

Connecting Obsessions



NEIL MAVRICK

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Obsessions*

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PROLOGUE

“**Y**ou’re obstinately obsessed,” they would say. “You can’t go on like this. Forget it, or you’ll end up insane.”

He wasn’t sure if they were warning him about his theories or the girl. Perhaps both. But, of one thing he was sure: they would never accept his ideas.

The concept was way removed from current thinking, and no one in the fields of general relativity and quantum physics paid the slightest attention to any of his papers.

His age was no help. He was considered neither old enough nor wise enough to propound upon such matters or to put forward such preposterous theories—their words, of course, not his.

As often happened whenever he reflected upon that period of his life, he was transported back to the time, imagining himself sitting on the stool in his study, letting it swivel slowly so that he could survey the walls of the room as they passed before his eyes: walls covered with a mixture of charts, newspaper cuttings, and posters.

The charts were his, the product of his youth and long hours working on complex projections, using modelling techniques developed on his network of bio-electro computers.

The cuttings and posters were something else. Those were the result of his hobby—or, perhaps he should admit it, his obsession.

He stumbled upon the posters three years previously. All but one depicted a number of movies starring the same actress. He also possessed recordings of most of those.

The exception, his favourite poster, took centre stage on the main wall; a glorious photograph of that same actress wearing a stunning gown, twirling her skirts as she danced. But her haunted smile bore witness to the cuttings on either side, and even as he looked at those, he felt the familiar surge of anger at her fate.

Ridiculous of course. There was nothing he could possibly do about it—at least, that is what he thought at the time.

However, he mused, coming back to the present, that was over fifty years ago.

He glanced down at the woman, now sleeping peacefully at his side, and watched her face for a while. Perhaps she was dreaming. Certainly her expressions were changing—for the most part sublime contentment, sometimes fleeting looks of apprehension interspersed with brief touches of irritation.

Then, just the once, that oh-so-familiar signal: her turned-up nose.

She gave yet another of her glorious smiles, although he may have been imagining that, and he couldn't help smiling himself. God, she was beautiful without the smile. Simply radiant with it! On this occasion, he had to close his eyes, fearful that his feelings would erupt into some audible expression that might awaken her. There was no way of knowing, of course, but he was as certain as he could be that her dreams were, to some extent, a parallel of his own recent reminiscences.

And why not, after all she'd been through? Hell, they'd both shared lives that few would imagine possible and even fewer would believe— himself included, he had to admit—were it not for his three overwhelming obsessions.

Book I

Paul Lander

CHAPTER 1

The Second Connection

(2010—Venice, Italy)

“**W**hat happened?” The woman sounded worried. “I have absolutely no idea, my darling.” Her husband’s voice reflected that concern—and their unmistakable English accents.

Their companion, who was steering the boat, could just make out their expressions in the dim light. Difficult to judge, though. The eerie reflection of moonlight in the canal waters was casting faint, shimmering patterns across their features. No doubt they were stunned, but that was understandable.

One moment the woman was close to falling from a bridge into the polluted waters of the canal in the mid-afternoon sunshine then, as soon as he managed to get both her and her husband safely into the boat, they made the connection. The area was now bathed in moonlight.

“I’m sorry, Mr and Mrs Saunders. You’re safe enough.”

“How do you know our names?” the husband interrupted, his voice now more incredulous than concerned.

The helmsman smiled. He doubted that either would see his face clearly enough to notice, but he wanted to reassure them or at least try to. However, when they knew the truth, that might prove difficult.

“I was expecting this to happen,” he explained.

“You were?” Still incredulous. Then the concern returned. “What exactly *has* happened?”

The helmsman gave a slight laugh, then stated, “Quite a lot. As they say, there’s good news and there’s bad. The good news is that you’re both safe and well. Had you fallen into the canal, Mrs Saunders, as you’re no doubt aware, it might not have been good for your health.”

“That’s for sure,” commented her husband. “And we really are most grateful for your timely intervention.” After another brief pause he quietly asked, “And the bad news?”

“We’re not exactly where you think we are.”

“We’re not?”

He watched as Mr Saunders looked around. The boat was still heading toward the Grand Canal as it had been earlier. Venice looked much the same.

