.” Fitzpatrick didn’t hesitate. “That seems perfectly acceptable. I suppose you need me to give you some details.” I leaned back in my chair and formed a perfect smoke ring. “Please.”

Fitzpatrick’s face became more serious, and I noticed for the first time how old he looked. Deep lines etched his forehead and surrounded his eyes and mouth. His skin had a transparent quality, though his complexion was quite ruddy for a man of his age and apparent lifestyle. His eyes were the only feature of his face that didn’t seem odd. He wore no glasses or corneal inserts, and his eyes seemed uncommonly clear and focused. Sure, maybe he had radial keratotomy or TDA surgery, but they didn’t explain an indefinable something about his eyes, somehow foreign, yet compelling. I looked away.

“As I told you last evening, I’m searching for a man named Thomas Malloy. Before I retired, I was a research scientist and worked quite closely with Dr Malloy for a time. Our paths diverted some 20 years ago, and we didn’t stay in touch. Recently, however, I saw a picture of my old friend in a local newspaper, the Bay City Mirror. My friend was in the background of the photograph. It was taken at a nearby university, Berkeley. When I went to look him up, I was told that no one named Malloy work there. I spoke to several people, even showing them the picture from the newspaper, but no one recognised—or admitted to recognising—Dr Malloy.

“I was close to abandoning hope when a young woman approached me, saying she might be able to help. She introduced herself as Sandra and said that she had worked with the man I knew as Malloy. He had been known to her as Tyson Matthews. Sandra did not seem comfortable talking to me at that time, so we agreed to meet later.”

Fitzpatrick paused dramatically and leaned toward me. “She did not keep our appointment.”

My eyes widened appropriately. “Did you talk to her again?”

“I had every intention of doing so. When I returned to the university, I was told that Sandra had quit her job and withdrawn from her classes. Other attempts to locate her prove fruitless.”

The story was starting to interest me. With a delicate cough, Fitzpatrick motioned toward my water cooler. “May I?”

“Certainly.”

He filled a paper cup halfway, returned to his seat, and took a sip. “As you can imagine, my discouragement gave way to a sense of empowerment. I feared not only for the well-being of the goal, but also of my friend. Macabre as it may seem, I began searching the obituaries in addition to my other inquiries. After several months, I came to believe that I would not see Dr Malloy again. Then I found another reference to my friend.”

Fitzpatrick paused and took another sip from a paper cup. I'd forgotten the Cubana—it had gone out. I set it in the ashtray.

“I have always had an interest in the paranormal and regularly read several periodicals in the genre. In one of these, the *Cosmic Connection*, I read that an upcoming feature would be an interview with a Dr Thomas Malloy. I contacted the publishers, but they would give me no information. In fact, the interview failed to appear in the magazine. I was never able to determine what had transpired, but \$500 bought me an address where Malloy could supposedly be reached.”

“Here at the Ritz?”

“That’s correct.”

“Apparently another dead end.”

“I suppose we have yet to determine that. It is, however, as far as my story goes.”

Of course, I was in. The money alone would have done it, but the old man’s story had me hooked like a hungry bass. I had an image to maintain, though. I took a moment to relight the Cubana. “I think I can make time to look into this for you. I’ll need a copy of the picture from the newspaper and a number where if you can be reached. And if you think of anything else that could help, give me a call. The numbers on my card.”

Fitzpatrick seemed relieved. He produced a business card from his breast pocket and placed it carefully on the desk. “As per your instructions, I brought with me a copy of the photograph.” Pulling a neatly folded piece of paper from yet another pocket, he set it carefully beside the business card. He then opened his chequebook and slowly wrote out a cheque. To avoid staring, I picked up the photocopy of Malloy’s picture and unfolded it. In the background of the photograph I could clearly make out the face of an older man, at least in his mid-Seventies. I looked up to see Fitzpatrick finish signing his name. He removed the cheque methodically, blew on it lightly, and handed it to me. I tried not to look, but a bunch of zeros caught my eye and wouldn’t let go.

“The Cubanas were more than enough for a retainer, Mr Fitzpatrick.”

The old man replaced the cheque book in his coat pocket. “Consider the cigars a gift from one patron of a dying art to another.”

He rose slowly and smoothed the pleats of his tailored trousers. I stood and leaned across the desk to shake his hand.

“I hope this venture will be to our mutual benefit, Mr Murphy.”

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I smiled down at the old man. “Call me Tex.”

After Fitzpatrick left, I waited for an appropriate period time, then grabbed the cheque and my hat and took the fire escape down to the street. It was only 7pm. The banks wouldn't open for a couple hours, but there was an ATM close by that would cash my cheque.

Chelsee's newsstand sits directly across from the Ritz. I decided to say hello. She left me hanging the night before. I needed to know if I'd hurt her feelings, how much, and what kind of Band Aid would make it all better.

“Hey... sorry about last night.”

“Really. Why? Chelsee was oozing antagonism. I remembered it was her birthday.

“Well I... you know, I feel like I swallowed my foot. It left a bad taste in my mouth. Metaphorically speaking, of course. My feet actually smell good.”

Chelsee didn't smile like she was supposed to. “Don't worry about it, Tex.” her words were nice enough, but her tone was testy. She crossed her arms and looked down. “I know how I look. Is not like I have guys lined up to ask me out... not like they used to.” She looked back at me, her chin up. “I wouldn't want you to mollycoddle me anyway.”

It was bizarre hearing Chelsee talk like this. It was so honest, so sad... so pathetic. I didn't know how to react. “Listen, why don't you let me take you to dinner tonight?”

“A date?” She said the word like she'd rather be doused in kerosene and given a lit cigarette.

“No, no, no—just two friends eating some food from the same table. Maybe some polite conversation.”

Chelsee mulled it over, then shrugged. “I guess that'd be OK. I mean... yeah, that'd be alright.”

Her shoulders seemed to relax slightly. “Look, Tex. I haven't been feeling myself lately. I didn't think this birthday stuff would be any big deal, but I guess it is.” She narrowed her gaze, completely unaware of her shiny eyes and moist lips. “I... appreciate you looking out for me.”

My face felt like it was turning a bit pink. “OK, is not a date then. I'll pick you up. How's five? Earlier? Later?”

Chelsee's eyes flashed for the first time. “I've got a better idea. Why don't we just have dinner at my place? It'll be quiet, we can talk... plus it will be a lot cheaper than going out.” she paused. “Besides I have something I want to talk to you about.”

I really felt like telling her that, for once, I had enough money to take her out. On the other hand, she never invited me to her place before, and the thought of it was substantially arousing. And what did she need to tell me? The possibilities were testing my antiperspirant.

