

CHAPTER ONE

*Fire a warning salvo at the disinterested
Private eye and he'll dog it to resolution.*

March 7, 1994 -10:50 AM

“You’ve reached the offices of Samuel D. Shovel, Private Investigator. How may I direct your call?” a soft voice asked. More than a secretary, she and Shovel were playing footsies. To please Sammy, she tailored her role of a hardboiled attorney’s secretary, snuggling in an out of a misplaced contemporary chair and desk, yet still surrounded by Mr. Ugly interiors. Even the city’s garbage dump, reeked better with its sweet sour odor, - instead of stale rotting fumes from ancient Easter eggs hunts that crept into office finishes long ago. She glanced at the dark trail around the coffee bar, shuttered, then smiled sinisterly for this was to be the last day she would ever smell such filthy cluttered gas of rancid bouquet again.

“Who is this?” San Francisco Police Department homicide detective, Lieutenant Bracque demanded.

“Why Lieutenant, you’ve hurt my feelings. This is Zondair.” Wondering why was he so upset.

“What!” Bracque exclaimed. “What the heck are you doing there? I have important information, and my chief demands that I inform Mr. Shovel at once. This could be life or death. Get him on the line; I haven’t got all day.”

“Calm down, dearie, I’m just helping out my new lover buddy.”

“What do you see in him? He’s short, dumpy and dresses in sleaze. Is he in for Christ’s sake?” Bracque said, thinking why did his nemesis get so lucky.

Zondair flexed the fingers of her right hand and admiring her recently pedicure design. “I think he’s cute. Besides, where it counts — he’s all man and then some.”

“He must have something... if a beauty like you takes him on an all expense vacation for a month. Well, is he or isn’t he there?” Bracque barked, still envious of his hated P.I.

Zondair’s chatter alerted Sammy. He was trying to suffer through all the noise Home Depot’s Expo’s remodelers were changing below. Both he and the lessor beneath him were told two days tops. The Expo gang were planning to arouse the ordinary to the extraordinarily by removing the stale 1948 trappings. Sammy’s new and only love engaged and paid for a complete renovation of Sammy’s offices. She advised him he had

to change his image to attract more wealthy clients like Golden Opportunities—this time he listened.

He thought it had to be Lieutenant Bracque. He jumped up and swiftly entered the reception room, stopping at the coffee bar. He wanted to eavesdrop while pouring a mug of coffee. He glanced toward Zondair, and brought his right index finger to his mouth. He rummaged through dirty mismatched mugs and selected the one with the least caked-on mold growing on the bottom. He gave its contents a couple of watery swirls; he dumped it out, looked at the bottom and did it again. He poured in hot Java. Then ferried himself toward the reception desk, and seized an opportunity. He set his mug down and approached his newfound love. He stood behind Zondair, gently massaging her shoulder.

Zondair twisted her head with the phone still firmly pressed next to her left ear, glanced up, then puckered her lips together and released them, throwing a phantom kiss Sammy's way; bringing a gesture of satisfaction. Whiffs of *Poison* perfume drifted from Zondair's earlobes, flooding Sammy's nostrils.

Warm sensations gripped his groin. Moving to the front of the desk, he sat on one end so he could relish her face. He eyed her assesses and every facial feature, but he couldn't help thinking, enjoy your moment of bliss, she could evaporate like donuts in a police station.

"What can I say, except I like it and didn't want it to end," Zondair added, quite content.

"Oh, that's just great," Bracque said exasperated, then continued, "Enough of this. I need to talk to Shovel. I told you this is important, dammit!"

"It's been a pleasure, Lieutenant. I'll tell him you're on the line." Zondair said, then punched a button putting Bracque on hold and turned to Sammy. "The Lieutenant seems a little frustrated that I'm with you again."

"He'll get over it. It's hard for his unromantic mind to comprehend," Sammy grinned.

"Sweetie, must I remind you that you were in the same category before you met me."

Hurt, like a puppy when he was around Zondair, his tail snapped between his legs. "So, you've reminded me. I'll take the call in my office," Sammy said, verbally abused.

"You're not going to drink out of that mug, are you?" Zondair scolded, spying stuck on mold spores now floating to the surface.

"Coffee's coffee. A little mold never hurt anyone," Sammy replied, shooting her a half smirk.

"Au courant," Zondair snapped back, "give me that mug, it has death written all over it. I'll clean it properly, then make a fresh pot. I bought some of Peet's coffee yesterday. I understand it's quit tasty.

