



UNDER A KILLING MOON

BY AARON CONNERS

Aaron Connors
“Under A Killing Moon”
A Tex Murphy Novel

— PROLOGUE —

In the moonlight, New San Francisco sparkles like a chunk of cubic zirconium, an island of hollow beauty surrounded by a red sea of radiation. Five million souls drowning in gamma rays.

It's December 2042. Some optimistic visionaries predicted that this millennium would usher in a new age, where technology and enlightened minds would combine to create some kind of heaven on earth. Well, that isn't how it turned out. We kicked things off with another "war to end all wars," only this one may have lived up to its name. Half the planet took it on the chin, forests turned into ashtrays, oceans into cesspools, and a large minority of human beings into genetically disfigured casualties of war.

These unlucky souls are called Mutants. The effects of radioactive fallout added another check box to the census forms. Now, there's a whole new form of discrimination. New San Francisco is one bad decision away from civil war.

Most of us got lucky, or at least our genes did. The lucky ones are classified as Norms. I'm one of them. Most of them live in the new city, but I don't. I live among the unfortunate souls, the Mutants and the destitute, in the wreckage of Old San Francisco.

My name is Tex Murphy. I'm a private detective - or at least I used to be. Since my marriage hit the rocks, I haven't done much more than look for the bottom of a bourbon bottle. I haven't had a case in weeks, or months, if I don't count the ones I wasn't paid for. In my book, this chapter's titled "The Year I'd Like To Forget and Probably Will."

I hand my hat in a dingy joint called the Ritz Hotel. My office on the third floor doubles as a studio apartment. Just like me, the Ritz used to be something. Now it's just another grimy building in a rundown part of town. And I'm almost out of bourbon.

— CHAPTER ONE —

Not a single pack of Lucky Strikes in all of Mexico City. I shook my head as my speeder glided through the clammy, grimy darkness that lay like a rotten blanket over the metropolis. From a quarter-mile up, I looked down on a sea of city lights, sparkling like sequins on a private dancer's too-tight dress. Just above the horizon, the blood-red moon was a bullet wound in the night sky.

I'd spent most of the day scouring the city for a pack of Lucky Strikes, moving frantically from one tienda to another, like a high-school sophomore on a scavenger hunt. I'd run out of time and was forced to abandon my search for the cigarettes that meant fine tobacco. I glanced at the small red box of cigarillos festering on the passenger seat and exhaled through a grimace. It was at rare times such as these that I cursed my addiction. I cracked the window of my speeder, took a final, excruciating hit from a Marlboro rojo, and flicked the sizzling butt into the night. Below me, the red hot cherry ejected and burned out, leaving the charred filter to spiral softly down into the world's largest ashtray.

Directly ahead, the Torre Latino Americana, once the Mexican capital's tallest building, stood forty-seven stories erect above a knuckled clump of runty buildings. Together, they strongly resembled a common hand gesture. Back at ya, pal.

I descended through the two-packs-a-day layer of atmosphere frosting and touched down on a street south of the Dulce Vida apartment building. There wasn't a lot of luxury to be found in Central America's largest capital, but the Dulce Vida had an aura that would pass for luxury in any civilized spot. This was the sort of residence inhabited by tasters of decay, rather than swallows - people who liked the idea of living in Mexico City, but preferred to avoid the hands on experience.

I slumped down in the driver's seat and peered up at the top floor of the Dulce Vida. The two windows on the far right were nice and dark. A less careful shamus would've made his move immediately. I, on the other hand, saved that kind of recklessness for conjugal minefields and offers of free liquor. The windows of the neighboring apartment were lined with Christmas lights and ablaze in holiday cheer. There was no reason to take unnecessary risks. A silhouetted figure passed by the window. I glanced at my watch: 8:29 P.M. It was Saturday night, and there were only twenty-one shopping days until Navidad. I figured the odds were fair to good that Eddie Ching's neighbors would eventually go out for the evening. Fortunately, I wasn't in a hurry...as long as I didn't think about my lack of Lucky Strikes.

I settled in to wait. Out of sheer habit and a pathetic dependence on nicotine, I pulled a Rojo out of the pack and torched it. After a long drag and with renewed disgust, I removed the cigarillo from my mouth and inspected it closely. It certainly resembled the cigarettes I'd come to know and love - it even burned like the real thing. But it was an abomination, plain and simple. The kind of creation Sauron and his minions worked through the night creating in the foul-stench bowels of Barad-Dur.

But even a mutated distant cousin of nicotine had to be considered family. I leaned back, my eyes locked on the windows of the Dulce Vida and my mind idling in neutral. In the distance, Christmas music floated merrily through the polluted night air. What a way to spend the holidays. Could've been worse, I supposed. I could've been working as a mall Santa. That was a mistake I wouldn't make twice.

A noisy, old-fashioned pickup truck roared past my speeder. I'd seen more four-wheeled vehicles after five days in Mexico City than I'd seen in New San Francisco in a year. Being out of the States made me appreciate my lot in life. Personal airborne transportation was still a novelty to ninety percent of the world, and being among the other ten percent made me smile - until I inhaled again.

A few minutes later, a scraggly group of teenagers paused to check out my speeder. Realizing that the vehicle was occupied, the apprentice lifers meandered off in search of fun and profit. Like the juvenile delinquents in New San Francisco, these hooligans were continuing the age-old tradition of cultivating a look that would be as incomprehensible and distasteful as possible to the preceding generation. The latest form of fashion rebellion was to shave a narrow strip of hair from the forehead to the back of the neck. This was known as a racing stripe. The width, depth, and design of the racing stripe apparently indicated gang affiliations as clearly as the color of one's socks had when I was growing up.

I sat in my speeder for almost an hour, smoking compost sticks and staring up at the Dulce Vida. At last, the lights in the Yule-filled apartment went out. I tossed most of the rojo out into the street and rolled up the window. There were four large, festively wrapped boxes in the trunk. After getting them out, I closed the hatch and activated the security system. Mexico City was notorious for its crime rate, and I, being a monolingual-and-damn-proud-of-it Yankee, wasn't about to take a chance on finding myself speederless and at the mercy of 30 million capitalist-loathing Latinos.

I looked both ways to avoid getting run down by some local reveler filled with mucha tequila, and crossed the street toward the covered parking lot that nestled up against the ground floor of the Dulce Vida. At the far end of the parking lot, a nondescript door provided a private entry for tenants. The majority of foot traffic went through the front door, which was around the corner on the east side, inaccessible directly from the parking lot. Having cased the location several times over the past few days, I knew the back door had a lock that would open only to the magnetic-strip cards given to tenants. Unfortunately, I didn't have a card. But I had something almost as good: a plan.

Peering out from behind my teetering stack of presents, I walked slowly into the parking lot. With any luck, someone would use the door in the next couple of minutes. If no one appeared, I would go to Step 2B of Plan A: intentionally drop the boxes, then stall until someone showed up. I'd seen plenty of Three Stooges movies while researching the technique and was confident I could pull it off.

A bright light flashed across the far wall as a car pulled into the parking lot and drove past me. I maintained my nonchalance as the driver parked and stepped out. It was a tiny, though sturdy elderly woman, always my preferred duping target. Laden with shopping bags, she trudged wearily toward the door. I maintained my leisurely pace.

The woman reached the door, set a shopping bag on the asphalt and, after what seemed like an eternity of purse searching, came up with a card, which she ran through the card reader. After replacing the card meticulously, she grabbed the door handle with both hands and heaved. At that moment, she became aware of me and turned. I threw every ounce of charm I could muster into a wide smile.

“Feliz Navidad!”

The woman smiled back at me and eyed my huge pile of brightly decorated packages. “Feliz Navidad!”

She stepped to the side and, as expected, held the door open. I was in.

The old lady followed me inside and down a short corridor to a set of elevator doors. An armed security guard sat on a chair nearby, reading a Condorito comic book. He barely glanced at me, probably assuming that I was helping grandma with the boxes.

The old lady reached passed me and pushed the up button. We waited silently for the elevator to descend. My nerves began to kick in, causing my stomach to slowly twist and tighten. It probably didn't help that I hadn't eaten anything for five days. On the flight down, I'd made the mistake of studying my Spanish for Idiots book, which had only reinforced my fear of native Mexican food by including translations for such phrases as ‘What species of meat is that?’ and ‘No lettuce, for God's sake!’ As I waited for the elevator, I could feel my digestive juices deciding that my stomach was not only edible, but nutritious and delicious.

After what seemed like a long time, the elevator chimed and the doors opened. Grandma and I stepped in, and I breathed a sigh of relief. As the doors closed, she pushed the button for the third floor, then swiveled her head in my direction. “Que piso?”

She seemed to be asking which floor I wanted. I quickly traveled through time to seventh-grade Spanish and began counting. “Diez y ocho.”

The old lady pressed the eighteen button and offered me a crinkled smile. Ten seconds later, we came to a halt at the third floor, and grandma stepped out of the elevator. “Buenas noches.”

“Buenas noches.” The doors closed, and I began my ascent to the top floor.

— CHAPTER TWO —

Two days before, I'd paid my first visit to the Dulce Vida. I'd found out which apartment Eddie Ching lived in and that he was out of town—a lucky break, since apartments are almost easier to ransack when they're unoccupied.