“You talked me into it, Miss Bando. I’ll be there at 5 o’clock sharp... I may even iron my shirt.”

“I feel so spoiled.”

“By the way, which should I bring—red or white?”

Chelsea looked all the way into my eyes. My knees wobbled. “Both.”

As I stood at the ATM, waiting to see if my cheque would get eaten, I filed Chelsea way for later (with some difficulty) and tried to devise a plan of action for locating Dr Thomas Malloy. With the little Fitzpatrick had given me to go one, I figured the best starting point would be back at the Ritz. Somehow, I’d need to get into Malloy’s former room. Unfortunately, getting information would involve talking to Nilo Paglio, the owner/landlord/extortionist, and I wasn’t his favourite tenant at the moment. It was the second week of April, and I was a little late on my February rent payment. I’d usually been able to hold Nilo at bay by doing the occasional house-detective job, but he’d run out of things for me to do. The Ritz hadn’t had the No Vacancy sign on for a while, and Nilo was breathing down my neck like a dancing sailor on the last night of leave.

For the first time in weeks, I entered the Ritz through the front door and stepped into the lobby. I had four five-hundred dollar bills in my hand and two in my shoe. As usual, Nilo was behind the front desk, sprawled over a chair in the corner, reading a skin mag. A soggy cigar stub smouldered between clenched jaws and cracked lips. It wasn’t a Cubana. He looked up, his eyes bulging out, and he almost swallowed his stogie as he struggled to his feet. “Hole it right dere, ya sneakin’ piece of snot!” Spittle flew everywhere.

“Calm down, Nilo. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Damn straight ya ain’t goin’ anywheres! Where’s my damn money?”

I pulled out the four McKinleys and held them up in front of Nilo’s red-scarred eyes. “I’ve got it right here. I just need to ask you about something before I hand it over.”

Nilo quit spitting on me, but his eyes didn’t leave the bills. “Wha ya askin’? Maybe I ain’t talking.”

I waved the cash slightly, letting Nilo get a good whiff of it. “Tell me about Thomas Malloy.”

“Never heard of him.” Nilo’s unblinking eyes remained focused on the money. It looked like he was still counting. Keep the bills in full view, I pulled

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out the copy of the newspaper photo Fitzpatrick had given me and pointed to Malloy.

The slug prised his eyes off the cash in my hand and glared at the photograph. “Used ta live here. Gone now.”

“Which room was he staying in?”

Nilo hesitated, then glaring up at me, hissed like a cornered alley cat. “Six.”

“Anyone else stayed there since Malloy left?”

“No!” the word was forced out like an abscessed molar. I moved the greenbacks tantalisingly close to the landlord’s snout.

“Give me the security code to apartment six, and these’ll be all yours.”

Nilo didn’t answer. I waved the bones around. The effect was Pavlovian. “Awright, damn ya! Four-eight-two-seven! Now gimme those damn things!”

Apartment six was on the second floor. I punched in the numbers, heard a click, pushed open the door, and stepped into the room. It looked like just the other rooms at the Ritz: ratty bed, lopsided dresser, nightstand, scratched-up desk. The place looked as empty as a politician’s campaign promise, but it was all I had to go on. I walked to the desk and grabbed one of the drawer handles. As I pulled the drawer open, I heard a floorboard squeak. It didn’t strike me as odd until I heard the whooshing sound. A blinding flash of pain seared through my skull as someone turned out the lights.

# Chapter Three

It felt like I was swimming to the surface of a pool of molasses. My eyes focused on what looked like a massive spider web. As the fog rolled off to sea, I realised I was staring at the cracked plaster ceiling in the Ritz Hotel, apartment Six. I rolled over and spend the next five minutes attempting to stand. A brighter shade of red light was seeping through the window. I checked my watch—it was 12:03pm I'd been out for more than sixteen hours.

The room looked the same as it had yesterday, except all the drawers had been opened and emptied. Looked like whoever thumped me had given the place a once-over. Maybe he'd missed something.

I was right. The desk contained an empty book of matches and two paperclips. In the dresser I found a black sock. An empty beer bottle had been left in the closet. For Holmes, this might have been a bonanza of clues. For me, it was diddly. I got down on the floor and peered under the bed. I detected a faint odour. Pawing through a pile of dust bunnies, my fingers touched something soft and smooth. It was a silk scarf, bright purple and oozing the cheap scent of department store perfume. Judging by the smell, it hadn't been there long. I pocketed the scarf and stumbled back to my office.

The Colonel, my mentor in the PI biz, had taught me long ago the proper cure for a goose egg: a double bourbon with an ice-pack chaser. As I underwent treatment, I leaned back in my chair and tried to think clearly. Who had jumped me, and why? Whoever it was had done a thorough job. I thought about checking around, but anyone good enough to put me out for 16 hours wouldn't be sloppy enough to be seen. I pulled the scarf out of my pocket and examined it.

There was no label, no identifying marks of any kind. I assumed that the scarf belonged to a woman, but I'd been wrong before. Either way, I was optimistic that finding its owner would put me on Malloy's trail. The question was how. Nilo would certainly have noticed any woman who'd come into the Ritz, though I doubt if he'd remember anything about her from the neck up.

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The scent on the scarf was memorable, if nothing else. Unfortunately, it was probably available at every discount department store in the city. I looked the scarf over. The purple shade was shockingly bright. The scarf would almost certainly have caught someone's attention. Chelsee was always good with details maybe she could...

Chelsee! Oh, Lord! I checked my watch for no good reason. She was gonna kill me. She'd never believe that I'd been out cold straight through dinner. I jumped out of the chair and caught the corner of the desk, bruising my thigh and upsetting my already unsteady balance. As I stumbled toward the floor, my forehead hit the rim of the metal wastebasket. I spun away, the back of my head slamming onto the hardwood floor. As I waited for the room to stop spinning, I thought that at least now Chelsee might find it easy to believe that I'd been jumped.

With some effort, I got my feet and made my way down to the street. I'd forgotten that it was midday. Chandler Avenue looked like a ghost town. This time of year, the radar meter was off the scale during daylight hours. Chelsee wouldn't open the newsstand until around 7pm she was probably at her apartment, asleep. I looked up and down the street. Even the Brew & Stew was closed. Then my ears caught the faintest strain of bluesy piano coming from the alley that separated the Ritz and the Fuchsia Flamingo Club. The Flamingo had just opened in the old bijou building. The marquee up front trumpeted: "Tonight! Don't miss Luscious Lucy Lust!" I walked to the end of the alley. A door was propped open. I stepped inside.