Scurrying back into his office, Sammy reached over, grabbed the phone, and plunked his stocky, muscular frame onto his chair. "Why, Lieutenant Bracque, what a

pleasant surprise.”

“Shovel, what the hell is Zondair doing there? I thought the two of you just had a fling and she was history.”

“She likes me. Why are you calling?”

“Oh brother. You—you both make me sick carrying on the way you do.”

“Look Lieutenant, I know it’s hard for you to understand how someone so beautiful could like a middle-aged bachelor like me, but it happened. So, get over it! What’s with the call?”

“I’ve been asked to advise you to lay off getting involved with your new client, Zoë Humerstein.”

“Sorry, pal, I don’t know or ever heard of Zoë... Are you sure you got the name right?”

“That was the name I was given. I wrote it down and read it back. Hey, I’m only the messenger here. I volunteered because I know you.”

Sammy glared at the phone, at a complete loss listening to Bracque. No one, from any police department, had ever told him to drop a client. These kinds of events were puzzling.

“Here’s a fresh mug of coffee,” Zondair announced, then marched back to her desk, smarting.

“I hate to disappoint you, but seriously, I’ve never met, nor can ever remember meeting, anyone named Zoë. It’s a lovely name though,” Sammy said.

“All I can tell you is this came from somewhere at the top, maybe even higher. I... I respect you and don’t want you to get hurt,” Bracque lied, “That’s the only reason I offered to make the call. When the word came down, everyone here in Homicide seemed startled.”

“I hear what you’re telling me, but if this Zoë calls, I’ll hear her out.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less of you.” Bracque retorted, and dropped the phone back to its cradle.

Sammy sat for a moment in a daze, then took a slurp of coffee and smiled, for Peet’s was indeed, quite tasty. His mind went over the conversation. What was Bracque really trying to tell me? On his way back to the reception area, he remembered movies where someone was warned before the fact, but never heard it actually happening.

“Zondy, I’m sorry. I acted like a clumsy child about the coffee mug. Please forgive me,” Sammy said, doing his best to appease. “That new coffee, what’s the name again, was wonderful?”

“Peet’s. I accept your apologies.”

“Did I receive a phone call from a woman named Zoë?” Sammy said, getting a tad antsy.

“I don’t think so. I’d remember anyone whose name started with a ‘Z’.”

“You’re sure?” Sammy said.

“Yes, sweetie, but several others called. Let me see,” She started going through her phone message log. “Yes, here they are. While you were out this morning a Barry Grossnell called again about the warehouse thefts. A Jay Mathew of Computer World wanted to know if you’re ready to upgrade your computer. And a Mrs. Humerstein wants an appointment to meet you.”

“When did Humerstein call?” Sammy asked hurriedly, his body stiffening.

“About 9:30 A.M.; that’s what I’ve listed here.”

“I don’t get it. Bracque called to tell me to lay off the Zoë Humerstein case. It’s now 11:10. If her call came in at 9:30 this morning someone had to know she was going to call me, or my office is bugged again. I know Lieutenant Bracque and his men; they wouldn’t place a listening device in my office.”

“You mean Mrs. Humerstein is Zoë?”

“Yeah. In less than an hour and a half someone telephones the top brass down at the Hall, clues them in on Humerstein; they check around the departments to find someone who knows me. Bingo, they find the good Lieutenant and ask him to call me.”

“What if they’re listening now?”

“I hope you bastards are listening,” Sammy’s shout thundered about the room. “Because of this, I will talk to her and most likely take her case.”

“But what if the office isn’t bugged?” Zondair asked in a soft voice, trying to calm Sammy down.

“Zondy, it makes no difference. Never ask me to lay off a case.” Sammy blurted loudly. “I’ll decide if and when to walk. I don’t take kindly to someone threatening me. Call Donald Alstadt. Tell him I want this place swept for the smallest bug that exists. I don’t care how much it costs.”

Zondair gave him you’re giving the barn away sigh.

“Okay... okay, find out how much. Keep it around a couple hundred.”

She called Alstadt as Sammy retrieved his coat.

“Leaving so soon?” Zondair asked, holding her hand over the phone.

“I’m pissed. I thought I might walk if off. Want to join me?”

Zondair nodded 'yes' as she began talking to Alstadt.

“I’ll be in the lobby,” Sammy said. “It’s a nice day for March, but a bit windy, so bring your coat.”