The man looked back. “I’m sorry, but I don’t follow you.”

“Well, it’s not so much where we are, as *when*. If my calculations are correct—and I’m sure they are . . .” And he told them.

* * *

The Saunders, once the helmsman explained, were shocked. Well, astounded and incredulous was perhaps a more accurate description. However, since they had actually experienced the event, there was little choice but to accept reality, especially once their companion told them all about himself and his reason for being there, leaving nothing out.

Considering the circumstances, he reckoned they were incredibly unfazed—a typically British reaction, now he came to think about it. That was no doubt helped by the fact that, through a stroke of good fortune, the couple had no living relatives who would miss them—just each other—and as long as they were together, they were happy. Of course, Mrs Saunders also thought that his endeavours to save the girl were *so* romantic.

CHAPTER 2

The Audition—Part 1

(Los Angeles—August 2012)

This was the first time he'd seen the young woman, in the flesh, and she was every bit as attractive as her pictures. He'd put a great deal of planning into reaching this stage. She'd no idea of course, but soon that would all pay off.

Rachel was her name. Rachel Starr.

The burger bar was busy. He glanced around, absorbing the details. Did all such establishments use the same store outfitters? Regimented rows of cream-coloured tables with easy-wipe surfaces, nestling in predominantly red stalls, although, in this place, there were also a few bar-style stools along the customer side of the serving counter. And beyond that, a hatchway through to the kitchen area from which orders could be taken and served.

He was tucked away at the table in a corner stall. It wasn't Rachel who served him but another waitress. That was good; she hadn't seen his face—not that it really mattered but better to wait. By the end of the week, the effort should all be worth it.

He'd grab her, get her into the automobile, and then he could concentrate on the rest.

* * *

"Wish me luck, Sam." Rachel picked up her purse and props bag and then checked in the mirror yet again. She flicked a stray strand of her dark brown curls into place. "I'll be back by four thirty"

"Yeah, yeah," Sam, the owner of the burger bar, drawled. How many times had he heard her wild estimates on when she'd return? "Or five thirty or six."

The young woman gave an infectious chuckle and planted a playful kiss on his cheek. "You're very good to me, Sam. I really appreciate it."

"Yeah, yeah," he drawled again. "See you later—and don't be late, gal." By then, she had swept out of the door and down the sidewalk.

Sam shook his head slightly, but smiled. Then he noticed his wife in the kitchen area, trying not to show she had heard the exchange, and his smile changed to a grin.

He and Annie had somehow drifted into the role of surrogate parents to those in their employ, especially the young women, doing what they could to keep their feet on the ground and to ensure they were safe. Eventually, they would leave, often saddened, but hopefully not too disillusioned.

Annie asked him once, "Why *do* we worry so much about them?"

"Because, after nine years of marriage, the third for both of us and no kids, your mothering instinct needs something to do," he told her, gruffly.

She simply laughed and then retorted, "Of course, and you're never just an old softie with them, are you?"

She was right, of course. They had employed a fair number of starry-eyed youngsters since taking over the Hollywood eatery seven years ago, in 2005. Most were young women, hoping against hope to succeed in the movies. Unsurprisingly, none did so; it was a cut-throat business.

However, he sensed that Rachel Starr might be different. At least, she'd been through acting school and, let's face it, she did have the most appropriate surname. Perhaps she would be the exception.

The sound of the door opening again caught his attention. That guy from the corner table was leaving, and in a bit of a rush. He'd been there long enough. Why do people never leave themselves enough time? Sam shook his head again as he watched the figure scurry off in the same direction that Rachel had taken.

* * *

Rachel walked into the hall, glanced around, and sighed. All casting sessions seemed to operate to the same dreary standards.

Find the drabest hall you can. It should, if possible, have a small stage area, decked with an uneven surface in which there are also numerous small holes. These two attributes must guarantee that anyone walking upon it will trip up—or trap their heels in the case of the women.

Place the most rickety folding table you have to one side, at which those attending can register their interest but on which they should never place their purses, or bags, for fear of collapsing the darned thing. Finally, sprinkle a handful of equally rickety folding chairs around the hall ensuring, of course, that there are nowhere near enough for all those who are likely to attend.