I then approached the manager under the pretense of wanting to lease an apartment. The manager, a well-heeled, swarthy man by the name of Alfonso, had agreed to give me a tour of the facilities. His English was as perfect as the white teeth that gleamed from beneath his astonishingly manicured mustache. I'd said I was only interested in an apartment on the top floor, with a spectacular view of Alfonso's uncommonly beautiful city. Obviously pleased, Alfonso had been more than happy to oblige.

As we rode the elevator to the eighteenth floor, Alfonso detailed the many benefits of becoming one of his tenants. The combination of the high crime rate and the rich clientele, he said, required that the apartment building be a veritable fortress of security. Not only were the entrances to the residential areas sealed off to outsiders, but each apartment had its own personalized security system. A keypad was installed on each apartment door, and the code to unlock the door was chosen by and known only to the tenant. Moreover, additional security systems, such as individual laser grids and LCD alarm glass for the windows, were offered optionally inside each apartment. If I'd actually been a potential renter, it would've sounded lovely. As it was, it made me nervous.

On the eighteenth floor, Alfonso had escorted me to an empty apartment on the far end of the hall from Ching's. I'd casually looked over his shoulder as he entered the code 1-2-2-1 on the keypad. The access code was all I'd been after, but to avoid suspicion, I went along with the compulsory tour, lavishly complimenting the architecture, the décor, and, of course, the fabulous view. Alfonso and I then returned to the lobby, where I told him I would need time to make up my mind.

The next day, I'd gotten everything together to execute my plan, then waited outside the building. But the tenants in the apartment next to Ching's didn't go out that evening, so I was forced to try again. This time everything was going smoothly.

The elevator doors opened on the eighteenth floor, and I walked briskly toward the door to the empty apartment. To be safe, I knocked several times. There was no answer. I punched in 1-2-2-1 on the keypad and opened the door.

Except for the dim city glow coming through the windows, it was dark inside the apartment. I set the packages down and opened one of them. Inside was a flashlight, a laser blade, a bent piece of metal, and an extremely expensive pair of ultra sensitive night-vision goggles. Placing the implements in my deep overcoat pockets, I walked to one of the windows and, after checking to make sure it had no alarm, opened it.

There was a wide ledge below the window. I stepped out onto it and made the mistake of looking down. It hadn't seemed so high up from the ground. I turned around to face the window, closed it, and then began shuffling slowly along the ledge. The first two apartments I slid by were dark. The third was lit up, but the only person I saw inside was a bald man, sitting in an easy chair and facing away from me.

I reached the first window of Ching's apartment without incident. Then I pulled out the particle-beam-detection goggles and put them on. As I'd learned from my tour with Alfonso, the apartment windows could contain the special and very expensive LCD alarm glass. Sure enough, with the goggles on, I could see faint blue lines cycling through the glass in a grid pattern. I wasn't surprised - in fact, I'd counted on it. What suddenly concerned me was the net of motion-detecting beams I could see beyond the window. The lines of light were about three feet off the floor and crisscrossed from the wall under the window to about ten feet into the room. I checked the second window, but it was equipped with the same safeguards. The laser nets, in effect, were high-tech moats. Unless I turned them off, access through the windows would be impossible.

I didn't have much to lose. If the apartments were all set up the same, there would be a switch on the wall about six inches to the right of the window, about four feet off the floor. After establishing the approximate location of the switch, I watched the cycling pattern for several minutes, then get out my laser blade and flipped it on. A razor-thin beam of light appeared, about three inches in length. With the care of a rabbi performing his first circumcision, I sliced into the glass and cut a hole with a two-inch diameter. Then I turned off the laser blade and grabbed the bent piece of metal. Inserting it into the hole, I began twisting it, feeling for the switch. After several seconds, I felt some resistance, then pushed down. The blue lights in the glass disappeared. The laser net didn't.

Using the laser blade, I cut an even wider hole in the glass, large enough to stick my head into. Peering around in the dark, I soon decided that whatever controlled the laser net was not within reach.

I'd been foiled. My first reaction, as always, was to light up. Then I reconsidered. Even though it was dark, I could be seen easily, and some might consider my conspicuous presence on the ledge of an exclusive penthouse apartment suspicious. The sooner I got inside, the better. I decided to try the neighbor's apartment. It was certainly preferable to being seen in my current position.

On the plus side, the windows next door were made of ordinary glass and there was no laser net inside, at least not an activated one. I peered inside and made sure the neighbors hadn't just gone to bed early. A preliminary check of the window confirmed that it was locked. I took off the goggles and, using the laser blade, cut a rectangle large enough to crawl through. Removing the section of window carefully, I stepped down into the apartment.

I got out my flashlight and moved the beam around. The apartment was furnished sparsely, but tastefully. The motif was floral, a school to which I didn't subscribe, but could certainly appreciate. A simple, black leather couch took up a large section of the wall on the right. On the other side of the wall behind the couch was Ching's apartment. I touched the surface of the wall, then knocked on it. A previously overlooked option occurred to me. I pulled the couch carefully away from the wall and pulled out the laser blade.

I'd never used the laser blade on anything more dense than glass, but I thought it might have enough juice to cut through plasterboard. Kneeling down, I aimed the laser beam and began to cut. The wall studs were about two feet apart and, when I finished, there was an opening approximately two feet wide by three feet high. Luckily, this section of the wall had no electrical wiring. Once the hole in the neighbor's wall was opened, I cut into the plasterboard

on Ching's side. Two minutes later, a matching section of plasterboard came loose and toppled over.

I replaced my laser blade, snapped on the goggles, and squirmed partway through the opening. The laser net I'd seen from outside extended to about halfway between me and the wall under the window. As long as I didn't get too careless, it looked like I'd be relatively free to explore the rest of the apartment.

I pulled myself all the way through the opening, then stood and took a look around. The first things I noticed were nearly a dozen terrariums, tanks, and aquariums of various makes and sizes, filled with everything from tropical fish to a boa constrictor. The soft and flickering ambient light provided plenty of visibility, so I didn't bother to turn on the flashlight.

As I looked back up, a figure moved suddenly on the far side of the room. I froze as my heart rate instantaneously tripled. Trying not to breathe, I peered toward the opposite wall and saw the face of a middle-aged man staring back at me, wild-eyed. After an instant of confusion, I realized it was me. My knees nearly buckled with relief, and it took a minute for the pounding in my ears to subside.

As my breathing slowly returned to normal, I inspected the walls of the room, which turned out to be covered with pricey-looking paintings and ornately framed mirrors. The room was not large, maybe twenty-five feet wide and forty feet long, but the mirrors gave it a much bigger feel. Some furniture was scattered here and there, but this appeared to be more of a den than a living room. I noticed a desk in one of the corners and decided to start there.

On top of the desk, I found a computer printout containing a list of names. As I looked it over, one name jumped out at me: Lowell Percival. The billionaire industrialist had been a client of mine years ago. I scanned the list and, as far as I could tell, it consisted of people interested in buying rare artifacts.

I continued on and quickly rooted through the drawers of the desk, but turned up nothing related to what I was looking for. The terrariums and aquariums didn't seem to be worth checking out, but I did anyway, just to be on the safe side. I paused to take a closer look at Ching's boa, which was curled into a dormant mound the size of a stegosaurus dropping. To the right of this terrarium was another, this one containing three brightly colored, venomous-looking serpents. Ching certainly had strange tastes. I imagined that poisonous snakes would be slightly less cuddly pets than, say, a puppy. Between the terrariums, I saw a long metal pole with a noose on the end. The thought of one of the snakes getting loose made the hair on the back of my neck stand at attention.

There was only one door leading out of the room, directly across from the freshly cut hole in the wall. I opened it and stepped into Ching's living room. The second window I'd looked in was on my right, opposite the front door to the apartment. The reflections of the city lights provided some light, but not enough for a thorough search. The room was about the same size as the den, but was much more lavishly furnished.

Directly across from me, I saw a large, wooden bookcase, crammed full of books. To the right of the bookcase was an open doorway, leading to a small kitchen area. To the left was a closed door, then a five-figure couch and love seat that occupied the entire corner of the room. I paused to examine a display cabinet teeming with exotic objects. The room was filled with

plants, vases, and other ostentatious decorations. The exposed walls were covered with paintings and still more mirrors. The apartment was a narcissist's dream.

I walked around the room, examining the objects d'art and feeling like a tourist. In one section of the room, I found a panel that opened to reveal a small but magnificently stocked liquor cabinet. Ching kept an admirable selection of bourbons and scotches, as well as the usual token bottles of rum, gin, and vodka. I was thirsty and nervous, but all I really wanted was to finish the job and get out.

Eventually, I made my way to the bookcase and looked through it. Many of the volumes were foreign. Unless these were just for show, it looked as though Ching spoke at least English, Spanish, French, German, Japanese, and probably several other languages I couldn't identify. The selection of books ranged from The Complete Works of Shakespeare to a collection by some guy named Flannery O'Connor. Regrettably, my preferred reading material had always fallen somewhere between Spider-man comics and the back of a Cheerios box. Of the several hundred volumes in the bookcase, I'd read only one - For Whom the Bell Tolls. Well, read was an exaggeration, but I'd seen the movie. Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman. Now that was a woman. Women like that had disappeared around the time tube tops and tie-dye became fashionable. What a goddess. I sighed involuntarily. So very lonely.

