

## A Touch of Deceit A Paradisi Chronicles Story

By David Bruns

I had to admit, there was something almost romantic about being called in the middle of the night to investigate a crime scene. *Alleged* crime scene, I reminded myself.

We raced through amber pools of light cast by the street lamps, the avenues of New Hong Kong deserted in the chilly stillness of a sleeping city. Overhead Caeruleum, the massive blue moon of New Eden, rode high in the cloudless sky, trailed by her much smaller, and darker child, Acerba. Kuttner, her heavy gray locks obscuring her face, hunched over the steering wheel half asleep.

“You want me to drive, Les?” I asked.

Her grunted reply could be roughly translated as, “Shut up, rookie.” I’d only been a trainee at the New Eden Special Investigations Bureau for a little more than three weeks, but in that time most of Agent Leslie Kuttner’s replies to me had been along the lines of, “something-something, rookie.”

The road ahead split. The left hand fork dipped down towards the river, an area known as the Bottoms to the locals. A pall of light smoke hung in the moonlight like a veil, the last vestiges of the recent riots. We flashed by a concrete wall and I caught a glimpse of bright graffiti: *Full Rights for Originals!*

I looked the other way.

We took the road curving up and to the right, our car picking up speed on the banked turn. Away from the Bottoms, toward the Heights, where the rich people lived. I couldn’t help myself. I turned to Kuttner again. “The vic is a Founder?”

Les shifted in her seat, but she didn’t tell me to shut up. “The *victim* is a member of a Founding Family, yes. Keep your pants on, rookie, we’re investigating a suicide. All the other agents are involved in the riots, so they called us. This is open and shut, you got it? Seen, but not heard, that’s your job.”

I let the weight of the information push me back in my seat. A Descendant committing suicide? I’d grown up in a Founder household and they had no reason to want to leave this life any sooner than absolutely necessary.

“Can I ask who it is?” I knew I was pushing my luck, but there had to be a reason why they brought me.

“Regis Chandler.”

“Whoa.” Regis Chandler, member of the Council, noted philanthropist, supporter of the rights of Originals, was dead? I thought about the pall of smoke over the Bottoms—this news would go over like alcohol on a bonfire.

“Whoa is right,” Kuttner grunted. “Don’t embarrass me, kid.”

We swept past the security post for the Chandler estate, the guards—both Ddaeran originals, I noticed—giving us a sharp salute as we flew by. The front entrance of the main house opened onto a cobblestone courtyard at the end of a long, curved driveway. Two servants hurried down to open our doors before Les had even stopped the vehicle. I caught the older Ddaeran’s gaze as I exited the car and gave him a slight nod. “This way, sir,” was all he said.

I would have liked to pause a moment to admire the magnificent foyer, but we were

hustled up the wide wooden steps, each one half a carved tree trunk. In my mind, I compared this house to the one I'd grown up in a few miles to the north. The Thorndike enclave was more like a bunker, utilitarian, modern, all steel and concrete. The Chandler house was warm, full of life...more like a home.

"I've placed all of the house staff in the living room so you can speak to them," the older servant said to Les, "and the missus has the family in the library."

Les grunted.

Regis Chandler in death looked exactly like he did in the newsfeeds, except here he was naked. His mane of gray hair was tousled in a way that looked carefree and he even had a hint of smile gracing his thin lips. His bare arms and chest were well-muscled for a man in his eighties, and a snow-white bedsheet bisected his navel. On his left hand, he wore only a plain platinum wedding band and a large, antique watch adorned his left wrist.

The only thing out of the place was the needle hanging from the crook of his right elbow.

"No one's touched the body?" Les asked.

"No one has touched my husband's body," said a voice from the doorway.

Elena Chandler glided into the room, her gray silk robe catching the light in all the right places. She walked with the self-assurance of a woman whose beauty had opened doors of privilege all her life. Tossing a stray strand of raven black hair over her shoulder, she extended a hand to Les.

"Agent Leslie Kuttner, ma'am. I'm sorry for your loss."