Zondair joined Sammy and they left the building holding hands. Zondair’s trappings stood out like a model on the prowl, sudden brief rushes of wind fluffed her black tresses while her full, long skirt flapped sporadically, revealing gorgeous gams. The two walk down the street. Pedestrians ogle, then shook their head trying to comprehend what their eyes beheld: A tall, black-haired beauty and a short dumpy guy who failed haberdashery 101.

Sammy thought back to his service tour in Tokyo, when he was lucky enough to glimpse groups of Geishas strolling the streets with their petite steps creating a national

stir. Everyone, men, women, girls and boys alike, all in unison, would stop, point and gawk in admiration. Never disappointing, the Geishas were adorned in thousand dollar kimonos and their dazzling ornamental hairdos and white-faced makeup was beyond reproach. I'm not strolling along Tokyo streets holding a Geisha hand, but right here, right now, I'm getting the feeling that folks envy me.

In the City, everyday can bring summer fog and mild winters. Camera toting tourist jam the Powell Street cable cars to the other end to sample fresh crab at fisherman's wharf. The city by the bay was different than most metropolitan areas. Travelers, workers and residents can walk to the financial district, major businesses, China Town, hotels, the wharf, theaters, department stores and exclusive fashion boutiques. Commingled people dashing about, and push sheer excitement into life everywhere. If you want to take a leisure stroll, no taxis required.

Ambling along Geary towards Market Street, Zondair radiated jubilation as she gazed at Sammy. She's found someone who loved, rather than lust after her. She pulled her hand from his, then wrapped her arm around Sammy. Still walking, she gradually lowers her arm, so her hand rubs his back in circular motions. In a final, you're mine burst, she gave Sammy's fanny two gentle pats.

It was a pleasant day; the rain was gone. Sammy and Zondair passed a flower stand, adorned with an array of radiant colors. Sammy stopped to buy his companion a red rose. She held the odorless bud with both hands, leaned down and pretended she could smell the delicious sweet aroma. On one of the corner steps of Union Square, flutes resonate Chilean ethnic melodies that permeate the senses, inviting those passing by to stop.

Zondair squeezed Sammy's hand as he threw out a fiver onto a hand-woven Chilean carpet. The two cross Geary Street, avoiding helmeted cyclists delivering urgent documents by scurrying from building to building. They occasionally nodded to people sitting outdoors chatting while sipping coffee.

On Market Street, Sammy and Zondair fused with the rush of humanity. They cross the intersection and headed south on Third. After several blocks, she asked, "Sweetie, why don't you wear the suite I bought you on our trip?"

"Because I don't want guys like Lieutenant Bracque making snide remarks about me. That's why."

"They'll get over it. Besides, how many men can say, 'This is an Armani original, tailored just for me'?"

"Probably not many."

"See, I told you I had influential friends, however, if you want to be successful you have to exhibit success. That brings in top dollars, which in turns buys expensive things that make you appear prosperous. Why on earth do you think designers design expensive clothes?"

"Is this s quiz?" Sammy asked.

“No lover boy, it’s reality. I spent ten grand in Europe and twenty here on buying you a complete new wardrobe from everyday togs to opera attire. The balance of the Europe clothes should arrive here next week. I want you to throw out all those rags you call clothes, especially that stupid jacked you bought in a Salvation Army Store that has one sleeve longer than the other, and start wearing the new threads. People will take notice.”

“You’re sounding bossy. I’ve never known a woman like you before.”

“Known a woman? You’ve never had a woman before. Listen, sweetie pie, I’m trying to help you build a successful business. You proved to me you’re worth every cent I put into making you — a sought after private investigator — after all you saved my life. Next, I’m after that horrifically wonderful dumpy office. I’ve paid Home Depot’s Expo Center, to fix up your place so clients will be flabbergasted. When I return from Jersey City we’ll discuss further improvements.”

“Why are you doing all this? I’m comfortable with what I have now.”

“That, my Sammy, is the crux of why you never had any real paying clients. If you appear broke, they will treat you as such. Look successful and they will pay top dollar. Why do you think I can command such high escort services? Did you ever dream you could bed me for the night? I think not. Tomorrow I have to leave on my trip to Paris, then New Deli and maybe Jersey City. I’ll be gone two to three weeks, maybe more. My flight leaves very early tomorrow. Will you miss me?”

“Yeah, I’ll miss you. Since you came into my life, I want to stay alive and not take reckless chances. Thinking back to the demise of my partner, I don’t know if that’s good or bad.”