I moved to the closed door, which turned out to be the entrance to the baño, the most commonly used Spanish word not directly related to food. There was nothing remarkable about the bathroom. To be thorough, I opened the medicine cabinet and casually glanced over the contents. Unlike some people, I've never had an interest in inspecting other people's medicinal and hygienic inventories. It looked like a pretty typical selection, so I closed the cabinet and returned to the living room.

The last area I checked was the kitchen. A stove, a microwave, a refrigerator, a sink, and a small dinette set were crammed into a space maybe fifteen feet square. Cupboards mounted on the walls circled the perimeter of the room. I took a peek in the refrigerator, but the interior was even more vacuous than the back of my office. After ten minutes, I realized that there was nothing to find in the kitchen.

I stepped back into the living room, discouraged. I'd searched carefully, but had nothing more than the name of an old client and an unwelcome reminder of my lack of exposure to classic literature. I swung the flashlight beam around, hoping to spot something I'd overlooked, but there didn't appear to be any container or space large enough to hold the item I was looking for.

I started moving everything that wasn't ruggedly attached to a wall and inspecting the areas underneath. Behind an antique-looking oil painting of buxom fruit, I found a small wall safe. Naturally, I was excited, but after experimenting with the dial for some time, I lost interest and returned to my search. There was nothing but wall behind the living room mirrors and paintings. The kitchen didn't turn up anything, so I moved into the den. After fifteen minutes, I'd come up empty again.

After I checked the wall behind the last painting, I stopped to consider my options. Taking another look at the wall safe, I decided that I'd just have to accept the fact that I would probably never get inside it.

Then a thought popped into my head. I returned to the living room and examined the layout. The kitchen, living room, and bathroom formed a horseshoe shape around the bookcase. Unless my calculations were way off, there was a rectangle of space about fifteen feet square unaccounted for. I carefully inspected the bookcase, which appeared to have been built directly into the wall. I tried to push it; I might as well have been trying to move my ex-mother-in-law. I briefly considered using brute force, but for all I knew, there might be an alarm of some sort attached to the bookcase itself.

There was only one thing to do. And it had worked before. I entered the bathroom and removed the towels from a rack on the right wall. I'd bought the laser blade at Radioactive Shack and wondered how much longer I had before it would break. Hopefully, it still had a little life in it. Like I'd done in the neighbor's apartment, I bent down and began to cut through the wall.

As I started on the second layer of plasterboard, a ray of greenish light appeared through the slit above the laser blade. A light source! There was definitely an enclosed area behind the wall. I'd almost finished when the laser blade sputtered and went out. Using the heel of my hand, I punched the center of the cut section. The plasterboard broke free, followed an instant later by a crashing noise. I wriggled through the opening, into some sort of treasure chamber. The room was no bigger than the kitchen, but was stuffed to the ceiling with paintings, statues, vases, and glass cabinets full of loose precious stones and jewelry.

As I stood up, I saw the source of the crash: I'd tipped over a stack of framed paintings. The one that had been nearest the wall had been nicked by the laser blade. I was no art expert, but it looked like an original Rembrandt. I wouldn't have known an original Rembrandt from a decorative place mat, except I had one back at my office. At least that's what the guy who'd sold it to me had said. For seventy dollars, it better have been.

The small room's contents had to be worth millions. It was like I'd found some legendary pirate's cave full of booty. A painting hung on the wall to my left and looked remarkably like a Van Gogh. I hadn't felt this overwhelmed and insignificant since my last date at divorce court. But this time, everything was going my way. In the center of the room sat the Holy Grail. Figuratively speaking. There was no question that this was what I'd come for. It was just the way Countess Renier had described it to me: a statuette, formed in the shape of a bird, about sixteen inches in height and constructed of some crystalline substance. It sat atop a marble pedestal and didn't appear to be hooked up to anything. It was a ripe peach, waiting to be picked.

I got close to the pedestal and examined every square inch. It had no visible security attachment. Moving slowly, like you do when extracting the funny bone in a game of Operation, I reached for the prize. As my hands touched it, I felt a tingling sensation, similar to the way frozen hands feel when they're first soaked in hot water. I ran my hands over the surface for a moment. I'd never felt anything like it. It felt almost malleable, though it was obviously made of some solid material. Unsure of how heavy it would be, I tensed up and lifted the statuette from the pedestal. A deafening alarm immediately tore through the apartment.

I hesitated, unsure of whether I was responsible for the alarm going off. It didn't matter. The fact was, I'd broken into an apartment in one of the most secured buildings in Mexico City. Getting caught would not be good. I passed the statuette through the opening in the wall, then

crawled back into the bathroom. As I shut the bathroom door behind me and hurried through the living room, I heard pounding footsteps outside the front door coming down the hallway from the direction of the elevator.

I hurried to the den as frantic Latin voices spoke rapidly outside. I passed the statuette into the neighboring apartment, then glanced around. Nearby I saw a remote stereo speaker. It looked just big enough to cover the opening in the wall. I was about to drop down and crawl through when I thought of something that might buy me some time. I rushed across the room and flipped open the lids on the terrariums containing the snakes. Then I returned to the stereo speaker, moved it next to the hole, dropped to my knees, and began to back in. With surprising speed, one of the smaller snakes slithered out of its tank and headed straight for me as I reached for the speaker. The snake was four feet away and closing fast when I pulled the speaker in front of the hole. As I stood up, I heard the front door to Ching's apartment burst open.

Safely inside the other apartment, I picked up the statuette, then pushed the black leather couch back against the wall. The Spanish-speaking voices next door slowly changed from frantic to angry and confused. I smiled to myself as I thought of them imagining that I had simply vanished into thin air. I wished I could understand what they were saying and regretted for the hundredth time not following up on the language skills I'd acquired in seventh-grade espanol with Senoritas Morena y Marta.

My amusement didn't last long. I had to get to either the stairway, which was next to Ching's apartment, or to the elevator, which was across the hall from the vacant apartment I'd first entered. Suddenly, someone knocked at the door of the apartment I was in. They knocked again, more forcefully. I hurried to the window and crawled through. Without the luxury of caution, I scampered along the ledge, my arms wrapped around the statuette. I reached the window of the empty apartment pushed it open, and jumped inside.

I crossed the room to the front door and put my eye to the peephole. There didn't appear to be anyone at this end of the hall. Through the door, I heard the elevator chime and then watched as a half dozen swarthy men piled out, led by an unsmiling Alfonso. They bolted off in the direction of Ching's apartment. Behind them, the elevator doors were open.

I turned the knob and opened the door. The elevator doors were starting to close. I bounded across the hallway and knifed into the elevator, but the opening had narrowed and I'd brushed one of the doors, causing the elevator to reopen. From the far end of the hall, I heard several voices yelling "Alto!" Heavy footsteps came thundering down the hall as I repeatedly pushed the button for the first floor. As the doors began to close, I had no idea how close my pursuers were.

Apparently not close enough. The elevator doors pressed lightly together, and I began to descend away from the loud voices. A wave of relief washed over me, but I wasn't out yet. The lobby and parking lot doors, as well as the stairways, would almost certainly be guarded. I tried to think. My speeder was parked out past the covered parking area, so that would be the direction to head toward. Maybe if I took the guards unawares, I could get past and outrun them to the speeder. Unless, of course, they had guns, which they undoubtedly did. I didn't have much choice. I pressed the button for the second floor.

The doors opened at the second floor, and the immediate area was mercifully devoid of humanity. I stepped out into a hallway almost identical to the one on the eighteenth floor. In the corner across from the elevator, someone had placed a small, elegant stand with a vase full of flowers. Nice touch.

I started with the closest apartment and tried the door knob. Locked. I made my way down the hallway, stopping at each door and trying to open it. By the time I reached the last door, I decided that I wasn't going to get lucky, so I reared back and kicked it in. Cradling the statuette like a football, I ran into the apartment, past a startled old man wearing nothing but a pair of dingy boxers. He had dropped a can of beer onto his lap and was staring at me, wild-eyed, as I dashed past him toward the window. I pulled the window open and looked out. It was about a twenty-foot drop. It wouldn't kill me, but it would probably leave a few bruises. Wrapping my arms tightly around the statuette, I stepped onto the ledge and jumped.

A bed of flowers came rushing up at me. I tried to roll as I hit the ground, but didn't quite pull it off. As I lay in the garden dirt, staring up at the filthy night sky, excruciating pain shot up and down my back and both legs. I decided to wait until the agony subsided before making any attempt to stand. Several seconds passed.

Suddenly, above me, the beer-soaked man started to yell. The welcome addition of still more adrenaline gave me just the boost I needed. I pried myself out of the loam, glanced around, and hugging the statuette like a football, ran to daylight. Gunshots rang out above and behind me. Weaving like a punt returner, I crossed the street and reached the speeder. It was where I'd left it and still had its license plates, wipers, and antenna. Perhaps there was a god, after all.