The widow Chandler swung her still-extended arm toward me. I took her fingers in my gloved hand, and her lips tightened when she met my gaze. The Founders always flinched when they saw the tell-tale green eyes of my Ddaeran mother.

"Gideon Thorndike," I said. "NESI trainee."

"Thorndike..." Elena Chandler was a Thorndike by birth. I could almost hear the gears turning in her head as she tried to figure out how we were related. I decided to save her the trouble.

"My father is Alistair Thorndike."

"Uncle Alistair has a bastard. I never knew." She caught the edge of her lip with a set of perfect white teeth. "And your mother?"

"Dead."

Les cleared her throat, but Elena ignored her. She nodded at my gloved hands. "And you have...powers?"

I put my hands behind my back. "I inherited some extrasensory abilities from my mother, yes."

The truth was more complicated. My mother died when I was three and I went to live with my father. Correction: I went to live in my father's house, not with him. I was raised mostly by the Ddaeran house staff. My father made an effort to visit me at least once a week, so I guess I should be thankful for that. By law, as a half-Ddaeran bastard, I could have ended up on the streets. Instead, I was caught between two cultures: too much a Descendant for the Ddaeran originals and too native for the Founders.

Let's just say I didn't have a lot of friends growing up.

My powers arrived when I was thirteen. Mind-touch, the ability to read memories through physical contact. Most Ddaerans have some level of natural psychic ability, they can usually read—or at least sense—thoughts passing through the mind of a companion. But the ability to read memories was beyond rare, even for Ddaerans, and it freaked everyone out, including me.

After a few incidents, they made me wear gloves all the time as a prophylactic measure.

Les cleared her throat again and Elena jumped.

“Yes, of course, Agent. Finish your investigation, but hurry, please. I’d like to have my husband’s body out of here by dawn.”

Les turned on the recording setting of her DOT device and started narrating a description of the crime scene. She handed me the needle, then the wrist watch, and I slid them into an evidence bag. The wedding band wouldn’t come off. She frowned when she checked the DOT slot behind Chandler’s right ear and found it empty. Most people left their chip inserted all the time, even while sleeping. It was very unusual for a councilman to be unconnected.

Les turned Chandler’s head to expose his left side. I saw her step back, and her head twitched as she stopped the recording. “Shut the door and come over here, rookie.”

She stood in front of the body, blocking my view. “What color lipstick was Mrs. Chandler wearing?” she asked.

Elena’s lipstick had been dark, a few shades darker than her light brown skin. “Um, mocha, maybe? Brownish and darker, why?”

She stepped away and pointed to Chandler’s exposed neck.

Behind the point of his jaw was a splash of red, partially wiped away. Lipstick. Definitely not Elena’s color.

“Rookie?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you do that mind-vooodoo stuff on a dead body?”

I shrugged. I honestly had no idea.

“I want you to try. Right now.”

I could hear my father’s voice in the back of my head. “These subjective senses have no place in modern police work. We deal in facts, Gideon, not emotions.”

I peeled off my gloves. The air felt cold on my naked fingertips as I slid my hand beneath Regis Chandler’s head. There was still warmth in his flesh as I settled my other hand on his forehead. Behind me, Les’ breath labored away.

With my eyes closed, I steadied my breathing and let my consciousness sink into Chandler’s being.

A normal mind-touch experience is like a river of images. You let yourself into the current, swim with the flow for awhile, then steer gently toward your destination.

With Regis, I might as well have thrust my hands into a bloody meat grinder. I was dragged down into a vortex of nothingness, a sucking, emotionless black hole—and it was taking me with it. My breath was vacuumed out of my chest and explosions of color danced before my eyes. I felt my body crumpling downward toward Regis...

Someone peeled my eyelid back and Les’ moon face loomed over me. “Rookie? You okay?” Her morning breath was foul.

I nodded and struggled up to a sitting position. My mouth tasted like I had thrown up.

“Well?” Les said.

Using one of the carved bedposts to hoist myself up to a standing position, I hung on until the room stopped spinning. “His memory was wiped. Completely drained.”

Les took a little longer getting to her feet. She blew out a long breath.

“Rookie, we’ve got ourselves a murder.”