As my eyes adjusted to the cool darkness, I made out a broad back hunched over a baby grand. The playing was sloppy, but sincere. This was my first time in the Flamingo, primarily because of the requisite membership fee. I looked around the dark interior. The design staggered back and forth between eclectic and tasteless. The overall feel was a blend of Mayan myth and Vegas vamp, all set to be lit up in pastel neon. But someone loved this place—there was almost as much heart and soul here as bamboo and Naugahyde.

I approached the broad-backed Gent at the Larsen grand. He spoke over her shoulder. "Didn't mean to wake ya, Emily. I'll knock it off if it's bugging ya." A sour-looking mutant with a large moustache, he swung his girth around and looked me up and down with a stunningly blank expansion. I was clearly not Emily. He stood up. He was huge. "We're closed." the tone implied something closer to "any last words?"

Immediately, I broke into my special "Howdy! I'm Tex! I'd like to be your friend!" smile. "Yeah, I know. I came through that door every yonder. I heard ya playin' that there piano. Sounds mighty fine!"

I hoped my trustee "saddle pal" drawl would confuse him. It was a

gamble, but he didn't strike me as Mensa material. The mutant looked me over carefully and seemed to be doing a lot of sniffing. I remembered the scarf from my pocket and pulled it out. "This here is probably what you're smelling. It's not mine."

My saddle pal looked closely at the scarf. "Where'd you get that?" he looked at me sharply. "And quit using the phoney accent."

He was on to me. Maybe I was losing my touch. "Uh, sure... I, uh, I found it next door... over at the Ritz. That's where I live. I was trying to find out whose it is."

The mutant took a menacing step toward me. "And that's why you walked into a closed, private club."

My left eyelid twitched. "Well, no. I, uh, actually... I heard the piano. That's why I came in. The door was open. I wasn't looking for trouble. Really?"

The mutant looked toward the door, then back at me. "Give me the scarf."

I hesitated. "Well... I don't know if I should. I mean, it's not yours... is it?"

The scarf was ripped out of my hands. "I'll make sure it gets to the right person."

There was no room for discussion.

"All right, then. Well, thanks. I'll sleep better knowing that everything's been taken care of. I guess I'll... run along them. Good to meet you. Real nice place you've got here."

The mutant followed me to the door and slammed it shut as soon as I was outside. I paused to light a Lucky. At least I'd learned a few things. Unless I missed my guess, the big goom had mistaken me for someone named Emily on account of the cheap perfume that still clung to me like cat hair on a sofa. He also recognised the scarf. Odds were that it belonged to the same woman. I had to assume that she had been in Malloy's apartment recently. And Emily lived—or at least was staying—in the old Bijou building.

I had a hunch that she knew something about Malloy. Now I needed to find out who she was and get her within range of my hypnotic charm. My conversation with Chuckles, the piano player, made me doubt that he'd be of any assistance. I needed coffee.

The closed sign didn't intimidate me. I knocked on the window and saw Louie poke his misshapen head out of the kitchen. He waved me, then disappeared.

## 16 Aaron Connors

Seconds later, he came to the door and unlocked it. “You’re up early, Murph.”

Louie held the door open as I stepped inside. The smell of spicy chilli billowed from the kitchen. The empty feeling in my stomach immediately became the only important thing in the world. Louie’s cuisine didn’t win any awards, but it attracted a substantial clientele from all over, even New San Francisco. There just weren’t many places left that offered home-cooked meals, a smoking section, and reasonable prices.

“You hungry? I can work something up in two shakes.” Louie was born to feed.

“You sure you don’t mind? Smells like you’re working some of your legendary chilli alchemy.”

“Naw. I just finish this batch. It’s a good one, but it’s gotta simmer for a few hours.”

I slumped onto a bar stool, and Louie slid a menu in front of me.

“Want the Armageddon?” I nodded. Louie’s house blend was the only java that ever worked for me. It had almost magical properties. “The pot will be ready in a minute. The right-back.”

Louie bustled back into the kitchen. I didn’t bother to look at the menu. Western omelette with feta. Wheat toast. Hash browns. Three cups of coffee. My eyes started to glaze over. I didn’t want to hurry Louie, but the ketchup bottle at my elbow looked delicious. The waiting was gonna kill me. I pulled out my crumpled pack of Luckies.

Louie burst from the kitchen, a steaming pot of joe in one hand and an oversized mug in the other. With the first sip of Armageddon blend coursing through my veins, I recited my breakfast mantra. Louie tromped back to the lab. The guy was a true saint—a disfigured cherub in a greasy apron. Here he was, feeding me before the diner was even open, probably assuming that I was broke as usual.

Quite a bit of sun filtered through the clouds. No one passed by. I took another sip from the mug and stuck a smoke in the corner of my mouth. I checked my pockets, but all the red tips were gone. I reached over the bar and grabbed a pack of matches. It was the same type of matchbook I’d found at Malloy’s apartment. I lit my Lucky. Maybe Louie knew something. If Malloy had been in the Brew and Stew, Louie would remember.

For once, the food arrived as I was putting the cigarette out. Louie refilled my coffee and poured some for himself. “Geez, Murph, when’s the last time ya eight?”

I shrugged, my mouth full of salty feta and crispy hash browns. “Don’t know. Couple days.” I pointed with my fork until I could talk legibly. “God, Louie. This is exactly what I needed this morning.”

“Rough night?”

I nodded as I tore a large section out of the centre of a piece of buttery toast. Louie took a long sip of coffee.

“So what’s the scoop on that guy who bought you the bourbon the other night? Client?”

“Yeah. He has me looking for someone named Thomas Malloy.” I wiped my hands with a napkin and pulled out the photo Fitzpatrick had given me. “This is Malloy. I think he may have come in here not too long ago. Recognise him?”

Louie looked intently at the face for a few moments. “I think so. It’s been awhile... couple of weeks anyway. Came in with a younger gal. They had the special and a few cocktails.”

“Tell me about the girl.”

“Real pretty, a little heavy on the make-up. Smelled nice. I think she sings up at the Flamingo.”

Louie grabbed the coffee pot and freshened up our mugs. I speared a chunk of feta.

“You ever gone there? The Flamingo, I mean.” he lifted the coffee to his mouth and talked through the steam. “Naw. Haven’t had the time. I’ve been meaning to.”

I mopped up the last of my omelette with a piece of toast. Louie waited for me to finish and took my plate away. I was full, but not uncomfortable. The tobacco crackled as I inhaled. I leaned down and pulled one of the McKinley’s out of my shoe. When Louie returned, I handed him the 500 dollar bill. “Does this bring us up even?”

Louie seemed a little shell-shocked. Maybe he’d already claimed me as a deduction on his tax return. He turned to the cash register, opened it, then swung the around and laid three C-notes in front of me.

“That oughtta cover it.”