I climbed inside, turned on the ignition, and lifted off. The lights of Mexico City faded behind me like firework residue. The statuette glowed faintly on the passenger seat. Hands shaking and back aching, I lit a cigarette, took a drag, then opened the window and ejected the abomination. I checked my radar - no one appeared to be following me. It looked like I'd pulled it off. A glance at the geo-grid showed that the nearest decent-sized US city was Brownsville, Texas. Four more hours, and I'd be seated in a café, a strong cup of coffee on the left and a fresh pack of Luckys on the right. Four hours away, three and a half if I pushed it.

— CHAPTER THREE —

Things were hopping at the Post-Nuclear (pronounced Nucular) café. The dinner seemed to be particularly popular with truckers and migrant workers. A lone waitress with orange hair the size of an award-winning state fair pumpkin bustled feverishly about the teeming horde of Brownsville's finest.

A single laminated page, burned and stained like the toilet tank cover in a bar restroom, sat in front of me. An index card paper-clipped to the menu proclaimed the special of the day to be beef pot pie and waldorf salad, with cherries jubilee for dessert. After brief consideration, I discarded the special as a viable option. It sounded good in theory, but pot pies are a lot like used vehicles and dames - no matter how good they look, it's what's under the hood that counts.

I reached for the unopened pack of Lucky Strikes I'd bought approximately ninety seconds after touching down in Brownsville. As I ran through the menu, I packed the fresh set of smokes against the heel of my hand. Seven times - no more, no less.

This was the first step in a complex, yet satisfying ritual known only to those who indulge in the world's second or third most dangerous habit. Pinching the starter tab, I pulled gently and unsealed the pack with all the care and anticipation of removing a bra. Next came the stripping of the foil, and finally, the extraction. It was as close as I would ever get to organized religion.

I tapped the cigarette on the tabletop, then moistened three quarters of an inch on the packed end with my tongue. With my left hand, I placed the cigarette between my lips, just left of center. My right hand approached, bearing the fire. My hands cupped around the Zippo as its flame touched the tip of the Lucky Strike. I drew in deeply and slowly and heard the pleasant crackling of toasted tobacco. My eyes closed, and I leaned back, wanting to savor indefinitely this sensation of reuniting with my one true love.

In the midst of the rapture, I felt a distinctly pink presence close by. I opened my eyes and saw that the orange-headed waitress had arrived. My head still resting on the back of the vinyl booth seat, I glanced at her name: LaDonna. LaDonna looked down at me indulgently, her foot tapping at about 6000 RPM and a brown cigarette dangling from her lip like an exhaust pipe. I tossed her a disarming smile and sat up, my attention returning to the menu.

There were so many choices, and LaDonna was like a ticking bomb. If I didn't order soon, possibly within seconds, she was likely to detonate, which would likely hurl her away from my booth and into a refilling condition-shuttling frenzy. God knew when she'd be back to take my order. I had to think quickly, yet my sense of self-preservation told me I had to be careful. Chicken-fried steak was out. So was the goulash. The meat hash intrigued me, but I passed. Finally, my eyes came across the grilled cheese sandwich. How dangerous could a grilled cheese sandwich be?

"I'll have the grilled cheese sandwich."

LaDonna scribbled furiously. "One grilled cheese. White, wheat, light rye, dark rye, pumpernickel, or pita?"

I wasn't sure how heavy I should go. I still had a long flight home. "White, please."

"American, Swiss, Muenster, cheddar, Brie, Colby, of longhorn?"

"How about a nice medium cheddar? Something in the four-to six-month range."

"Coffee?"

"A gallon, please. Make it extra thick."

LaDonna nodded and returned in the direction of the counter. She was good. In the thirty feet between my booth and the kitchen, she lit two cigarettes, dropped off three bills, told a joke, laughed at two others, all without missing a step. As I watched her work, I noticed with some shock how shapely her legs were. Of course, they were doing miraculous things with nylons these days, but those gams looked authentic. They were certainly her most attractive feature. The area between her hips and shoulders could've belonged to a Texas A&M middle linebacker, and the beehive towering above her head made the distance from the nape of her neck to her hair net measure a full third of her total height.

After a brisk, lingo-filled exchange with a dazed-looking short order cook, LaDonna set off on another lap around the diner. She was fun to watch. I finished my first Lucky Strike and was about to help myself to a second when LaDonna swung by and thrust a full cup of coffee at me like a relay baton. Without spilling a drop, she slid the cup onto the table and continued on without breaking stride.

If only the coffee had been as enjoyable and full-bodied as the service. At least it was hot - and I'd had worse. As I blew steam across the top of the chipped mug, I couldn't help but yearn for an oversized serving of Louie Lamintz's Armageddon blend. It was a truly magical beverage. I could drink a fifth of bourbon and still do origami, but after three cups of the Brew & Stew house blend I'd catch a buzz. Louie said the secret ingredient was love, but I wasn't so sure.

A thumping sound and the tinkle of broken glass caught my ear. I looked over toward the counter and saw a heavy-set man face-planted onto the bar. A rail-thin older man behind the counter was scurrying to mop up spilled beer as the patrons reacted with amusement, empathy, and/or disgust. The sight made me think shamefully of my own recent behavior, which would have been just as embarrassing if I'd had the money to drink in public.

As it was, I'd spent most of the previous month locked in my office with a bottle of rot gut and a couple of Edith Piaf Cds. Sure, I knew I was better off without Sylvia - hell, I hadn't entertained a single Christian thought about her or even remotely wished she's come back the whole time - but the divorce had been a psychological root canal. The abscessed tooth had been removed at the expense of the entire jaw.

With my naïve and reckless idealism blown to bits all over my office floor, I'd done the only thing a hard-boiled PI could do under the circumstances: I picked up pieces, dropped them into a tumbler, and poured myself a double bourbon. From there, I went through the usual phases: disillusionment, resentment, anger, self-doubt, regret, rationalization, more anger, grief, a little more anger, and finally, black and thirsty angst. Then, exhausted from my jog

around the emotional gamut, I'd rapidly descended into an amnesiac stupor of self-pity and devil-may-care intoxication.

A door in the Post-Nuclear Café slammed shut, rousing me from my pondering, and I noticed LaDonna approaching, a plate of food in one hand and a toxic-looking coffeepot in the other. "Here you go, honey."

LaDonna slid the plate in front of me and somehow topped off my mug at the exact same instant, without spilling a drop. I looked up into her overdone eyes. "You're an amazing woman."

For the first time since I'd seen her, LaDonna paused. Looking me straight in the eye without a hint of a smile, she raised an eyebrow.

"You couldn't afford me, sugar." With a wink, she turned and resumed her plate-spinning act. I understood why the place was packed.

When my smoke was finished, I turned my attention to the plate in front of me. The grilled cheese sandwich looked surprisingly appetizing, a light golden brown except for the crispy dark brown edges. I made a conservative estimate that half a stick of butter had been used to grease the griddle. Melting cheddar seeped out from all four sides. Crunchy crinkle-cut fries formed a hot, salty halo around the sandwich. There was no parsley to discard, no orange slice to remove. This wasn't cuisine - it was grub. Tasty food with no garnish required. I delicately lifted one half of the still-steaming grilled cheese and took a large bite out of the center. The smoldering cheddar was almost too hot to eat, almost. The mingling flavors of bread, butter, and cheese went to the very root of my soul and spoke to me. They said "Mmmm."

After I'd finished half the sandwich and a handful of fries, my stomach (fresh off a five-day hunger strike) voted to light the post-prandial smoke and be done with it. My taste buds, despite active campaigning by the other senses, eventually had to concede, and I pushed the plate away. I was full and happy, a sensation I usually reserved for the Brew & Stew. I'd never had Louie's grilled cheese sandwich, but it was now on my list of things to do.

Over a third cup of coffee, I glanced down at the backpack on the seat beside me. Hopefully, this was a sign of things to come. My career had never been the stuff of legends. Hell, I'd lost count of how many part-time jobs I'd taken just so I could afford to be a gumshoe. My resume, if I ever had the inclination or funds to have one made up, would read like an unskilled-labor listing board at an unemployment office. I had a better chance of getting invited to speak at a NOW rally than getting my bio in the PI Who's Who.

Still, it was the only thing I'd ever really wanted to do. Mom had her heart set on my being an optometrist. Of course, that was back when people still needed glasses and contact lenses, before they became ostentatious fashion accessories. My father had me pegged to follow in his footsteps and be a security guard. Maybe that was why I'd become a detective...some sort of subconscious Oedipal thing.

The problem started thirty-two years earlier. The babysitter let me stay up and watch the late, late show. Little did I know how lasting the impact of *The Maltese Falcon* would be. I didn't understand the plot, and most of the patter went right over my five-year old head, but there was something about it that captivated me. Oh, I'd gone through the usual childhood phases -

dinosaurs, Robin Hood, space travel - but the hard-boiled PI was a shtick I never grew out of. Fedoras, trench coats, cigarettes, and bourbon. Scheming dames, shady chumps with names like Lefty and Rocko, and sinister characters with pencil-thin mustaches and foreign accents.

