

Almost Murder

by Michael P Calligaro

David Panning stared out one of the chartered jet's little windows. Women and men in tasteful, yet scanty clothing greeted the island's visitors as they deplaned. Behind the welcoming committee, lush vegetation and wild flowers covered the land surrounding San Sangre Island's dormant volcano. Even inside the plane, David could feel the South Pacific weather--seventy degrees with a slight offshore breeze blowing through.

He grabbed his carryon and followed the line of rich tourists up the isle. "Seems a perfect day for a homicide," he muttered. A fat woman in a diamond necklace fixed him with an angry glare. "Oh, yeah, we're not supposed to talk about it." Weren't supposed to talk about it, no. But David couldn't get his mind off of it. Strange and illicit thoughts had plagued him since he started his preliminary research for this story. He did his best to keep these thoughts buried deep within him, where they could do no harm. Unfortunately, he was too shallow a person to lose thoughts in. For the most part, he really only covered them with a sarcastic wit and snide comments.

It came to the woman's turn to take the stairs. She turned a cold shoulder to David and painted on a radiant smile for the island's inhabitants. David made a face at her retreating back. After the Senator Tomconsen story, he'd sworn never to work with rich people again. But here he was, among the worst of them. "You're the youngest journalist ever to get a Pulitzer," his editor had pleaded, "we need the best for this one." But the depths to which he had been forced to sink to get Tomconsen had shown him just how much he hated this line of work. Or was that how much he hated himself for possessing the ability to sink to such depths? Why couldn't there be a vicious land war going on somewhere he could cover? Anything but this.

Unlike the rich woman, David left his face a stolid neutral when his turn at the steps arrived. Among the silk shirts and designer jeans of the other passengers, his cotton polo, comfortable slacks, and docksiders looked out of place. He didn't care. No one would mistake him for one of these people, and that suited him just fine. Besides, he couldn't imagine spending extra for his clothes just to get a fancy label. His jeans said "Levi," and his shirt came from some unknown sweatshop in Hong Kong. He climbed down the stairs where a woman whose breasts seemed intent on escaping their much too minimal confinement placed a lei around his neck. She smiled as she leaned forward suggestively, and he did his best to ignore her. The guests trudged off across the beach toward the check-in area. David dutifully followed. A woman in scant clothing stretched to its limits and an Adonis-like, sculpted man in speedos greeted the guests from behind the counter. They gave David a key, pointed him to his room, and assured him his bags would be along soon.

The hotel sat nestled into the base of the volcano. David stopped at his room's patio and surveyed the beach beyond. Men and women in varying degrees of undress frolicked in the water while others lay out in the intense sun. "Pena's got a nice little island here," he muttered to himself. He held his key up to the lock and the door opened silently.

The room was larger than his apartment back in New York. The bathroom contained a Jacuzzi large enough to hold twenty people. David considered warming up in the morning by doing laps in it. The rest of the suite was equally impressive. He hadn't realized they made beds larger than King size. And he'd been to movie theaters with smaller screens than the room's TV.

A sliding glass door lead back out to the patio and the beach beyond. With a touch of a button thick shades slid shut, obscuring the windows and leaving him in privacy. No windows adorned the opposite wall, as that side of the hotel had been built into the base of the volcano. Colorful displays showing art and other scenes covered the wall and David found he could set them to his liking--anything from still life flowers to tasteless eroticism. He paused on the triple x scenes, then set the displays to empty white. The wall's only other feature was a nondescript door with a simple lock and no peephole. He knew what this was for but opened it anyway. A narrow, well lit tunnel lead down.

"So the guests can do their dirty business without the others knowing. How convenient."

Someone knocked on the outside door, and David hastily shut the inner one. He opened the shades to find the bellhop waiting for him with his bags.

"Mr. Panning, Mr. Pena sends his greetings." The boy hung his luggage in the closet. "I trust that everything is to your satisfaction?"

David shrugged. "Yeah, sure." He started fishing around in his pockets for a tip, but the bellboy held up a hand.

"That will not be necessary, sir. We are amply rewarded for working here." David shrugged again. "Now, please relax for a few hours. Mr. Pena would like to meet with you after dinner." With a nod, the bellboy left.