What a liar. I knew I’d run up at least a 400 dollar tab over the past two months or so. I slid off the bar-stool, pocketing one of the bills and my pack of smokes. Louie braced himself on the counter and jerked his head in the direction of the two bills. “Don’t even think about leavin’ here without those.”

I walked to the door. “Thanks, Louie. If there’s a God, he’s saving a seat for you.”

I stepped outside and looked up and down the street. I could hear the air traffic picking up, but no one in the neighbourhood was out and about yet. My next stop would have to wait until later. Chelsea first, then the Fuchsia Flamingo. My full tummy and I walked back to the office.

# Chapter Four

“A little late, aren’t you?”

She looked tired. Through the partially open door, I could see the kitchen table. Burned down candles. Slightly wilted flowers. An open container of Haagen Dazs with a spoon stuck in it. A simple “I’m sorry” wasn’t going to cut it.

“I’m sorry. I... I really didn’t...”

“Couldn’t you at least call? Don’t you have any respect for me at all?” Chelsee’s eyes glistened. She dried her eyes on the sleeve of her bathrobe. “Leave me alone, Tex. I can’t talk right now.” She started to close the door.

I reached out and stopped it. “C’mon, Chelsee, it’s not like you think. Just... give me a chance to explain.”

She looked at me defiantly. The tears were coming back. She turned away.

“Look, I know this is gonna sound ridiculous, but...” I paused, then said it as quickly as possible. “I couldn’t come because someone knocked me out.”

It sounded like the lamest lie ever told. Chelsee gave me a look that said what kind of a fool do you take me for?

“Really. I’m serious—feel my head. I was out for, like, sixteen hours.”

Chelsee’s hard stare was merciless.

I took her hand and placed it carefully on my still tender goose egg. “See? I swear, I really wanted to be here last night, but I was out cold the whole time. You gotta believe me—I wouldn’t stand you up. Ever.”

She pulled her hand away. Her gaze seemed to penetrate me, reaching straight into my flawed male soul. After a long moment, she released me. Her voice was softer now. “What happened? Are you OK?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It’s not like I’ve ever taken a shot to the head before.”

Chelsee pulled a tissue from the pocket of her robe and smiled as she dabbed at her nose.

I grinned and felt a huge weight lift off my shoulders. “Why don’t you get dressed and let me buy you a drink?”

She opened the door and motioned me inside. “Might as well. I wasn’t planning on opening the newsstand today anyway.” She picked up the Haagen Dazs, licked off the spoon, and replaced the cover. “Where should we go?”

I knew that we should go somewhere in the new city, a nice, quiet place where we could discuss the pros and cons of romantic love, get a little light-headed, maybe go for a walk and watch the sunset—in short, get away from this Malloy case that had gotten me into trouble in the first place. But if we went to, say, the Fuchsia Flamingo, maybe I could make things up to Chelsee and get a little detective work done. It was probably a bad idea.

“How about the Fuchsia Flamingo?”

It turned out that the owner of a Flamingo, a fellow by the name of Gus Leach, had given Chelsee a complimentary membership. As we stepped inside the club, we were greeted by the moustachioed mutant I’d met earlier. “Hello, Miss Bando.”

“Hello, Gus. This is a good friend of mine. Tex Murphy—Gus Leach.”

Leach sized me up. I hadn’t made a good first impression, but being a friend of Chelsee’s might compensate. Leach looked back at Chelsee, then extended his hand toward me. “We met, though we weren’t properly introduced.”

My knuckles popped as he shook my hand. I wouldn’t be shuffling cards for a while.

“Sit anywhere you like. I’ll send the waitress right over.”

We opted for a corner table. There were only five other people in the club, and we barely beat the waitress to our seats. Chelsee asked for a Cape Codder. Feeling playful, I ordered Scotch. Chelsee excused herself, leaving me to survey the surroundings. The Flamingo’s interior was a shrine to bad taste on an epic scale, an unparalleled mish-mash of exotic things, neon, and garage sale oddities. The baby grand and a microphone stand were on a stage at the far end of the room. In the centre of the club, a small, unused parquet dancefloor sparkled under a giant disco ball. Chelsee and the drinks arrived simultaneously.

“This is quite a place. Interesting decor.”

Chelsee smiled and stirred her vodka and cranberry juice. “I like it. But then, I’ve always been secretly attracted to blatant tackiness.” her eyes locked on to mine as she leaned forward and sipped through the straw in her drink.

“Should I take that personally?”

She shrugged coyly. “Take it any way you want.”

## 20 Aaron Conners

My right foot spontaneously started tapping like a machine gun. For over a year, I'd pursued Chelsee shamelessly—without her ever giving me the slightest bit of encouragement. Rejection fit into my image—the lone wolf. Besides, it was one thing I was good at. Now she was turning the tables on me, or so it seemed. The hunter had become the hunted. My mouth suddenly dry, I grabbed my Scotch and gulped it. Chelsee raised an eyebrow and leaned forward, pressing her chin on the back of her hand. I smiled nervously and turned to find the waitress.

“Do you want to know what I was going to tell you last night?” Chelsee's voice had slipped to a throaty whisper. God, I needed another Scotch. I signalled to the waitress, then turned back to Chelsee, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Sure.” my voice was cracking slightly. I fumbled with my pack of Lucky Strikes.

“I was gonna tell you that I've been thinking... you know... about me and you.”

The match shook slightly as it wandered toward the end of my cigarette.

“I have to admit... I used to think you were just another smug, insensitive back of hormones, going through a midlife crisis. Now that I know you better, I realise this isn't a midlife crisis at all.”

The cigarette was calming me down. “Thanks... I think.”

Chelsee smiled down at her drink and slowly stirred it with her forefinger. I just decided that, underneath it all, you're really a nice guy. And I've always thought you were quite attractive.”

She lifted her finger out of the drink and ran it like a cross her lower lip. Lord, she really knew how to pitch my tent. Moving her drink to the side, she again leaned forward and placed her chin on the back of her hand. It looked like it was my turn to talk. I sent a stream of smoke off to the side; I'd regained control.

“This sudden interest... seeing me in a new light—I mean, I don't want to look a gift horse in the mouth, if you'll pardon the expression, but this isn't connected in any way to, say, someone's recently celebrated birthday?”

“I don't know. Maybe. I think that made me take a look at myself, look at what's important. For a long time now I've been on my own. I've decided that independence is overrated. I want to be with somebody. Have someone need me.”

“I was married once, you know.”

Chelsee nodded.

“It was miserable. Whenever someone tells me to go to hell, I tell him I've already been there.”

“Would you ever try it again? With someone else, I mean.”