She homed in on the obligatory table and joined the short queue of wannabe actresses waiting to register. Once she had given her name and been handed her sides—a short script to use later—and a form to complete, she looked around for a chair but, seeing none that were free, decided to perch on the edge of the stage to complete the form.

That done, Rachel looked around at the other girls waiting their turn, nodding to one or two whom she recognised from previous auditions. She'd never get used to doing this, but ever since she was a little girl and realised that there were such people as movie stars, she set her heart on joining them. And how! The burning ambition made her feel like screaming sometimes as the breakthrough she so desperately sought remained frustratingly out of reach.

She felt the usual butterflies in her stomach, but they were worse on this occasion.

Admittedly, that experience on her way to the audition was no help. At least twice she had the strangest feeling that someone was following her. She checked, but no one was there—not that she could see, anyway. Must have been her imagination but—she shivered a little—it was creepy. Cool it. Think about something else.

She tried to. Was it really only twenty-one months since her arrival in Hollywood? Sure, trying to get into the movie business was still new to her, but she seemed to have been trawling around these wretched auditions forever. Thank goodness for the sanity of her job at the burger bar! That at least allowed her to survive, just, though money was tight. Boy, was it tight! If she couldn't find a part soon . . . No! She shook her head. She wasn't going there.

Today, she was wearing one of her standard audition outfits; a tank top and mini skirt—not too short—and shoes with four-inch heels.

They emphasised her slim figure and long legs. She'd left her hair loose so that the dark brown curls tumbled well below her shoulders and, as usual, wore little in the way of makeup. She was always grateful for a God-given beauty—well, since becoming aware of such things as a teenager—needing little to augment her looks. A light application of eye shadow and mascara to heighten the effect of wide brown eyes, plus a delicate shade of pink for her lips, usually sufficed.

Of course, for clubbing or other nights out, she would pump up the volume some.

Rachel shifted her position slightly, only to send her props bag crashing on to the floor. She looked around apologetically, but no one seemed to have noticed, so she bent to retrieve it and set it beside her again. She brought the bag, containing a number of potentially useful items, to all her auditions, once she experienced the first few. Just in case.

She took a deep breath to try to collect her thoughts and concentrated on the sides.

Despite having been one of the first girls to arrive, she was almost the last to be auditioned. She approached another makeshift desk occupied by the casting director and his assistant and handed over the form giving her particulars together with details of any previous acting experience—in her case a small appearance in a TV ad some months back as well as parts in productions put on by the acting workshop she attended for two years before coming to Hollywood.

Rachel noticed the casting director eyeing her with undisguised approval. Nothing unusual; she soon learned to ignore the feeling she often experienced at auditions. One of being in a cattle market!

His assistant checked the information on Rachel's form. "What year's this?" she asked, pointing to Rachel's date of birth where the ink had smudged a little. "Ninety-eight?"

"Sorry, no. Nineteen ninety. I'm twenty-one: twenty-two come November."

"You have no agent?"

"Not at the moment—though I'm looking." Which was true, but good agents were darned near impossible to find these days.

The assistant nodded and then asked Rachel to act out the short scene covered by her sides, with a nondescript young man.

When they finished, the casting director called her over. "Ok—err," he checked her form, "Ms Starr. We've drawn up a shortlist, and I'm pleased to say you're on it."

Hey, that was a first. Rachel gave him a broad smile. "Cool. Thanks."

"I'd like to see you again Friday evening, eight o'clock. That all right?"

It wasn't; Rachel already had plans for Friday. "Sure," she responded. She'd have to change them.

Then she returned to work, arriving back at the bar at six thirty.

* * *

So far, so good. It had all gone as expected. Rachel attended the audition, though she seemed furtive at times.

Odd. Unless she'd seen him!

He hoped not. That might frighten her and make her change her plans, which he certainly didn't want. She'd be scared enough later in

the week. He'd have to move quickly and get her into the car before she knew what was happening. The timing would be crucial.

Should he follow her, now the audition was finished, and for the rest of the week? Just to be on the safe side? He didn't really need to do anything more until Friday, but after all this planning . . . Better play safe but keep well out of sight.