He closed the shades again and sat down on the edge of the bed. He gave the little inner door a furtive glance and quickly looked away. This whole air of disgust he'd wrapped around himself would have been much more convincing if he wasn't so looking forward to what waited behind that door.

* * *

David paced back and forth across his room, the distance being such that this gave him a decent workout. Dinner had been as extravagant as every other aspect of the island, but he had hardly noticed it. He had not flown all the way down here to play in the sand with beautiful women or to sip champagne in an Olympic sized Jacuzzi. His paper was paying an outrageous sum of money so he could get a story about the place, and he wanted to get on that story. But Pena was taking his own sweet time about starting their meeting.

The screens on the far wall switched to the face of a swarthy man. "Mr. Panning, how nice to meet you." The man had no accent whatsoever.

David scowled at the face on the screens. "Meet me? This is hardly a meeting, Pena."

The man laughed. "How right you are. Won't you come join me?" The door opened. "Follow the tunnel and turn left at the T."

After considering for a moment, David nodded and complied. He found Erik Pena in a room full of

monitors, speakers, and controls. David hardly had time to notice what the monitors displayed before Pena jumped to his feet and pumped his hand.

"Now we are met, Mr. Panning. So, how do you like my little island?"

David pulled back and Pena released him. "It's got all the amenities of the most expensive resort in the world."

"But *this* is the most expensive resort in the world!"

"Exactly."

Pena's smile faltered as he realized David's sarcasm. "I am pleased that you approve."

"But still," David continued, "no one is here for the nude beaches or the surround-sound entertainment systems."

"No they are not. My guests are here for what only I provide. That!" He pointed to the main screen. It showed two men in what appeared to be a back alley at night. The better dressed man punched the other repeatedly in the gut, then picked up a pipe and started to smash his head. The scene became exceedingly gory and Pena flipped it off.

"So, it's true. You really do let your guests kill people."

Pena smiled at him. "Hardly, Mr. Panning. While I am my own country and can do anything I wish here, I doubt the international community would let me get away with killing large numbers of people against their will. No, I give my guests the illusion of killing people. All I really do is provide interesting fantasy settings and extremely lifelike androids. What you just saw was end of the popular 'Normal Guy Beats the Crap Out of a Mugger' scenario."

David continued to stare at the blank screen. "Ah, Mr. Panning, I see that you do not believe me. Please, follow." He led David to a room full of body parts. This would have been gruesome if it weren't for the wires hanging out of most of them and the total lack of blood or decaying stench.

David pointed to one of the heads on a shelf. "Come now, Pena. That doesn't look very realistic."

"I think I'll let Anson defend that part's honor, Mr. Panning." He pointed across the room to a man sitting behind a desk doing paperwork.

On hearing his name, Anson looked up and smiled at David. "Disembodied heads never look real. Then again, neither do most human corpses. Most of what makes something look lifelike is the animation."

David frowned. "I'll believe that when I see it."

Anson nodded. "Would you like me to animate the head for you, then?"

"Sure, hit me with your best shot."

Pena rest a hand on his shoulder. "I have a better idea. Why don't you walk behind Anson's desk and see what he is working on?"

On wandering behind the desk, David's eyes grew wide. Instead of skin and muscles, Anson's "back" was all servomotors and wires.

Anson's head spun around 180 degrees and looked down at its back. "And here you probably thought I was an engineer. I'm really just an engine." It laughed.

David's frown deepened. "Physically, that's a great demo. But its humor programming could use some work."

Pena laughed. "Convinced?"

Nodding, David returned to Pena's side. "So, do you have a gunslinger? I'm a pretty good shot."

Clucking disapprovingly, Pena responded, "No, Mr. Panning. This is not Westworld. Here you kill the androids, not the other way around."

"Oh I'm sure nothing like that could ever happen here. But still, aren't you playing to the depravity of rich people?"

Pena walked away and David followed. "My guests are not depraved, Mr. Panning. They are normal human beings. Not that long ago, we used to run through jungles and kill our food with our bare hands. A little later, we slaughtered each other by the thousands with sharp weapons. Society now frowns on these activities."