I took a long sip of Scotch and thought it over. The implications of our conversation were making my head swim. Suddenly, a voice rang out.

“Ladies and gentlemen. The management of the Fuchsia Flamingo is proud to present this evening’s entertainment. Please give a warm welcome to Luscious... Lucy... Lust!”

A pitiful smattering of applause accompanied the opening bars of “I’ve Got You Under My skin.” A slicked back middle-aged man in a powder blue tuxedo sat at the baby grand. A woman stepped into the spotlight and undulated to the microphone. Her ruby red sequined dress look like it had been painted on. It wasn’t low-cut—it didn’t have to be. From forty feet this woman look perfect. She curled her fingers around the microphone and began to sing. I was spellbound. She didn’t just sing a song—she made love to it.

I glanced over at Chelsea. She was looking directly at me, not smiling. “Did you forget the question?”

I had. I’ve got you deep in the heart of me. With some effort, I pulled my attention from the stage and tried to remember where we’d left off. “Let’s see. Marriage. I don’t know. I guess I could... if it seemed like the thing to do.”

I really didn’t mean to sound distracted. Chelsea didn’t respond. The waitress stopped by and confirmed that we did, indeed, want two more drinks. I lit another smoke and looked back toward the singer. I was willing to bet that if I got within ten feet of the stage, I’d catch the scent of the purple scarf. Luscious Lucy—alias Emily—and I needed to talk.

“Do you know her?” Chelsea was still watching me watch the singer.

“No. But I think she’s tied up in the case I’m working on.”

“Really.”

“Seriously. I can’t give you all the details, but I’m looking for a guy. I think this dame used to see him. I’ve got to talk to her and find out what she knows.”

Chelsea picked up her purse and stood up. “Well, I’ll leave you to your investigative work. Thanks for the drink.”

She turned and headed for the exit. I jumped up and almost body slammed the waitress who was arriving with our drinks. I quickly pulled out my wallet and threw a fifty on the table. “Leave the drinks. I’ll probably be back in a minute.”

I caught up to Chelsea just outside the front door. “Where you goin’?”

“Home. I’m tired.”

## 22 Aaron Conners

“Look, Chelsea. Don’t get me wrong.. I care about you—a lot. I just get a little uncomfortable whenever I hear the ‘M’ word.”

“Tex, you don’t need to humour me. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

She crossed her arms and looked intently at the sidewalk. “I’ve had an offer to sell the newsstand. I think I’m gonna take it. Like I told you the other night, I think I’ll try Phoenix on for size.”

For some reason, I felt a twinge of panic. “Are you sure about all this? I mean, moving is kind of a big thing. Nothing you want to rush into.”

She looked up. “I’ve been thinking about it for months. I guess I haven’t done anything because I want to see if we could give it a try. But I don’t think it’s going to happen. You’re probably right—I’m just getting panicked because I’m thirty and there’s no one in my life. I like you a lot... I should probably leave it at that.”

She turned away and spoke over her shoulder. “I’ll walk home. I could use the exercise.”

I didn’t know what to say, but I felt like I should say something. “Chelsea...?”

She stopped and turned. “Yeah?”

I wanted to, but I didn’t. “Come see me before you go anywhere.”

She nodded. I watched her until she was gone. What a schmuck.

Back inside the Flamingo, I drained both glasses. The beautiful woman was getting friendly with the piano and singing a smoking version of “Love for Sale.” the thrill had left with Chelsea. I packed another cigarette and called for a double Scotch. Scratch that. Make it bourbon.

The singer’s act went on for forty-five minutes. She was too good to be playing this section of town. I wondered what her story was, how she’d ended up in a dead-end lounge like this one. The last note of “Misty” faded into sparse, though enthusiastic, applause. With a graceful curtsy that completely contradicted the slinky gymnastics she displayed earlier, the young woman made her exit. Draining my bourbon, I casually made my way across the room. To the left of the stage, a doorway led to the restaurant and an ascending stairway. As I stepped through the doorway, a flash of red caught my eye from the top the stairs. I darted after the girl.

Reaching the top, I turned to my right and saw the singer standing at a door, searching through a full key chain. I approached slowly, to avoid startling her.

“Excuse me. Can I talk to you for a second?”

The girl jumped. She turned to face me and retreated several steps. She was clearly frightened. “One step closer and I’ll scream! I mean it!”

I stayed put. My hands were extended with palms out—the universal sign for “nothin’ up my sleeve.” “Whoa... no need for that. Okay? Just hear me

out. I promise... I'm not a pervert. Well, hardly ever. And only with women I know really well."

The girl seemed less scared but didn't relax her defensive stance. "What do you want?"

The sound of heavy footsteps came from the stairs behind me. I talked fast. "I'm a friend of Thomas Malloy's—I need to find him."

"What the hell are you doing up here?!" Leach pushed past me and stood between me and the girl. I didn't answer; it was up to Emily—I figured the odds were split. I could get her to talk or I could be beaten to a pulp by the big mutant. Leach took a step toward me, fists clenched.

Emily scrutinised me, obviously trying to determine if I was on the up and up. She turned out to be an excellent judge of character. "It's OK, Gus. He just wants an autographed picture. I'll come down in a minute."

Leach looked back at the girl, then at me, clearly irritated. Reluctantly, he moved toward the stairs, his eyes burning a hole in me. As he walked by, he dipped his shoulder slightly, knocking me off balance. I resisted my instincts and kept quiet until Leach was out of earshot.

"That was exciting."

Emily found the correct key and inserted it into the door lock. "We'll have to hurry. Gus doesn't like me talking to guys."

I followed her into her apartment. A quick look around gave the impression of being in a wild teenage girl's room. The smell of cheap perfume mingled with stale tobacco smoke. An open bottle of tequila, half full, sat on the table of a brightly-lit vanity. One shelf was lined with stuffed animals.

Emily sat on the edge of her bed and clumsily lit a long, thin cigarette. She was younger than I thought she'd be. Under all the make-up, she was probably twenty-two, no older than twenty-four. A hard twenty-four.

"You're Tex Murphy, aren't you?"

I was caught off guard. It never occurred to me that she'd know who I was. "Yeah. Have we met?"

She shook her head. "No. I just heard about you... that you're a PI, that you can help people."

I knew I had a reputation. I'd always thought it was less than flattering. It made me wonder who she been talking to. "People usually hire me to do their dirty work. Most of my clients seem satisfied with my work."

"I need you to help me." Emily looked me straight in the eyes. She sounded desperate.

"What kind of help are you looking for?"

"I think someone is going to murder me."

## 24 Aaron Connors

I could see she was trying hard to stay under control. I found my pack of smokes and drew one out. “Why?”