Now, here I was. Glimpses of the glamour were few and far between, but everyone has their own delusional fantasy. I selected a Lucky strike from the pack and rolled it gently between my fingers. I had the look. I had the aptitude. I even had the skills. All I really needed was some steady employment. And maybe a dame.

After this cup of coffee, I'd get back on the road. I was looking forward to getting the statuette into the countess's hands. The retainer she'd given me was almost gone. When she paid me the rest of the finder's fee, my first stop would be Louie's place.

He'd been running me a tab for almost three months and hadn't said a thing about settling up. Plus, it was Louie who'd been at least partially responsible for me getting this case in the first place. I'd been so busy drinking myself into oblivion that I'd let trivial matters slide - my vid-phone bill, for example. From what I could gather, Louie had tried to call me sometime during my month-long Festival of Blurred Vision and found out that my vid-phone had been disconnected. An anonymous payment was made to my account, and like it or not, I was back in business. Louie professed complete ignorance about the matter, but I knew. It was soon afterward that the countess had called.

The case was a godsend. After the Colonel's visit, I'd decided it was time to crawl out of the gutter. Solitary agonizing and drinking to excess make for good film noir, but there's no satisfaction in it without an audience. I'd put the bottle away and put myself in the capable caring hands of Mr. Coffee. The transfusion took several days to complete, but when it was over, I was grimly determined and sober, not to mention a little wired.

Despite good intentions, sobering up had its downside. Taking stock of my situation, I'd been stunned to find that my liquid assets amounted to less than three figures, with my net worth solidly in the red. To the best of my recollection, I owed two months' rent, some unjustifiable alimony to Sylvia, the bar tab to Louie, and several IOUs to Digby, my bookie. I reminded myself to stop taking betting tips from my personal psychic.

When Countess Renier called and asked if I was available for a job, I was prepared to do anything up to and including scrubbing public urinals. Well, maybe not public urinals, but I was desperate. Luckily, the countess's case turned out to be more than I could have hoped for.

The countess lived in an especially affluent section of the new city, where the mortgage payments were more than I'd paid for my speeder. I floated down Filmore until I found 2429. The place looked just like my dream house, only bigger. I landed my speeder, walked to the front door of the mansion, and rang the doorbell. After a short wait, the door was answered by a nattily dressed butler who looked like a tall Hume Cronyn and sounded like Katherine Hepburn after an all-night kegger.

He said I was expected and led me through a pitch dark entryway into a softly lit sitting room just slightly smaller than a regulation NBA court. Despite an ambient temperature ideally suited for growing cacti, there was a blazing inferno in a large fireplace on the far side of the room. The place was sparsely, though expensively, furnished. The butler cleared his throat, and I noticed a slight movement from a chair by the fire. An older woman sat in an

overstuffed, high-back chair with a shawl around her shoulders and a blanket over her legs. She motioned for me to come closer. I removed my fedora, more for ventilation than good manners, and crossed the room. Behind me, the butler excused himself discreetly. I approached the old woman and extended my hand, which she took limply.

“Thank you for coming, Mr. Murphy. I know you must be very busy this time of year.”

I had no idea what she meant by that. The PI business isn't seasonal. But I nodded agreeably and smiled. “It's my pleasure, Countess Renier.”

The countess released my hand and motioned for me to sit in a chair across from hers. A bead of sweat ran down the side of my face. I wiped it away as politely as possible. The countess tucked her hands under the blanket. “I hope this heat isn't too oppressive for you. I'm afraid I need to maintain this temperature, otherwise my joints become quite painful.”

The countess gave me just enough time to nod before she continued. Her voice had been as feeble as her hand-shake, but it suddenly shifted into business mode.

“Your services have been recommended to me by a trusted friend, who prefers to remain anonymous. Suffice to say that your unique abilities are what I need right now.”

She didn't waste any time. For an instant I thought about asking her who'd referred me, but I had a feeling she wouldn't tell me. “Which of my unique abilities are you referring to?”

The countess didn't smile. “I'm sure you have many unique abilities. The one I would hire you for is your knack for locating people and things. I understand that this knack has made you some friends - and more than a few enemies.”

I crossed my legs nonchalantly. “Well, wasn't it Roy Rogers who used to say you can't please all the people all the time?”

The old woman turned her gaze toward the fire. “It's good to hear you say that, Mr. Murphy, because this errand may make you unpopular with some people.”

I studied the countess's face, trying to guess where this was headed. She stared impassively into the dancing flames, which threw shadows across her ancient profile.

“What exactly do you mean by unpopular?”

The countess pulled her eyes from the fire and looked back at me intently. “Let me give you some background information; then you can decide for yourself.”

I nodded as she pulled the shawl closer around her slumped shoulders.

“Some time ago, a family heirloom was stolen from this bungalow. I keep most of my valuables on my estate in Europe, but on this visit, I brought the item to show to a friend. I have made extensive inquiries trying to retrieve it, but have found out very little.”

Bungalow. That was rich.

“Pardon my ignorance, Countess, but I’m guessing that you have the resources - cash, I mean - to buy all the information you need. What makes you think I can help you?”

The old woman didn’t bat an eye. “I don’t, though you shouldn’t take that personally. I have others working for me on the same matter. My friend recommended you, and I’ve exhausted every option, without success. I’m afraid you’re something of a last resort.”

I wasn’t certain if I’d been insulted or not. “Referring to me as a last resort could double my fee.”

The countess sighed, as though the subject of money was distasteful. “I’d already planned on paying you much more than your usual fee. I’m a wealthy woman, Mr. Murphy. To give you an idea, the stolen artifact alone is worth more money than most men could earn in ten lifetimes.”

These jabs were putting me on the defensive. Keeping in mind my destitute circumstances, I tried to be pleasant. “Well just see about that when I win the Clearing House Sweepstakes.”

“How quaint.” The old woman didn’t seem amused. “Let’s not waste any more time. I need some work done, and I’ll pay you well for it.”

“In my experience, getting paid well is a relative term.”

The countess’s distaste was now fully apparent. “Is this the way you negotiate your fee for every job? I find it appalling.”

I shrugged. “I have any number of appalling traits... but I am a good PI.”

She looked at me appraisingly, her eyes squinting slightly. After a few moments, she turned her gaze back to the fire and spoke.

“If you prove to be as good as you think you are, I will pay you a thirty-thousand-dollar finder’s fee.”

Thirty thousand clams. Hmmm. That was a lot of seafood - a good bit more than I would have asked for. “Let me think about it... OK, I’ll do it.”

The countess nodded and turned toward me. “I thought you might. I’ll expect you to focus all your energies on this. The methods you use to retrieve the artifact are of no interest to me. But as more time elapses, the less likely it is that the item will be found. For that reason I must require you to find it and return it to me within ten days. After that, the value of the artifact will decrease significantly, as will the finder’s fee.”

Ten days wasn’t much time, but this appeared to be a no-lose situation. I nodded to show that I was following along. The old woman narrowed her gaze. “I should also warn you against any thoughts of double-crossing me. The statuette is valuable to only an obscure handful of collectors. If you were to find it and try to sell it on your own, you would certainly fetch less than the fee I have offered.”

I'd never double-crossed a client, but the countess couldn't know that, so I didn't take offense. "I understand. Now, what exactly am I looking for?"

"The artifact is a statuette made from a rare crystalline substance. It is shaped somewhat in the form of a bird in flight. It is unmistakable and extremely rare - there is no other piece like it in the world. It has been in my family for countless generations and, as I said, it is extremely valuable. There are many collectors who would stop at nothing to own it. Whoever stole the statuette would likely have gone to the black market and offered it to the highest bidder."

The countess produced a photograph from under her blanket and handed it to me. It was a poor-quality print, like a copy of a copy. She wasn't giving me much of a head start.

"Is there anything else you can tell me? I could use a little more to go on. For starters, do you have any idea who stole it?"

The countess shook her head impatiently. "No, no. I've told you all I can. As I said, I don't expect you to succeed in finding the statuette."

That qualified as a double-dog dare in my book. I stood up, still holding my fedora, eager to get to work. "I'll see what I can do. Pleasure to meet you, Countess."

The old woman looked up at me, no expression on her face.

"I'd prefer that you not contact me until you have the statuette in your possession. I am not fond of receiving visitors under normal circumstances. But thank you for coming, Mr. Murphy. My valet will give you a retainer of one thousand dollars on your way out. I assume that will be enough to get you started. Good-bye."

I'd gone straight to work, looking up all my old connections in the seamy underbelly of the city. The countess had said that whoever had stolen the statuette would have gone to the black market. It sounded logical to me - the buying and selling of hot property was one of Old San Francisco's leading enterprises. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the statuette had been heard of by even the low-grade parasites, who comprised most of my underworld contacts.

After spending three sleepless days and half of the M note, I met up with a small-time gangster named Franco Franco, who gave me a fair amount of information in exchange for a favor to be cashed in later. I wasn't altogether comfortable with the arrangement, but I had twenty-nine thousand good reasons not to worry about it at the moment. Franco passed along a name: Eddie Ching.

I asked around and found that most people experienced a strange form of amnesia when Ching's name was mentioned. Luckily, there are plenty of cutthroats willing to do anything for money. Eventually, I got a lead and followed my nose to Mexico City.