They arrived in a plush room with huge overstuffed couches. Pena flopped down on one and stretched out. David sat on the edge of a chair. "These changes in society have come about in the last few centuries," Pena continued, "but our bodies and our genes do not adapt so quickly. We still feel destructive, homicidal impulses, that we are forced to crush down inside us."

David eyed him uncertainly, but said nothing. Pena continued, "Surely, Mr. Panning, you have wanted to wring a coworker's neck before? Or maybe you just wanted to take a woman, violently have your way with her, then throw her away." This struck home, but David tried not to let it show. Impulses like these were just that, impulses. He couldn't control them, nor could anyone. And it's not like he ever even considered acting on them. They just popped into his head and he let them go.

He must not have hid his thoughts effectively, for Pena smiled triumphantly. "Of course you have. All humans have these impulses. What I do is allow people to act on them without hurting anyone. It is quite liberating."

David coughed uncomfortably. "I'll bet."

"Besides, Mr. Panning, the 'depravity' that we appeal to is the same one makers of violent movies and video games count on. People watch those movies, play those games, and come here, all for the same reasons."

David nodded, frowning. "So, why am I here?"

Pena stared at him in confusion. "Your newspaper paid the full price for your stay. Why would I turn you away?"

"Of course. You're a businessman. But I'm sure you don't give every guest a personal tour of the

facilities."

"That is true. I am hoping that you will write an article about the island."

"Because of the free advertising?"

Pena nodded.

"But what if I write a negative story?"

Now he smiled. "Mr. Panning, there is no such thing as 'bad publicity.' Typically a protest in front of a company only increases that company's exposure and makes more people utilize its services. If I could bribe you to go back to New York and tell everyone that we're sick and depraved here, I would. I'd be booked up through next year."

David had seen this phenomenon enough times to know Pena was correct. "Then maybe I won't write any story."

"I doubt that. Your employer will want some return on his investment."

Right again. David stood up. "Well, I've seen enough to write it. I'll be leaving now"

Pena spun his legs around and sat up. He leaned forward intently. "I doubt that as well. You have paid the full price of admission. Why don't you sample all that the resort has to offer?" He stood and strode purposefully to David. "Aren't you wondering what it would be like to kill someone? Wouldn't you like to act on one of your 'bad' impulses, just once? Wouldn't you like to feel alive, all the way down to your genes?"

David did want all those things. That's what made him so nervous. "No, I really don't think so."

Pena put an arm around his shoulders and led him into the next room. "I think you do. You can admit it. It's not something to be ashamed of. You may be a socialized animal, but you're still an animal. We all are."

The room contained a large display screen and more couches. The image on the monitor was one of a striking woman in tattered clothes. She paced inside a cell, her face transfixed in fear. The room looked just like an ancient dungeon, from the carved stone walls to the sputtering torches to the numerous and varied torture implements. A guard in a loincloth stood at attention outside the cell. A key hung on a leather strap around his neck.

"This is one of our most popular scenarios among the men. The woman in there has been taken prisoner and thrown into a dungeon. She has not yet been touched, but she sees the torture devices and knows what is coming. You race in and kill the guard. Then, when you free her, she jumps into your arms, thinking you are her savior. You can then have your way with her. Do whatever you want. Rape her repeatedly, torture her, strangle her when you are satiated. You get to be both the valiant hero and the evil villain. Your inhibitions will fall away and you will feel truly *alive* for the first time in your life. Try it. You can stop if you don't like it."

David's heart beat furiously. He stared at the smooth curves of the woman's hips and made his decision. "You won't watch, will you?"

"We often make recordings for our guests. But if you would like, I will turn off all the cameras in that room."

"You do that."

* * *

David crawled along the base of the dungeon wall, hiding in the darkness afforded by the poorly illuminating torches. He had picked up a sword on the other side of the room and was now inching his way to the guard. The man had not seen him yet.

He ran out of cover a good fifteen feet from the guard. What now? Almost as if on cue (it probably was), the guard turned around to leer at and taunt the prisoner. "Maybe I'll come in there and do you before they get here," he chided. "No one will have to know." The script was horrendous, but the robotic acting was actually quite good. The fear on the woman's face became terror and she backed into the rear corner of the cell. David leapt up, sprinted to the guard and ran him through with his sword.