* * *

Later that evening, Rachel hurried home to the two-bedroom apartment that she and her roommate Vanessa rented not far from the burger bar. She was climbing the stairs to their apartment when the shadows cast in the stairwell by the lights on each landing prompted her to recall the earlier incident. The excitement of being put on a shortlist had made her forget. Just as well, she reckoned, otherwise she would have been as nervous as hell again on the way back from work, forever looking over her shoulder. Even thinking about it now made her run up the remaining steps to her front door to quickly let herself in. The door led straight into the main room of the apartment, off which all other areas were accessed.

"That you, Rae?" Vanessa's voice drifted in from the bathroom. "How did it go?"

"Hey, Ness. I'm on the shortlist."

"Really?" Vanessa's head popped around the side of the bathroom door. She'd obviously had a shower and washed her hair, which was now wrapped in a towel that was about to fall off, but she caught it in time and quickly secured it back in place. "That's good," she muttered, quietly.

Hmm, Rachel thought, she doesn't sound all that enthusiastic. Perhaps she's had a bad day. She shrugged her shoulders and crossed the floor to go into her bedroom, pausing at the entrance, where she turned back to add, "It's early days yet. They want to see me again Friday evening. Mind if I skip our date?"

Vanessa pulled a face and then grinned. "Well, just this once."

"You have any luck?" Rachel called, moving on into her room. Vanessa too was a wannabe actress. In fact they met on the Greyhound bus that brought them to Hollywood along with a number of others who, she guessed, bore similar aspirations.

"Nah, though there's an audition next Monday I might try for. Some sci-fi movie."

"Sounds good." Sci-fi had enjoyed a huge surge of popularity over recent years. "Go for it."

Rachel changed into pants and a loose top and then returned to the main room where she slumped on to the sofa, tucking one leg under her, before turning on the TV. Not that she particularly wanted to watch; the set was often switched on for hours on end, ignored by both.

Vanessa eventually wandered in from the bathroom to plump herself down beside Rachel. Ness was a little older, at twenty-three, and a couple of inches shorter. She was blonde, too, the source of a constant running joke between the two of them. Did blondes really have more fun? Vanessa was certainly ahead on the number of boyfriends, indeed her ability to juggle up to three or four at a time impressed Rachel.

She herself had no one special at the moment. There was Dave, with whom she enjoyed a platonic relationship; no pressures on either side. But that was all. Platonic? She smiled to herself. Now that was something Vanessa could never understand.

Dave was in the movies. He'd managed to find a number of small parts in recent months. Nothing major as yet, but each part larger than the one before.

Ness rested her head on Rachel's shoulder and then sighed before quietly asking, "Do you think we'll *ever* get our big break? Or our small break, even?"

Rachel reached out to give her a brief hug. "Course, Ness." She jumped up and gave a twirl, stretching her arms above her. "Look what they'd be missing."

Vanessa laughed and then, once Rachel sat back down, commented, "I sometimes think it's a complete waste of time." Then she brightened. "Still, there's always porn." And she made lewd expressions, sticking her tongue out and wagging it.

"Oh, Vanessa. You wouldn't really, would you?" Ness didn't answer, so Rachel gave her a dig. "Promise. Promise me you'll never consider porn movies." Still no answer. Another dig. "Nessie!"

Vanessa looked at her and then grinned. "You always fall for it, Rae."

"You pig," Rachel shouted, jumping on Vanessa and threatening to hit her with a cushion, ignoring the laughing cries of "Sorry, sorry!"

CHAPTER 3

The Audition—Tchoueski

Rachel was ready in good time on Friday. She wore a pale-blue cotton blouse teamed with a long, cotton, navy skirt with a pretty, white floral design.

“Good luck,” Vanessa said, giving her a brief hug.

“Thanks, Ness. What are you doing?”

“Joe’s coming round. Might try to get him into bed.”

“Vanessa!” Rachel realised that her voice was accusing. *Heck, I’m beginning to sound like her Mom*, she scolded herself, then added, “I thought you didn’t really like him that much.”

“Oh, it’s early days. I might enjoy breaking him in. Anyway, you better get going, or you’ll be late.” With that Vanessa unceremoniously pushed Rachel out of the door and closed it.