Emily stood up and began to pace. “It started right after Thomas left. About a week ago... he just disappeared—without a word. A couple nights later... I found a note in my room. After I read it, I was so scared... I told Gus, and he said not to worry about it... then I got another note... I want to call the cops, but Gus won’t let me... he keeps saying its nothing, just some freak who gets off on scaring woman.”

She dropped back onto the bed and took a long, shuddering breath. I didn’t like the idea of someone murdering her. “This is really the sort of thing the police should know about.”

She took a jittery drag of a cigarette. “Gus says he will make sure no one hurts me. He doesn’t want anyone else taking care of me. I know he means well, but sometimes I just want to... but he’s always been so good to me... I don’t know what to do.”

I’ve never really believed in coincidence. The timing of Thomas Malloy’s disappearance and the arrival of the notes seemed too close to be unrelated. Emily was a strong kid, but she was almost hysterical with fear. I probably would have helped her anyway. It was an added bonus that her problems might give me a lead to Malloy.

I went over to Emily’s bed and sat down next to her. My voice was as gentle as brushed cotton. “I’ll do what I can to help... Gus doesn’t need to know.”

She turned toward me, look for an hesitant at the same time. “I don’t have a lot of money... but I be so grateful.” her hand brushed my thigh, almost accidental. I stood up and moved away.

“I’ll need to look at the notes you got—if you still got them.”

“I do. I saved them to give to the police.” She crossed the room to a desk and pulled out two pieces of paper. I looked them over. “When did you receive these?”

Emily sat back down on the bed. Last week, maybe two nights after Thomas disappeared, and then the night before last. They were slipped under my door.”

“Has anything else happened, other than the notes?”

“No, not I can think of.” I slipped the notes into the pocket of my overcoat. “Incidentally, what is your full name?”

“Emily Sue Patterson.”

“Listen, Emily, like I told you, I’m looking for Thomas Malloy. If I can find out who’s hassling you and get them to stop, will you tell me everything you know about him?”

She thought about it for a moment. “I guess so. I think I can trust you... why are you looking for him?”

“An old friend of his hired me to find him. He might be in danger.”

“I’ll do what I can. I didn’t know him that well, but he was very good to me. The last time I saw him...”

The door burst open. Leach looked from me to Emily and back to me. He seemed almost disappointed that he hadn’t caught us in a compromising position. He pointed a cigar sized finger at me. “You! Get the hell outta here! Emily, you’re on in five minutes!”

I tipped my hat to the young lady and walked out the door. Leach followed me, slamming the door behind him. He whispered menacingly at me as he followed me down the stairs.

“Leave her alone, Murphy. Take her away from me, and I’ll kill you. Don’t you ever forget that. I’ll kill you.”

Discretion being the better part of valour, I didn’t reply. Leach followed me to the bottom of the stairs, grabbed me by the arm, and pushed me toward a side door.

“You go out here. And don’t bother coming back. I don’t like nosy people hanging around my place.”

The door slammed behind me. I was back in the alley between the Flamingo and the Ritz. At least I’d learned a lot since the last time Leach had booted me out of his club.

# Chapter Five

I set the needle down carefully. A few seconds a crackling, then Nat King Cole's voice began to fill the office. I walked around the desk and dropped into my chair. The desktop was covered: a partially filled glass, a bottle of JD behind it, he smouldering ashtray, a fingerprint testing kit, a magnifying glass, and other investigative paraphernalia. In the centre of this mess were the two notes Emily had given me. Three hours' worth of analysis, and I was no better off than when I'd started.

One note read: I'm watching you. I take pictures. Be afraid. It was written on a plane 8 1/2 by 11 inch sheet in block letters with a standard No. 2 pencil. At the bottom of the sheet was a symbol shaped like an arrow. It seemed familiar to me, though I couldn't think of where I'd seen it before. The second note was identical, except for the content. It read: It won't be long now. You and I will be together.

Whoever had sent the notes was one sick, creepy bastard, but he was also very careful. There were only two sets of prints on the sheets: mine and Emily's. No stains, no marks of any kind. Everything he'd used to create the notes was standard, easy to get, and untraceable. There was one unique thing about the notes: the arrow symbol. It wasn't much, but it was my only angle.

"Certainly has been a long time, Tex." Patty Baker's full, rosy cheeks glistened under false eyelashes and peroxide-friendly hair.

"Yeah, well, you know how it is for me, Patty. Work, work, work."

It was a slight exaggeration, but Patty required excuses. She and I had gotten chummy a couple of years ago. It had been an unintentional foray into the world of one-night stands, but the resulting ungentlemanly obligation that came with it would make me uncomfortable every time I paid a visit to the San Francisco PD Main Precinct. One night had been enough to convince me that she must be someone else's type.

Patty pursed her lips and pouted in a somewhat revolting fashion. "I'll bet you could squeeze me into a busy shadow for an evening or two."

“I’ll have to take a rain check, sweetheart. I’ve got a big case going—could keep me busy for months... years, even. As a matter of fact, that’s why I’m here. I need to bend Mac’s ear for a bit.”

Patty gave me a coy, girlish look and ogled me in a way that was supposed to leave me wanting more. She leaned forward, reaching for the Vid-phone control panel. A deep, raspy voice jumped out of the speaker behind the front desk. “What?!”

Patty pressed down a button and looked up at me, seductively. Nothing about her look made me change my mind.

“Mr Tex Murphy to see you, sir.”

“God... all right! Send him back!”

Patty punched the door release, and I step through the security scanner.

“Thanks, Patty.” As I passed her, a paw cupped my backside. I jumped slightly and quickened my pace to Mac Malden’s office. I felt violated.

I only saw Mac when I needed a favour from the police department. It was a friendship of convenience, at least for me. I unintentionally helped him solve a couple of cases in the past, including the murder of Marshal Alexander. Mick Flemm’s robbery spree, and the mysterious death of Rusty the Clown. Mac was old school and knew when he owed someone, even if he bitched every time I asked for anything.

The crusty cop was sprawled in a high-backed swivel chair, a bent smoke sticking up from under his moustache and a police report in his hands. His desk was piled with papers, plastic freezer bags full of various items, at least a dozen Styrofoam cups, and a handful of petrified doughnut chunks. Mac set the police report on the desk, took a deep drag, and leaned back. He always tried to look like he was busy doing important work whenever I came by.

“Make it quick, Murphy. I’ve got about a million things to do, and wasting my time on you isn’t one of them.”

“Geez, Mac. I don’t see you that often. I worry about you... you don’t look too good.”

“Yeah?! Well, neither do you! You look like crap!”

“Oh, I’ll admit, I’m not twenty-eight any more, but, you know, I feel great. I’ve got one of those juicers, and it really works! I think you could do with the nice cabbage and carrot juice blend.”