The man coughed and looked up at him with pain-filled eyes. A sense of power and strength came over David. He yanked his sword out of the evil man's back and watched him fall to his knees. "I'll take that key." He drew his sword up, and, just like he'd seen countless times on TV, swung it down on the guard's neck. The head rolled away and the torso fell over, pouring out blood. The feeling of power grew stronger as he bent down and grabbed the key.

Then a slight pang of doubt struck. For a panicked moment, he wondered if the guard really had been an android. What if Pena had lied to him? He peered into the torso's neck and, with much relief, found metal beneath the blood. He dropped his sword and opened the cell door. The woman leapt into his arms and held him tight. "Oh, thank you," she sobbed. "I've been so scared. I don't even know why I'm here."

David returned the hug and considered just taking her out of the dungeon and letting her go. He had played the rescuing hero and it had felt exhilarating. Maybe that was enough. But then he noticed the tight muscles in her backside and he became aware of her warm body clinging to his. The feel of her breasts crushing against his chest made his decision for him.

He brought her over to the nearest table and threw her on it. She fought back, but he was far stronger and got her tied down. There was nothing wrong with her scream programming.

* * *

David slept fretfully that night and spent the next day in a daze. He had done things to that girl, that android (he had to keep reminding himself of this), that had come from some very dark area within him. Had exploring that part of himself exorcised it or brought it closer to the surface? He hoped for the former, but feared it was the latter. The look in her eyes as he strangled her last bit of life away might haunt him forever. No, it was just good programming. He had to remember that.

But it was not her screaming that really unsettled him. It was his intense enjoyment at causing her to scream. He reveled in it. As he was beating and choking her he started to imagine she was that damn reporter from the Times, Jane Bischoff. After it was all done, he'd had one terrifying thought that made him rush back to his room and take a long shower. He'd wondered if Pena could make an android that looked just like Jane.

The island was having a late-night party and most of the guests were out dancing on the beach. David

had been wandering around with a drink in his hand, not paying much attention to anyone. He did notice that there were others acting like him. It somehow felt good to see others reacting badly to their virtual homicides.

A woman dressed in a medieval peasant's clothes burst onto the beach screaming, "help me!" Immediately thereafter, a big guy in a uniform grabbed her and carried her away kicking and screaming. People laughed and resumed their partying. David heard one say, "That Erik Pena, always kidding around."

So Pena had programmed one of his androids to race onto the beach and scream. Why? David's journalistic impulses kicking in, he discretely followed the guard and android. They entered the underground through a service entrance and David slipped in behind them. The android's screams hid any sounds he might have made.

The guard walked purposefully to a long corridor full of identical looking doors. He stopped at one of them and held his hand to a plate. The door slid up and he tossed the android through. The door slid back down, taking her screams with it. The guard then ambled off down the corridor whistling to himself. Pena kept his androids activated and locked up in cells? Wasn't that taking the realism thing a bit far? Feeling sick to his stomach, David snuck out.

* * *

The next morning he told Pena that he wanted to get back and write his story.
"You realize that I can not offer a refund?"

"That's okay, I got my money's worth."

The experience on the island had affected him greatly and he wrote some of his best prose. His editor loved the piece. David just tried to put it out of his memory. He never mentioned the hallway full of doors.

While walking down the street the next day, a van pulled up alongside him. Two guys jumped out and one hit him over the head.

* * *

He awoke in a small room containing nothing more than a cot and a door. Neither the door nor the walls had any windows nor any markings to reveal where he was. That didn't matter; he knew where he was. He was not at all surprised when the door slid up and Erik Pena walked in.

"Ah, Mr. Panning. So good to see you again."

"The feeling is not mutual."

"No, I suppose it is not. Still, I am pleased to have you back."

David sat up in his cot. "Why am I here this time, Pena? I didn't tell your secret to anyone."

"I know that. But it was gnawing at you and you would have told someone eventually."

"You're afraid that the leaders of the developed countries will find out what you do down here and put

an end to it?"

Pena laughed hysterically. "That is very funny. They already know. In fact, your Senators are some of my best customers. 'Hunt and Kill the Reporter' is my absolutely most popular scenario."