Now here I was sitting pretty with the statuette in the bag and two days to spare.

"You all finished, honey?"

LaDonna had refilled the mug in my hand as stealthily as a pickpocket. My usual limit was three cups, but it would've been a shame to squander such stellar service. I took a sip as

LaDonna removed my plate and silverware, then wiped down the table in one motion, leaving it as clean as it could ever hope to be. A bill lay damage-down in front of me with LaDonna's loopy signature and a smiley face scrawled on it. I picked it up, pulled a twenty out of my wallet, and tucked them both under my mostly filled mug. I reached for my backpack and slid out of the booth. LaDonna smiled and waved busily as I pushed open the door and stepped out into the warm Brownsville night.

My speeder was still parked outside, which was good. I crossed the parking lot and beeped my alarm off. Gripping the door handle, I pulled up. Suddenly, a white flash blinded me as something smashed into the back of my head.

— CHAPTER FOUR —

“My God, Murphy. You look like hell.”

With some effort, I pushed myself up from a puddle of drool and slumped back into my chair, struggling to focus. The Colonel stood across the desk from me, slowly shaking his head. I hadn't seen Colonel Roy O'Brien since he'd kicked me out of his detective agency. I'd been one of his young, star recruits, and he'd been my mentor. I owed a lot of what I knew to him. We'd parted on bad terms, though, and had avoided each other since.

Fifteen years later, he was standing in my office, unexpected and uninvited, and I was seeing three of him. The three Colonels had lost the remaining color in their hair and looked a little thicker through the waist. Their faces had acquired a few dozen additional wrinkles, but the jaws were still firm and thrust forward. The deep-set blue eyes hadn't lost any of their malicious glint, and the acid smiles were every bit as smug and infuriating as I'd remembered them.

I watched through horribly pulsating eyes and mirage-like waves of nausea as the three old men merged into one. “You caught me on a bad day. I forgot to take my Flintstones.”

I was slurring, damn it. And probably talking too loud. The Colonel stepped around to where I was slumped precariously and sat down with one leg up on the desk. “Looks like I caught you in the middle of a bender.”

“This isn't a bender. This is nighttime.” Without warning, my chair lurched to the left, forcing me to grab for my desk and severely disrupting my already impaired equilibrium. With no small amount of effort, I forced the room to stop spinning and stretched myself. The Colonel's proximity wasn't helping the unsettled feeling in my stomach. Maybe a drink would calm things down. Two bottles floated around my desk. I guessed right and unscrewed the cap. “Wanna drink? This stuff isn't bad once you get used to it.”

The Colonel smiled and looked piously toward the floor, his hands folded serenely on his thigh. “No thanks, I haven't had a drink in eight years.” He glanced back up at me, too quickly. “Yeah, one day I looked in the mirror and decided I needed to make a few lifestyle changes. Quit drinking, quit smoking. Now I'm looking forward to a nice long retirement on a tropical island with a tribe of beautiful young women.”

It wasn't an attractive mental image, but everyone has a dream. He chortled and rubbed his hands together.

“Enough about me, Tex. Tell me about you. How's everything going? Bad as it looks?”

I steadied myself as conversationally as possible. “Depends. What is today? Saturday? Oh, Saturdays aren't too bad. I don't get really suicidal till about Thursday afternoon.”

I poured about seven fingers of bourbon in the general direction of my glass, then attempted to fix a pointed stare at the Colonel. “So, was there something you wanted? Or did you just come by to sprinkle a little salt into the open wounds of my pathetic life?”

The Colonel chuckled insincerely. “Now why would I want to do a thing like that, Tex? Just because you ratted on me, got me suspended, humiliated me in front of peers - you sold me out, you son-of-a-bitch!”

His eyes burning through me, the Colonel paused to run a hand through his white, still-thick hair. It was a mannerism he’d always used when he was agitated. He stood and walked away, a hand massaging the back of his neck. After a moment he turned back to face me and, slowly, the smug grin reappeared.

“Of course, that’s all in the past. I quit hating you for it weeks ago. Naturally, I got reinstated and everything worked out fine.”

“Glad to hear it.” I took an unnecessary slug from my glass and wiped my mouth on the back of my sleeve. The Colonel smirked and returned to his perch on the corner of my desk.

“So what happened? I heard you were doing pretty well there for awhile. Solved a couple of decent cases. What’s your problem? Are you one of those people who can’t live with success?”

I leaned into my left armrest, away from the old man, and rubbed my eyes with the thumb and forefinger of my left hand. “Oh, living with it isn’t the problem. I just can’t commit to anything long-term.”

The Colonel didn’t respond immediately. I looked up at him and saw the priggish look on his face. It made me angry, and the paint thinner coursing through my veins didn’t help. I leaned forward and stuck a finger at him. “You know what I was fifteen years ago? I was a stupid, idealistic kid! If you weren’t such a bastard, you could have tried to understand why I did what I did. I mean, now...now I understand that I was out of line, but it was just an innocent, stupid mistake. You didn’t have to cut me off!”

The Colonel leaned down and stuck a gnarled finger back into my face.

“Yes I did! Because apparently you never learned the first rule of a PI: never, ever betray your friends! Friendship goes beyond blood or genetics or politics. You find out who your friends are, then you hold onto ‘em! They’re a precious commodity to people like me and you.”

With one last piercing stare, the Colonel stood up. He crossed the room, then paused at the door. “You’re too good to end up like this, Tex. You’ve got no excuse.”

He opened the door. “I’ll send you a postcard.”

*

The door slammed shut, and I was no longer in my office. I was in a dark place, lying down, a dull ache lurking somewhere close by. I’d been dreaming about the Colonel - or was I remembering a conversation that had actually happened? I couldn’t be sure. My mind was out of focus, and an unpleasant odor was making it hard to concentrate. What was that smell? Vaguely familiar...nauseating...claustrophobic. In my mind’s eye, I saw my Great-Aunt Gertie, who’d been dead for thirty years, I began to hear soft footsteps and low voices.

Somewhere nearby, I heard a harsh female voice accusing someone of sleeping with her sister. A deep, testosterone-laced voice denied everything. I tried to open my eyes, but it hurt. From the back of my skull, a steady pounding gradually accelerated. My eyeballs felt as though they were swelling up. With a mighty effort, I opened my eyelids.

Everything was white. I tried to move my head, but it didn't want to. The female voice was now accusing the man of sleeping with her grandmother. The voice was coming from above me and to the left. The stench in the air was almost unbearable. Suddenly, a woman's face appeared in front of the white backdrop. The face was long and thin, not unattractive, but haggard. The eyes looked down at me compassionately, and the narrow lips gave way to two sets of uneven, gray teeth.

"Hello there."

I tried to respond, but nothing came out. My mouth, I realized, was parched, and my lips felt dry and brittle.

"I'll bet you're thirsty, huh?"

The woman's face disappeared, then reappeared behind a light blue plastic cup. As the water hit my tongue, my swallowing mechanism failed to respond, and I lurched into a coughing fit, which amplified the pounding in my head. After a few seconds, we tried again, and this time the water went down without incident. The woman vanished, and I began to wonder where I was - a POW camp, a lunatic asylum, or worse. Maybe some good Samaritan had carried me from my office and checked me into a detox center. I tried to get my bearings. The last thing I could remember was LaDonna. Or had it all been a rot gut-induced hallucination?

A man's face appeared above me. I strained my eyeballs down and saw a clipboard tucked under his arm and a stethoscope around his neck. It all made sense now. The smell, the vision of Great-Aunt Gertie. I hadn't been in a hospital for years.

"Hi there. I'm Dr. Berry, and this is Nurse Chase."

I had to take his word for it. She was out of my peripheral vision.

"How's the head? You've got quite a little bump back there."

Ah...a master of understatement. It felt like I was sleeping on a baseball. Abruptly, I remembered being jumped in the parking lot of the Post-Nuclear Café. I felt a hand on my wrist. The doctor was checking my pulse.

"Fine, just fine." He looked back down at me. "Your injury was quite serious. You were unconscious for almost two full days."

I licked my arid lips and croaked, "Where am I?"

The doctor was looking at his watch. "Brownsville Regional Hospital. The police brought you in. Apparently, someone attacked you. They didn't tell us anything else. On behalf of the town, I'd like to apologize. In general, you'll find us to be good-hearted, law-abiding citizens."

I was still trying to grasp what had happened. Then a horrible thought occurred to me. “Where’s my backpack?”

The doctor shrugged and glanced in the direction of the nurse. “I didn’t see a backpack, did you? No, I don’t think so. There’s a new Z-Mart down on Main Street. I’ll bet you can pick up a new one there. And their prices are generally quite a bit lower than you might expect.”

Damn it. I closed my eyes and tried to think. Who would’ve jumped me? I was almost certain I hadn’t been followed from Mexico City. Maybe it’d just been some drunken drifter, obliterated by a fifth of Cuervo, looking to hit someone. Or it could’ve been some rowdy local teen, rolling an unsuspecting out-of-towner for beer money. I was actually hopeful that whoever had hit me had been after my wallet. Maybe the statuette was still back in the parking lot and had been picked up by someone at the diner. If it was gone - I looked down at my wrist, still pulsating under the doctor’s fingers. There was my watch. It was no Rolex - in fact, it was a cheap piece of crap that only worked under certain climatic conditions. But if I’d been the victim of a simple robbery, they would’ve taken it. Damn.