“What’d you do? Quit the PI business and sign up with Robco? I don’t wanna buy a damn juicer—and I don’t like wise guys coming in my office and annoying me! So get out!”

“Ok. Calm down, Mac I’m just kidding you. I actually have a reason for stopping by. I want you to look at something.”

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I pulled the notes from my coat pocket, unfolded them, and set them in front of Mac. He lit another smoke and looked them over carefully. Then he motioned for me to close his office door.

“Where did you get these?” his tone of voice was startlingly unfamiliar. He was looking directly at me, without a hint of the usual acid gruffness or antagonisms.

“A client gave them to me.”

Mac handed the notes back to me, then pulled a sheet of paper and pen and out of a desk drawer. Mac scribbled on the paper as he spoke. “They’re meaningless. I wouldn’t worry about it.” he held the sheet of paper in front of me. I can’t talk. Someone might be listening.

I mouthed “Who?” then spoke aloud as Mac wrote some more. “Yeah, that’s what I figured, but I thought I’d check it out.”

Mac held up the paper. NSA. Hot damn. The National Security Agency only got involved in big stuff. Apparently I’d stumbled into something a helluva lot bigger than I’d bargained for. I took the paper from Mac and picked up pencil from the desk. What do you know about these notes?

Mac took the sheet of paper. “Did you see the Giants game last night?” He scribbled.

I took my time answering. “Naw. I went out. I haven’t seen the paper yet today. Who won?”

“Dodgers, five to four. Got three in the ninth. Manousakis hit one into the third deck.” he passed me the paper. Black Arrow killer—murdered seven or eight in AZ and NV over the past two years. Arrow symbol referred to in case notes. Another girl murdered here few weeks ago—similar note found. Investigation shut down by Feds.

I wanted to ask Mac more, but he had that get out of my office light in his eyes.

“Well, it was good to see you, Mac. We’ll have to go catch a game at Candlestick sometime.” I got up to leave.

Mac opened a desk drawer and searched through it. “Oh, Tex, on your way out, could you drop this letter off for me? I’d sure appreciate it.” I took a business card from him and stuck in a pocket.

“No Problem, Mac. I’ll see you around.”

Patty was on the vid-phone and let me leave without the usual double entendres and hollow hints at future trysts. I was eager to look at the card Mac had given me but decided to wait until I reached the relative privacy of my office.

The business card was ragged and cheaply made. It read: Lucas Pernell—Investigative Reporter. The printed number had been crossed out and a new

number written in pencil. It didn't look promising, but Mac hadn't given it to me for no reason. I punched in the number on my vid-phone.

"Bay City Mirror. Circulation. How may I help you?"

"Lucas Pernell, please."

The video relay was off, and I assumed that the voice had been computer-generated. Amazingly, it wasn't. "Who?"

"Pernell. Lucas Pernell."

"Do you know the extension of the party?"

"No, I don't. I was just given this number."

"Please hold."

Elevator Muzak piped through my Vid-phone speakers. An orchestral version of "Scream at the Sky" from Soundgarden's final album. An oldie, but a goodie. A voice finally cut in. "Who are you holding for?"

"Lucas Pernell."

"One moment, please."

A minute or so later, the phone beeped and yet another voice popped out of my speakers. "This is Pernell."

"Mr Pernell, my name is Tex Murphy. I'm a PI and a friend of Mac Malden. He gave me this number."

"Is this some kind of joke? I don't know any Mac Malden."

Either this was a big mistake, or maybe Pernell was testing me. "Hmm... maybe I got the name wrong. Anyway I have some notes that might interest you."

There was a short silence. "These notes... are they sharp, to the point?"

"I guess you could say that."

"You're right. And interested. We should meet. I'll let you know when and where."

Click.

I spent several hours scanning the internet for references to the Black Arrow Killer, but I couldn't find anything. I turned off the computer and poured myself a bourbon. My eyes were dry, and my back ached. A nap sounded good. My fax machine beeped and spewed out a single sheet. I tore it off and read the words *Twilight*. 1 A M.

I'd never experienced the Garden of Earthly Delights that is the *Twilight Lounge*. It was on the outskirts of New San Francisco. Not quite reputable—not particularly scary. Like a hundred other watering holes, it followed the Lounge Code: dark, not too friendly, and always open. I stepped inside and

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looked around. I had a pretty good idea what a Lucas Pernell would look like. Glasses, tousled hair, herringbone jacket, khaki trousers, a cheap tie has always loosened and slightly off-centre. There were at least for Lucas Pernell's in the bar. Fortunately, I must have been the only Tex Murphy.

"You Murphy?"

"Pernell?"

"I'm over here."

I followed the guy to a table in the far reaches of the lounge—pass the pool tables, pass the dart board. Even past a life-size cut-out of a golden beach vixen and her sweaty beer bottle.

"What do you drink?"

"Bourbon."

"Well, that's a good start."

Pernell caught a waitress's eye, held up two fingers, and pointed at the table. I pulled out a pack of Lucky Strikes, shook one to the top, and pulled it out between my teeth. "Can I bum one of those?"

"Sure." I shook up another smoke and pointed the pack toward Pernell.

We lit up as the waitress set up my first drink and Pernell's second. My fellow bourbon drinker paid the waitress and waited for her to sway back to the bar.

"Let's see the business card."

I pulled out the card Mac had given me. Pernell turned it over and examined it closely. Apparently satisfied, he lit a match and held it up to the card. Fractions of a second short of burning his fingers, he dropped the smoking cinder into the ashtray.

"You said you had notes."

I produced the two sheets of paper. Pernell first looked at them sceptically, with the air of someone whose patience is being tested. Quickly, though, his grip tightened, and his eyes began to move over the paper. After a moment he looked up at me, sharply. "How did you get these?"

"They were given to me by a client."

"How did your client get them?"

"From a stalker, apparently. What do you think?"

Pernell smiled. He carefully removed his glasses and polished them with his tie. "Look, sorry if I wasn't too friendly just now. Most of the people I deal with fall into two groups: idiots and imbeciles. I've got a waiting list a mile long of crackpots desperate to waste my time. Unfortunately, it's a necessary waste of time, sifting the grain from the chaff." he replaced his glasses and picked up the notes. "You, my friend, are one big chunk of grain."

I buried the smoking end of my cigarette into the black remains of Pernell's business card. "Why don't we pretend—for just a second—that I have no idea how important these notes are. You tell me what you know, then I help my client. Sound like a plan?"

"So you don't know anything about the Black Arrow Killer?"

"Only What Mac Malden told me. Killed a few people in the Southwest a few years ago. Seems to have moved into the Bay area and apparently murdered a girl around here a few weeks ago. That's all."