David tried not to dwell on that. "So, why do you care if I tell anyone?"

"Because if the general public got wind of this they would scream. Personally, I think they would really be complaining that we are too expensive for their use, but still, they would scream. Then my wonderful customers would have to take steps to put an end to San Sangre Island. None of us wants that."

"That's sick, but not surprising. And I'm sure the reason you started using real people is equally unsurprising."

Pena nodded. "Do you know how expensive androids are? We had a few unfortunate people stumble across us and we decided to use them in a scenario. But the guest figured it out. He paid us double to let him come back and do it again."

"And I suppose that's my fate?"

"Very good, Mr. Panning. There is a certain ex-Senator who is dying to try out the reporter scenario with live bait--you especially."

"So what'll you do, drug me up so he's sure to win?"

"No, he wants it to be even."

"Oh, and I suppose that if I beat him you'll let me go."

Pena frowned. "Why would I do that?" The door slid down behind him.

* * *

"This will be a fair fight. You and your opponent will enter the chamber on opposite ends and will have equal chances of finding good weapons."

David tried to bore his eyes through the guard's skull. "How does it feel to sentence people to death?"

He ignored David's glare and shrugged. "I do penance all the way to the bank."

A door slid up and the guard shoved David through. He tripped and skinned his elbow and knees on rough hewn rock. Swearing, he quickly took in his surroundings. This chamber was much larger than the one he had used with the woman. It was also far less refined. The series of caves and tunnels appeared natural, not blasted out by Pena's men. Faint mine lights hung overhead, casting a gloomy glow about the place and providing hardly any illumination.

He heard a door open far to his right, but couldn't see it. A voice called out. "You went too far, Panning. You cost me my election. Now I'm going to kill you for it." Definitely Tomconsen. The son of a bitch had been raping his aides and threatening to have them thrown in jail if they told anyone. Though David did not relish putting his life on the line, he almost enjoyed the opportunity to go another round with this waste of a human being.

He scanned around and found a piece of thick twine hanging by the sealed door. He shoved it into a pocket and moved off to the left, away from Tomconsen's voice. He quickly found an old rusty knife and a lead pipe. The knife, he slid into his back pocket; the pipe, he carried. There was no sign of a really useful weapon, like a gun, though. Perhaps Pena feared for his ability to control David if he stocked the caves with real weapons.

A pair of nunchaku, two butterfly knives, and a lead ball later, David gave up on the thought of finding a gun. He focused instead on a strategy for surviving the encounter. He found a comparatively open area with a large boulder and a high ceiling. It took some skill to climb the boulder with his hands and pockets full of weapons, but from the top he could survey a decent area of the caverns in relative safety. If Tomconsen wanted him, he'd have to come and get him.

David's heart beat like he was on mile twenty-one of a marathon. He jumped at every sound, but none of the shadows turned into a crazed opponent bent on killing him. An eternity passed, then another. David considered bringing on his fate more quickly by calling out. Tomconsen had never been very bright and David worried he'd die of starvation before the idiot found him. However, before his impatience got the better of him, a shadow moved.

Holding his breath to keep from moving, David stared at the shadow and watched it become a man in camouflage with grease smeared over his face. What was that he held in his hands? David cursed inwardly. The ex-Senator was carrying a very large handgun. He debated what to do. He had not been seen yet, but his spot atop the boulder was only strategic if his opponent had no long distance weapons. That not being the case, David was in serious trouble.

Tomconsen looked right and left across the cavern, then stepped softly inside. He stared at the boulder, then his eyes ran up its side. David jumped up and threw his pipe. Simultaneously, Tomconsen aimed and fired. The bullet whizzed past David's ear. He jumped backward and slid down the boulder, further scraping his legs and arms. With considerable lack of grace, he hit the ground hard and fell onto his behind. This sent jolts of pain up his spine. The ex-Senator screamed out in pain.

I can't believe I hit him with the pipe, David thought.

Two more shots rang out and a Tomconsen called after them. "You're dead, Panning! I figured Erik wouldn't provide me with a gun, so I brought my own. I know you don't have one. You don't have a chance."