After the doctor finished checking my vital signs, the nurse gave me a pill the size of a Ping-Pong ball. Several minutes later, everything went into soft focus, and the pain in my skull receded. I struggled onto my elbows and sat up against the metal headboard. Now what? If the statuette was gone, I was screwed. Maybe the police had picked it up. Maybe.

I spent the next four hours in medical limbo. Despite my obvious desire to leave, the doctor and nurse were hesitant. Apparently, they felt the medication they’d given me could have antisocial effects. I told them that keeping me locked up could result in violent seizures, but the nurse brandished a hypodermic and held me at bay throughout the afternoon.

Resigned to waiting, I reached for the TV remote. I didn’t have an idiot box in my office, and I hadn’t intentionally watched television since Nickelodeon had replaced Ren and Stimpy with Three’s Company. As I surfed restlessly, special news reports kept popping up with earnest-looking correspondents describing a bombing in Los Angeles. There was nothing especially newsworthy about a bombing, especially in LA, but this one had obliterated CAPRICORN headquarters. I’d heard about CAPRICORN, but had always been under the impression that it was just another left-wing agency, concerned with suing the NRA and making frantic speeches laced with sound bites and peppered with alliteration.

The reports were informative. I knew, of course, that relations between Mutants and Norms had become more and more strained over the past year. I also knew a little about the Crusade for Genetic Purity, which had grown from a radical right-wing rec room full of anti-Mutant extremists into a mainstream organization with lobbyists, PR people, and a shiny, new temple-esque structure in downtown Phoenix.

According to reports, Norms were flocking to the crusade, which held the belief that Mutants were subhuman and were polluting the world’s gene pool with faulty genetics. Some of the most admired minds in the world had affiliated themselves with the crusade and were backing what they called a eugenics movement, which seemed to involve classifying people by their genetic makeup.

The reports went on to say that, recently, CAPRICORN had officially joined the Mutant League in countering the growing power and influence of the Crusade for Genetic Purity. The

media usually depicted the crusade in a dubious light, hinting that it had been behind the bombing and subtly accusing the crusade's leaders with backhanded compliments and innuendo.

One news show went into detail about the president of the Crusade, the Reverend Claude Sheppard. Apparently, the good Reverend had a somewhat checkered and mysterious past. The program also described the process of initiation for joining the crusade and told how aspiring members had to pass a genetic screening. Once accepted, members advanced through a series of sixteen levels of indoctrination. Eventually, they could reach the ultimate stage of enlightenment, at which point they were invited onto the Moon Child, an orbiting resort station for the spiritually elite. On the Moon Child, members would undergo the final rites, which would result in them receiving the Good Housekeeping Pure stamp of approval.

I'd never taken a gene screen, as they called it, but I knew I was a Norm, though I'd never considered it an issue. I made my home in a primarily Mutant section of the Old City, and most of my friends were Mutants. The whole thing seemed ridiculous to me. Back when my grandfather was growing up, people were still discriminating on the basis of race. It seemed strange to think about, but there had actually been a time when people of color were forced to use separate facilities and were banned from certain places. Now, here was a racially mixed organization picking on a different group because its genetic structure wasn't the same. In my mind, it was just another playground scenario gone bad in the hands of adults.

And as far as I was concerned, the Crusade for Genetic Purity wasn't any different than the hundreds of other hate groups that had come before it. The KKK, the Nazis' Final Solution, South African Apartheid, Bosnian Ethnic Cleansing, the West Coast Gang Wars, the Asian Scouring, the African Tribal Siege, the Middle Eastern Alliance.

In every case, the destructive movement had been suppressed. After World War III, everyone looked around at what they'd done and seemed to decide that we were down to our last thread. Then came the post-war generation, and "Mutant" became a new check box on the census form. Originally, it was used to classify war veterans for benefit purposes. Then came the second generation, and the children of the Mutants were born into the same classification. Now, at the start of the third generation, when the Mutants were beginning to make up a substantial portion of the population, genetic discrimination had started to rear its ugly head.

It wasn't something I planned on getting worked up about, but I hoped that the crusade would, like its predecessors, take its fifteen minutes, then disappear. But I sensed that this time, it was different. To a lot of people, Mutants represented something bad, the visible evidence of man's stupidity and mortality. They were society's scar tissue.

The afternoon came and went, and the pounding in my head slowly changed from a sledgehammer to a hard rubber mallet. The sun was about to call it a night when the nurse came in with my clothes and announced that I could leave. I got dressed and found my wallet untouched-ed in my back trouser pocket. That was a bad sign. Whoever had jumped me hadn't been interested in taking my cash. I didn't have much hope that I'd find my backpack.

When I checked out, I gave the desk nurse my address and told her to mail me the hospital bill. It was going to make a nice addition to my collection. Eventually, I hoped to have unpaid bills from all fifty states and Puerto Rico.

I called the police from the hospital. They picked me up and took me back to my speeder. My backpack was gone - the countess's statuette and twenty-nine thousand dollars with it. I gave the police the information they needed to fill out a report, but it was useless. They had already interviewed the people in the diner, and no one had seen anything. I spent a couple of hours checking around on my own, but it was as if the incident had never happened. No one had seen or heard anything. If it had happened in my town, I would've had connections to consult and a grapevine to listen in on. Here in Brownsville, I had squat. There was nothing left to do but fly home.

*

I reached New San Francisco with mixed feelings. It was something of a relief to be home, but my head was pounding and my stomach was tied up in knots. I wasn't sure if I should tell the countess that her statuette had been stolen a second time, but I'd tell her what happened and maybe she could get a Brownsville flatfoot to pick up the trail. I began rehearsing my pitch, how the whole miserable experience had cost me most of my retainer and that I'd appreciate it if she'd at least compensate me for time spent and bodily injury. Once again, I had ignored the credo of smart business: Get it in writing.

It was after midnight when I landed my speeder in front of 2429 Filmore. The neighborhood was dark and quiet. Before leaving the speeder, I paused. Maybe it would be better to come by first thing in the morning. No, I wanted to resolve this situation as soon as possible.

As I walked to the door, I passed a Century 22 For Sale sign planted in the front lawn. An unpleasant tingling went down my spine. I climbed the front steps and rang the doorbell. After the third ring, I moved to one of the front windows and peered in. It was pitch black inside, but from what I could make out, the room appeared to be absolutely empty. I checked all the entrances and finally had to break a window at the back of the house to get inside. The power was off. Using my Zippo as a tiny torch, I walked through the mansion.

It was completely cleaned out. With the exception of some cardboard boxes and several small potted plants, there was nothing...until I reached the sitting room, where I'd met the countess a week before. Everything was the same as it had been. I walked to the fireplace and touched the ashes. They were cold. Week-old cold. I'd been set up.

— CHAPTER FIVE —

I woke up after a brief twelve hours, feeling sore and unrested. Being gifted always had that effect on me. I stumbled into the shower and tried to think. The hot water pounding on the back of my neck jump-started my brain, but didn't help me come up with any answers. The countess had obviously been phony. I hadn't thought about it at the time, but I should've suspected something when her photo of the statuette was clearly a bad copy. I suppose I'd been too eager for the case to ask myself any bubble-popping questions. A clear violation of the PI Rules.

I stepped out of the shower and dried off. The effects of my shower massager started to fade, and I took a painful inventory of my wounds. My back was still sore from the landing outside the Dulce Vida, my head felt like it was hosting some kind of aneurysm tournament, and my backside was sore from the long flight home. On the brighter side, I'd smoked less than a pack over the past eight days. My lungs and sinuses were in the pink.

After I got dressed, I fired up the coffee machine and walked to the door. On the floor, under the mail slot, was about a week's worth of mail. I'd been too tired to deal with it the night before. I gathered up the pile, crossed the warped hardwood floor, and flopped into the chair behind my cluttered desk. Pushing aside a pile of legal pads and assorted note scraps, I tapped the envelopes into order like an oversized deck of cards and started shuffling through the bills.

On top of the pile was a handwritten, practically illiterate, and nearly unintelligible note from my landlord, Nilo. In King's English, it essentially read: Pay the rent or go find another dump to live in. This was Nilo's official pre- eviction notice. I'd been expecting it, which is why I parked my speeder by Louie's café and taken the back-alley route to my office. The longer Nilo didn't know I was home, the more time I could buy before having to smell his pig-feet-and-pork-rind breath as he told me what would happen if I didn't fork over some cash.

Of course, any reputable place would've booted me out weeks ago. Luckily, Nilo had a hard time holding onto tenants. Not that he was the slightest bit compassionate or flexible regarding payment arrangements. He was merciless in his pursuit of back rent and took every available opportunity to extort it from me. Countless times I'd tried to explain to him the nature of freelance work, how when it rained, it poured. I also tried to make it clear that, for the moment, I was too broke to pay attention and that he couldn't get blood from a stone. Unfortunately, analogies were lost on Nilo. He'd stare at me stupidly, muttering a seemingly random mix of threats and obscenities, and go back to ogling his porno mags.