Pernell handed the notes back to me. I folded them and put them back in my pocket. "Well, Malden might know more than that, and he might not. Even if he did, I doubt he tell you. He'd be stupid to."

"Why?"

"It's a long story."

"Humor me."

Pernell took a swig of bourbon. He looked at me closely, like he was sizing me up, then went on. "When the first bodies turned up in Arizona in the summer of '41, the local police tried to keep it off the wires. Didn't want the bad publicity. So wasn't until March of '42, when three other victims were found, that the story broke big. Turned out that the killer in all five cases had the same MO. He always sent notes to his victims before murdering them. I went down to cover the story and actually got a chance to see one of the notes. It was like these that you gave me. Exactly like these."

"With the arrow symbol on it."

"Right. And the block lettering—everything. Now, the police weren't too keen on releasing the details, since this type of crime could spawn copycat murders. The black arrow symbol was referred to in reports, given the murderer the appellation of the Black Arrow Killer, but the actual symbol was never published. This way, the police would know when the actual killer was involved by this specific arrow symbol."

"Makes sense."

"So, anyway, the killer moved on and racked up two more victims in Nevada before the police could catch up. Finally, a girl contacted the police after receiving one of the notes. The cops moved in and made an arrest. Sources tell me that, at that point, the NSA stepped in and completely took over the investigation. Media coverage evaporated. The guy they arrested was named Leroy Kettler, though his name was never officially released."

"But they got the wrong guy, right? I mean, the killer is still on the loose."

"Maybe. The court held him over without bail. Before they could get a hearing, the guy hung himself in his cell. Or that was the official story."

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Everyone seemed satisfied that they'd gotten their man. No one bothered to ask how Kettler had gotten shoelaces into the cell. The case was closed."

"Sounds like you don't buy it."

"I don't. I had some connections at the jail. After things blew over a bit, I got in and discreetly interviewed a few people, including the inmate of the adjoining cell. He believed that Kettler hadn't committed suicide—he'd been murdered. He said that two men in suits had come to Kettler's cell the night before he was found dead. From his description and other details, I think it's possible, even likely, that the men were NSA agents."

"But why would the Feds want to kill Kettler?"

"Maybe Kettler was a fall guy. I could just be a sucker for a conspiracy story, or the real killer could have been a policeman, or someone in the government. Maybe the government had a reason for getting rid of the victims. I've been following that angle, seeing if there's any connection between the victims. On the other hand, maybe Kettler was the Killer, but for some reason the Feds didn't want the case resolved. I don't know. Regardless, there was a cover-up."

"Mac Malden said that another victim turned up around here. How does that fit into the picture?"

"It doesn't. The girl was a grad student at Berkeley. According to her family, she didn't receive any of the notes associated with the other murders. Her mother is sure that she would have said something. The night she was killed, she wasn't acting nervous or cautious. The next morning, she was found dead in her bedroom, strangled. A note was found in a desk drawer in the bedroom. As soon as the SFPD found the note, the Feds showed up and took over."

As Pernell described the events surrounding the most recent murder, a tingling went down my spine. Unless my intuition was way off, the case was beginning to resemble a spider web. Threads, seemingly unrelated, were coming together toward an as yet an unknown axis. Fitzpatrick had told me about a girl from a nearby university. A girl who disappeared. My disbelief in coincidences had never been stronger.

"The girl... was her name Sandra?"

Pernell drain the rest of his burden. "Yeah. Collins. Sandra Collins."

He got up from the table and excused himself. My mind was racing. What was the common denominator between Fitzpatrick, Malloy, Kettler, and this young woman, Sandra Collins? There were too few details, too many implications. I lit a cigarette. It helped, though it didn't seem to have instant answers.

"Are you Mr Murphy?"

"Yes?"

The which has picked up the bourbon glasses and white down the table.

“Phone call for you. On the payphone... over there.”

Another noncoincidence. Someone was calling me on a payphone in a bar I'd never been in before.

“Murphy here.”

The voice was being fed through modulator. The video relay was off, of course. “Listen carefully, Mr Murphy. You're on a very dangerous path. I want to see you reach the end of it, but there are many who would do anything to stop you. Even now, your name is reaching the ears of powerful people, people capable of removing all traces of your existence. If you fail, it will be as if you never lived a day on this earth. But there are more important things at stake than your life. Do you understand?”

I really didn't, but I was just going along for the ride, and this guy was driving. “I'm pretty sure I do.”

“Good. In one hour and four minutes, you will be at 771 Santa Cena. There is a stairwell on the east side of the building. Go down two flights and wait by the red door. At exactly 2:45, You will hear a click. Open the door, enter, and close the door immediately. Move quickly to the third door on the left. Wait for another click, then enter the office. Check your watch. You will have exactly five minutes to search the office. There will be another click, and you will leave the office. The same thing will happen at the doorway you entered. Do you understand?”

I finished jotting down the information. “Yes. But what will happen if I don't...”

Dial tone. I switched off the Vid-phone receiver. My PI instincts were napping on this one. Was it legitimate, or was I being set up? The mystery caller had known I was here and probably could have killed me, if he'd felt like it—but he hadn't. That was encouraging... sort of. As much as I hated to, it seemed like the mystery caller would have to fall, provisionally, into the “Friends of Tex” category. I slipped my notebook back into my coat pocket and returned to Pernell. He'd ordered another round of bourbons, pulled out a notebook and pencil, and seemed ready to give me the third degree.

“I don't suppose you'd tell me the name of your client.”

“Sorry. Confidential.”

“At least tell me the details of how you got the notes.”

“Wish I could. Unfortunately, it would violate my solemn PI oath.”

“How about letting me have the notes?”

I considered it. They probably weren't going to help my investigation, but they were evidence. I wasn't sure I should give them up. “What do you want them for?”

“Visual aids, man. This story has Pulitzer written all over it.”

“Tell you what. I’ll give you one of the notes in exchange any other information you come up with.”

“Deal.” Pernell pulled a business card from his jacket and handed it to me. “That number’s current. I know how to reach you.”

I took the card and handed over one of the notes. “I’ve got to get going. Is there anything else you think I should know?”

Pernell rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Your client is certainly in danger. She should have someone with her at all times.”

Either this guy wasn’t as bright as I thought, or I was a lot brighter than he thought. Like smart enough to tie my own shoes.

“Okay. Is there anything you know that I don’t and should know?”

“One more thing. When I was following the story in Nevada, I met a guy like you. PI. He asked a lot of questions. A week later, he had a tag on his toe. Suicide, I think.”

I threw a fifty on the table. “Thanks for the tip.”