David searched around in desperation. He was up against a wall with no way out of the immediate cave that didn't pass in front of Tomconsen. The wall had a single outcropping that he could hide behind, but which side should he use? It would only hide him if Tomconsen came around the opposite side of the boulder. He could try throwing a knife to one side and hope Tomconsen would move toward the sound, but chose against it. Tomconsen might realize what he'd done and move in the opposite direction instead. No, he'd just have to pick one side and pray for the best.

But which one? David, with his reporter's eye for detail, had noticed that Tomconsen held the gun in his left hand. That meant that if he had even half a brain, a questionable supposition, he'd round the boulder to the left, giving him a better angle. David choose to wait behind the right side of the outcropping.

It felt like a full eternity passed. Finally a sound behind the outcropping told David he had made the right choice. Another eternity went by and the ex-Senator limped past him. David slid the twine around his opponent's neck and squeezed. Tomconsen tried to point the gun behind him, but David crouched down

and stayed too close. The gun went off next to his head, leaving a loud ringing in his ear and burning his cheek. The stone behind him chipped off and blasted into his back, but did not penetrate. Still trying to get the gun pointed directly at David, the bastard died sputtering.

David gave the limp body one final shake, then dropped it to the stone floor. Did the exhilaration he felt surpass that of killing the woman? This was in self defense and the world was probably better off without a living Tomconsen in it.

But, much to David's shame, he had enjoyed killing the woman more.

Sickened, he grabbed the gun and raced toward the door he knew. It slid open and the guard stuck a head in cautiously. David slid to a stop, shot him, and then dove through the entrance as the door began to slide down. He shot at some other guy running down the hallway but missed. He then ran over the guard's dead body and back to the corridor of cells. Without so much as a pause for consideration, he passed the cells and raced to the service door. The door was in sight before the guilt for his last action caught up with him. What about all the others? Shouldn't he try to free them? The full realization of his selfish depravity washed over but did not really surprise him. He considered his own hide to be worth far more than those of the all the others. Wasting the time to free them would likely to get him killed, he reminded himself. These rationalizations allowed him to continue to the door, but didn't make him feel any better.

Making no attempt to conceal the gun in his hand, he ran along the beach, causing guests to scurry out of his way. At the front desk he shoved the gun in the receptionist's face and screamed, "Lie down!" She did. He furiously dialed his editor's emergency number on the phone. It rang twice then picked up.

"This had better be good."

"Frank? It's David! I've got one Hell of a story for you, but I might not live to tell it. They kidnapped me and I'm on San Sangre Island. Get me out of here, quick!" A guard with an uzi burst through the door and David shot him before he could heft his gun. The girl screamed. He yelled into the receiver, "Make that double-time!" and slammed it on the hook.

David leapt over the desk, grabbed the guard's gun, and dashed off into the tropical jungle. David's bloodlust begged him to set up traps and kill as many of the guards as he could. But reality and cowardice keep this from happening. This wasn't a movie and he wasn't a buffed out, special forces Vietnam vet. Instead he found a good place to hide and stayed there. Unfortunately, this left him little to do but worry and reflect on what San Sangre had taught him about himself. Neither activity proved to be much fun.

A few hours later, he heard a plane fly overhead. He carefully looked in all directions for guards, then ran toward the main dock. He'd been wondering who Frank would send. The National Guard? The Marines? That Vietnam vet he'd almost pretended to be? But Frank was much smarter than this. The seaplane floated up to a dock and two camera crews and a tech with a satellite uplink jumped out. David fired a burst from the uzi into the air and the cameras turned to him. He beamed and sauntered out toward the plane. Pena stood in the cabana snarling.

David tossed the gun in Pena's direction, waved and said, "I was a lovely day for a murder, Pena. Thanks for the trip." He got on the plane with the reporters shooting questions at him rapid fire. "Please," he said, "get us away from here safely first. Then I'll do your interviews."

The sharks nodded and he slouched down into a chair. Something bit into his back. What was that? Oh,

Tomconsen's gun. Instinctually he shifted his body so as to hide the bulge under his shirt. Maybe it was his subconscious that made him conveniently forget to leave the gun on the island. But, now that it had been done, another other part of him refused to give it up.

David sat back and thought about Jane Bischoff. A smile crept across his face.

The End

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