I decided that rent was in the lower third of my list of priorities and turned my attention back to the pieces of mail. The second item was from the Zebra Speeder Finance Corporation. I knew what they wanted. Unfortunately, I didn't have it. With any luck, their repo man wouldn't stop by until I'd manage to get a case that actually paid off. The third bill was from West Coast Bell. Even without any long-distance charges, the amount due seemed unreasonable. Next in line was an application for a Master Express credit card. I'd have been tempted to send it in if it weren't for that annoying disclaimer: subject to credit approval. My credit rating had gone bad about the same time as the cartilage in my right knee and my hopes of playing first base for the Red Sox.

I continued on through an ad for a dating service, a form requesting a donation to the Humane Society, and a coupon booklet featuring discounts on dry cleaning and Et Tu Brute pizza. It

wasn't until I reached the bottom of the pile that I found anything of interest. First, there was another credit card application, this one for the Radioactive Shack. What made it different was the word Pre-approved stamped on the form. I'd never really thought much of Radioactive Shack, but they'd recently opened an outlet (no pun intended) just down the street, which made it convenient. Besides, I'd always wondered what it would be like to charge something. I decided I might give it a try and stuck the form into my desk drawer.

The final envelope wasn't a bill or junk mail. My name and address were handwritten in block letters. There was no return address. It had been postmarked at the downtown USPS office on November 30, exactly one week earlier. I crushed the last inch of my Lucky Strike into an ashtray and tore open the letter. Inside was a blue card, the size of a standard index card. On one side, the anonymous correspondent had written BXK+A261184. I turned the card over. There was nothing written on the back. There was nothing else in the envelope.

I wouldn't be in analyzing mode for several more hours. I set the blue card aside. There were other, more pressing things on my mind. Coffee, for one. I poured myself some instant breakfast and walked to one of the windows that looked out over majestic Chandler Avenue.

Chelsee Bando was chatting with a stocky, middle-aged gent at her newsstand. Even from three stories up, I could almost smell her perfume, and primal urges stirred within me, like a den of bears around Easter. It had been a long time since I'd performed the forbidden dance of love, but that wasn't the only reason Chelsee made my toes curl. Of course, looking at her was like holding an AA meeting at a bar. I'd sworn off women - they were worse than alcohol. Maybe they wouldn't kill your liver, but they'd done one hell of a job on most of my other organs.

I sipped the java and looked around the rest of the street. Things were pretty dead, as usual. The only unusual thing I saw was a police speeder parked toward the end of the block. It was unmarked, but it might as well have had C-O-P-S painted on the hood in canary yellow. There was only one guy inside, slumped in the passenger seat, eyes closed and mouth open.

The man talking to Chelsee left the newsstand and walked toward the cop speeder, holding two Styrofoam cups and a bulging bag. What were the cops doing on a stakeout in our sleepy little neighborhood? I'd been accused of taking too many things personally, and this was no exception. I moved away from the window and returned to my desk.

Over a second cup of Joe, I wondered what the chances were of me being the target. I tried to think what I could possibly have done to piss off the SFPD. Except for the job in Mexico City, the most interesting thing I'd done since sobering up was experimenting with a tartar control gel. Everything before that was a bit blurry, but I couldn't remember doing anything illegal. Despite being reasonably sure I wasn't in trouble, I decided to keep a low profile.

My first priority was to find out who'd set me up. I'd never enjoyed being played for a sap, and I was about to get a hospital bill that I had no intention of paying. Besides, there were no messages on my vid-phone, no cases lined up, and I was determined not to fall back into a life of sloth and slobbering.

A good place to start would be the Century 22 real estate agency. I'd jotted down the number from the For Sale sign at the countess's "bungalow." I punched in the number on my vid-

phone. After three rings, a handsome black woman with large, shiny eyes and a perfect, easy smile answered.

We chattered for several minutes about 2429 Filmore. Kaitlyn Abbot, the real estate agent, told me that the house had been owned by an older woman named Mrs. Greenburg, but that she'd passed away some time ago. Mrs. Greenburg's two children, both of whom lived out of state, had decided to sell the house. Mrs. Abbot went on to say that the place had been unoccupied for at least six months.

After I disconnected, I mulled over the fact that the mansion had supposedly been vacant for months. Countess Renier, if that was her real name, had certainly shown a bold streak by staging her ruse in the empty house. I had to admire the audacity. Unfortunately, that didn't take the sting out of being used like a Kleenex. If I'd been a realist, I might have filed the whole episode under Learning Experiences, but I'd never been accused of being a realist. Besides, I had nothing else to do. The question was, where to begin? The mansion was all I had to work with. Maybe the imposter countess had left something traceable behind. I decided to make a return trip.

A light acid rain was falling as I left the office and hurried to my speeder, carefully sidestepping the street's minefield of oily pools. I was sporting my good Dexter wing tips and always tried to keep them safe from inclement weather and low pH puddles. Inside the speeder, I lifted off and headed toward Pacific Heights.

I parked several houses away from 2429 and made my way to the back of the mansion without being seen. I entered the "bungalow" and spent the next hour going through the sitting room, looking for anything that might give me a lead. The high point of my search was finding a full ashtray. The cigarettes were marked with a symbol I'd never seen before.

I poured some of the cigarette butts into an envelope I found in my overcoat pocket, then left the residence and stealthily made my way back to the speeder. Maybe a tobacconist could identify the brand of cigarettes. It wasn't the greatest lead in the world, but it might be just slightly better than nothing.

I lifted off and flew several blocks, until I reached a convenience store with pay phones out front. Jumping out of the idling speeder, I jogged through the misty downpour. At the pay phone, I inserted a dollar bill, and the directory menu appeared on-screen. I accessed the listing for tobacconist shops and decided to start at the Cigar Bar, since it had the catchiest name, as well as being the closest to my present location.

I was about to return to the warmth of my speeder when a thought struck me. I knew that tracking someone down by way of their preferred brand of cigarette is desperate at best, but I didn't have anything else to go on. What I really needed was a crack team of investigators to go through the phony countess's sitting room. With a staff of fully trained professionals, experienced in fingerprinting, collecting DNA samples, and analyzing microscopic fibers, maybe something would turn up. And I had connections in the San Francisco Police Department.

Unfortunately, I'd seen them at work often enough to decide they were mostly a bunch of knuckleheads. Their ringleader, Lieutenant Mac Malden, was an old acquaintance. I pulled out another dollar bill, fed it into the machine, and entered the number for the downtown

precinct. Inferior help was better than no help at all. I also made a mental note to ask Mac if he knew anything about the unmarked speeder on Chandler Avenue.

Malden wasn't in his office, so I left a brief message on his voice mail, asking him to call me at my office at his earliest convenience. I disconnected and returned to my speeder, then flew through a heavy downpour to the Cigar Bar. It turned out to be a rustic hole in the wall down by the Wharf. When I stepped inside, the smell of fresh tobacco reached out and embraced me like an old lover. The interior of the shop was long and slender and brown, appropriately enough. Sets of display cases faced each other down the length of the store. The hardwood floor was marinated in the blended aromas of cherry, vanilla and Cuban leaf.

I walked down the left side of the shop, inspecting the wares. Case after case was filled with handsome wooden boxes teeming with Cubans, Hemingways, and Ashtons. The shelves above were full of cigar cutters, vintage lighters, cigarette cases, and other smoking accouterments. I turned toward the right wall and its selection of hundreds of pipes. There was also a substantial magazine section containing every periodical published for the patrons of the disappearing art of smoking. It was heavenly. If I'd had the money, I could've spent the entire day here, smoking myself into a stupor.

Behind the long counter (and a cloud of smoke), a small, bony man with a bad toupee was ladling rough-cut tobacco from a large glass jar into a small plastic bag. He looked up at me, and his leathery face crinkled into a crooked grin around a neatly hand-rolled cigarette.

"Afternoon."

I pulled the pack of Luckies from my overcoat pocket and walked to the counter. The man stopped ladling and extended a lighter. I leaned over until the tip of my cigarette touched the flame, then straightened up, releasing a long stream of smoke. The leathery man looked me over approvingly.

"Baby Luckies. Don't see many people smoking' those these days. Not really enough. Looks fine on you, though. Compliments the get-up nicely. You know, I gotta fedora like that. Pricey. Not really the style, but like I say, quality never goes out of fashion. Am I right? You bet I am."

He glanced over the counter. "Wing tips, too. Nice touch. There ya go again...quality. These days, I dunno, businessman types wearing this new footwear - what do they call it? - active dress shoes, or something' like that. Who are they kiddin'? Sneakers are sneakers. Now those wing tips of yers, that's a shoe. Am I right? Sure I am."

He took a quick drag from his smoke, then extended his hand. "Sorry if I'm talking yer ear off. Name's Gabby. Not my real name, of course, but my friends call me that, and anyone who smokes Luckies is a friend in my book, sight unseen."

We shook with our free hands. "My name's Murphy. It's a pleasure to meet you, Gabby."

Gabby stubbed out his smoke and returned to ladling. "Murphy, eh? Good, solid name. Suits ya. So, what can I do for ya, Murphy? Pack of Luckies?"

"Sure."