Outside, Rachel shook her head but smiled. Much of what Nessie said was just that, words; she wasn’t really as wild as she liked to make out. But she did have that reckless streak within her, which bothered Rachel a little.

Rachel took a cab to the casting director’s offices, situated above a row of retail outlets off the east end of the Hollywood Boulevard,

paid the driver, and then climbed the two flights of stairs somewhat nervously. An excited nervousness!

She came to a door bearing the sign ‘Tchowski Inc.—Casting Directors’, knocked, and then went inside to find herself in a small reception area. In complete contrast to the dingy hall in which the first audition was held, this place had a smart, modern feel to it and an air of professionalism.

I must be the first to arrive—at least, there’s no one else around. Or am I late? She checked her watch in some concern. *Thank goodness. I’m a couple of minutes early.*

“Ah, Ms Starr.” Rachel jumped. She didn’t notice an office door to her right opening or the casting director standing in the doorway. He was much bigger than she remembered, but of course he was sitting at the earlier audition.

“Please. Come on through.”

“Hello, Mr Tchowski.” Rachel recovered her composure and went into his office. No one else was there either. “Am I early? The others not here yet?”

“Others?” her companion echoed as he closed the door, momentarily turning his back to her. “What others?”

“I thought you were seeing all of those on the shortlist.”

“Ah, that’s correct. But one at a time, Ms Starr, one at a time. There are just three of you. You’re the first. I’m seeing the others next week.”

“Oh. Right.” This was not what Rachel was expecting. “Right,” she repeated, quieter.

Tchowski sat himself behind a large mahogany desk, facing a wall upon which was mounted a long horizontal mirror, with what

appeared to be a cupboard door to the right of that. He beckoned Rachel to stand beside him. He was perspiring a little. Odd. The room didn't feel particularly warm.

Rachel was beginning to feel nervous again. Not the excited nervousness she experienced earlier, but a sixth sense was warning her that something was wrong.

She was standing to one side of his chair when he reached out to put his arm around her thighs, drawing her closer. She stiffened.

“Relax, my dear, relax. I know how much you youngsters want to break into the movies, but it's a tough business, you know, real tough.” He removed his arm. “I'm sure I can get you a small part in this new movie, but it would be helpful if you could give me a little encouragement.” Rachel didn't need to ask what he meant but did so anyway.

“Encouragement?” She knew her voice was shaking.

“Why don't you sit here and we can discuss it, my dear?” Tchoweski indicated his lap.

In an instant, Rachel spun away toward the door. She made no attempt to hide her anger and contempt despite the fear building inside. “I can assure you, Mr Tchoweski, I'm not that desperate to break into the movies as you put it. I'm sorry to have wasted your time and even sorrier that you've wasted mine. Goodbye.” And she turned the handle.

The door was locked.



BlueInk Reviews describe *Connecting Obsessions* as . . .

A shrewdly constructed page-turner,
A highly entertaining, emotionally compelling read.

CONNECTING OBSESSIONS is a sci-fi mystery, and the story of a romance that is far from ordinary.

How far would you go to save the woman you love? Beyond the boundaries of established science? Okay, but what if you had never actually met her?

As a teenager, Richard Stevenson stumbles across a newspaper cutting of a young actress taken at a Gala dinner in Los Angeles in 2014, and is intrigued by the haunted expression on her face. Subsequent research into her life reveals that she killed herself in 2017 following an assault that took place a few years before the gala. This triggers an obsession with the girl.

Around that time, Richard is also growing increasingly frustrated. His studies to expand upon the theories of General Relativity and Quantum Physics, especially those concerning the flow of time and space, are ignored by all his contemporaries.

Rachel Starr is a wannabe actress. She has been in Hollywood for two years, but she is not alone. There are hundreds like her, and many face dangers from those who would entice them into the world of pornography, prostitution, or simply into bed.

One day, Rachel meets Paul Lander, an enigmatic character seemingly possessing an intimate knowledge of what the future holds for her – and, indeed, the rest of us – unless he can use his three obsessions to intercede on her behalf.

Three *connecting* obsessions