“Being a risk taker myself, I won’t interfere.”

“Do all women impose changes to their lord at hand?”

“Ancient history suggests women ruled the Roman Empire and murdered whomever got into their way, including their husbands. However, I do not want to change you, I want you to receive what you deserve: P.I. Recognition.”

Sammy treasured all the worldly doors Zondair had magically opened, and he comprehended how dull life had been: Everyday, get up, meet clients, chase thugs, sleep on the run and fret over money. Looking back, constantly being beat up, shot at, living on hot dogs, and having heart palpitations seemed fun, now he understood his life was bleak drudgery.

He still couldn't understand, months earlier, Zondair had buzzed into his dull life like kismet. During an investigation involving an international assassin ring, Sammy saved Zondair, a free-spirited courtesan, from certain death. The killers found the perfect patsy: A beautiful woman, with creamy white skin, coal-black hair, and a European reputation for pleasing men. She could easily entice a bothersome young clothes designer to share her room for the evening. Zondair agreed to give the man a night of passion he would never forget. She was handsomely paid up-front by the assassin ring.

What Zondair didn't know was the assassins planned to shoot her and their hapless target. A maid would find both dead the next day, supposedly victims of a lover's quarrel.

Sammy intervened, so Zondair felt she owed him more than her gratitude. She took Sammy to exotic locations and introduced him to places and palaces he'd only heard about. That gesture backfired. Zondair discovered she was attracted to him. He wasn't a lothario, but rather a man so afraid of hurting the opposite sex he kept all desires cloistered within.

"Zondy, you showed me a lot these past months. However, you come in and out of my life for a day, a week, maybe more, then, like now, you just leave. I get it, but I don't get it. You never tell me about yourself, like, where you're from?"

"Sweetie, I must live my life a little longer as it's been. I don't know whether we'll turn into an item or if I'm just grateful to you for saving my life. But, you're beginning to grow on me. When I'm away, I can't wait until we're together. By now you should know I like you."

"Zondy, I like you too. And it's not the sex talking."

"Ummm, the sex is good. Who would have known that such a small man could be so blessed?"

"Damn it all, I'm not that small."

"Isn't that what I said?"

"You win. When are you leaving?" Sammy said, shaking his head in total acquiescence.

"Tomorrow morning, early. We have time for a couple of wrestling matches. What do you say?"

"Oh hell, you know you always get what you want." Sammy said, starting to realize she was a proactive lady.

"Sweetie, it's a win-win situation. I've never heard you complain in the clutches."

"Okay... okay, but let me call Zoë Humerstein first and arrange a meeting tomorrow. I'll make the call from my condo. How's that?"

"I think I can allow that—but make it quick. I don't want to miss a moment."

At the corner, next to the Moscone Center, they cross Third Street and head for Sammy's condo. It's going to be a long afternoon, and short night for Zondair, dinner at *Max's*, with light packing mixed in between what she calls *frolicking*.

He asks himself, for the umpteenth time, why has this woman come into my stoic life? She's too good to be true. What does she see in me? Generally, I don't attract any women, let alone a beauty like her. So, why her? If—if... hell, when she leaves I'll be crushed... I've never known anyone as exciting as Zondy... I mustn't think about it or I'll turn neurotic, if I'm not already there.

*E*arly next morning, and alone, Zondair cabled to the airport, she assessed her involvement with Sammy. Am I being drawn to him; this can't be happening to me—me, who only use men and a few women for personal gain; I've got to cut this off—now; I know, I know I may never return, yet why does he makes me feel so alive; oh God, I need a priest to help sort this one out. I've never allowed men to control my life, except in brief rendezvous for serious cash. Wait—is it possible I'm getting too old and it's time to quite sharpening my claws?

*S*ammy needed the stimulus of caffeine to refresh his mind. Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he buried his face in his hands, and shook his head. He dug into his eyes, and scraped out the Sandman's crust. Sammy got up, took a wiz, splashed cold water onto his face, put on a robe and headed for the kitchen to make coffee. He sat at the table, Zondy was gone; he guzzled coffee, for his mind was still spinning. He kept asking, who was this Zoë Humerstein? Why was she so important that Lieutenant Bracque called to warn me? Bracque, that's a good one. Of all the cops in homicide, they pick the one who bristles at hearing my name.

He picked up the phone and called Zoë. But she refused to tell him why she'd phoned.

Zoë paused for a moment, then said, "We need to chat."

Chat? What does that mean, chat? Sammy thought.