

TALES OF TROUBLE

"Episode 1: The Dead Got It Good"

By

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ACT ONE

FADE IN:

INT. HALLWAY - LATE AFTERNOON

Jockey Full of Bourbon by Tom Waits blares over a low shot down a long grungy hallway. Suddenly crimson stiletto heels walk over us. We follow them low down the hallway, tap-tap of a runway walk, foot across foot. Sparks fly when the heels touch down.

MAX (V.O.)

I knew she was no good. It was written all over her body. You couldn't miss it...if you knew how to read.

The shoes stop abruptly, a cigarette butt lands at the toe, the foot smushes it into the floor. Pure sex in a simple twist of the ankle.

MAX (V.O.)

I knew it, but I played it dumb anyway. Dumb as a stump. That was me and the lousy script that was my life.

Shoes continue down the hall, stop as a silvery hand with redred nails reaches down and adjusts the ankle strap. All dance, coy gesture. An erotic prelude though no one is looking.

MAX (V.O.)

What the hell...I was at that point, you know? Ready, willing, and able to play the patsy for some recelled blonde with a nip and tuck waist.

Shoes finally stop before a closed door. It opens. We rise behind the figure and see the full effect...impossibly shapely body in a tight dress, long lush hair, a cascade down the back.

MAX (V.O.)

Yeah I was falling down dumb the moment I heard those Steelettos, some kind of erotic Morse code. But when I finally saw her, it wasn't just my cochlea that perked up.

Music fades as we jump inside to behind MAX sitting at a desk in a typical private eye's office from a 40s movie. A frosted door across from him has backwards writing on it. On the other side, her shapely shadow moves languidly.

MAX (V.O.)

She put her coat on the hook.
Neomink I figured, from the hang of
it, which meant she was loaded.
They didn't kill minks anymore,
they just sucked out their
chromosomes and sold them by the
ounce.

Max puts a glass down on the desk and leans forward, laser focus on her shimmering shadow on the glass of the door. With his finger, he outlines her body in the air.

MAX (V.O.)

Her shadow could have been drawn in
sweat. Mine. Renaissance hair, Art
Deco shoulders, Egyptian waist...oh
yeah, I studied art in college...
only it didn't culture me.

She stands still at the door to his office, unmoving. Her waist is tiny, her shoulders wide, her hair billowing. After a long pause, she reaches for the knob.

MAX (V.O.)

Now what? I thought. Hoping for an
invitation? But I was all out of
invites. So I waited for her to
commit, pretending the knob was
mine.

Music swells as the door swings open framing her in all her glory...magnificently female. On the glass of the now open door we read the name "Max Trouble" etched into the surface. She poses like a gift.

MAX (V.O.)

Face of an angel but the body was
satanic. I could sell my soul for
the sin therein. Her dress so tight
I was having chest pains.

Sweeping to the side, we see both of them as she walks towards Max at the desk, all sensuous curves and slinky motion, alluring, dangerous.

MAX (V.O.)
 Of course the body was engineered,
 bioware implants and explants. Her
 airport scan must have looked like
 a stealth bomber. But I didn't
 care...I didn't work at the
 airport.

She stops at the desk, takes out a cigarette, but even this
 is foreplay. She holds it in her hand, bends over, waiting
 for him to light it. The door behind her creaks to a close.

MAX (V.O.)
 I wondered what kind of lubricant
 she was using. I could have used it
 on my hinge.

WOMAN
 (Silky)
 Mr. Trouble

MAX
 Says so on the door, hun.

Cigarette between her fingers, she puts her hands on the
 desktop, balloons her cleavage.

MAX (V.O.)
 I could almost smell my dreams on
 her breath. Dirty dreams.

WOMAN
 You seem distracted.

MAX
 Working on my memoirs.

WOMAN
 You're lucky to have some.

MAX
 You don't?

WOMAN
 I may not live long enough. My name
 is Esmeralda.

MAX (V.O.)
 I didn't believe it but I fell for
 it. The whole caboodle, fake as
 sugar, all mixmashed up by some
 lust engineer.

MAX takes a lighter from his desk, lights her cigarette.

MAX

Sit down. Take my load off. I mean yours.

ESMERALDA

Thank you.

She sits down erotically in a scrubby armchair facing the desk and slowly drags on the cigarette.

MAX (V.O.)

She moved her lips like she was massaging my doubt with her mouth. And believe me, my doubt hadn't been rubbed like that in a long time.

MAX

Make yourself snug. Feel free to cross your legs.

MAX (V.O.)

They were killer legs, the kind killers kill for.

She crosses her legs as Max gets and up and perches on the front of the desk near her.

ESMERALDA

I need your help, Mr. Trouble.

MAX

Zat so?

ESMERALDA

Someone is trying to kill me.

MAX

Hate it when that happens.

Taking a deep breath she manages to pillow her bosom by two bra sizes.

MAX (V.O.)

Pneumatics, I thought. Gotta love them.

ESMERALDA

(Noticing)

You're staring Mr. Trouble.

MAX

Don't get me wrong, I love good engineering.

ESMERALDA

(Pouty)

Please don't joke. I'm so frightened.

MAX

Okay. Talk to me. I'm listening.

ESMERALDA

Someone is trying to kill me.

MAX

Who would that be?

ESMERALDA

My husband!

MAX (V.O.)

Husband! I was hard up and high on hormones but I wondered what kind of creep would want to end a dream like her.

MAX

You gotta have it all wrong. Why would he want to...

Esmeralda wells up.

MAX (V.O.)

Ah...the tears and terror gambit. It worked too. Now all I wanted to do was protect her. She took out a handkerchief and blew a fanfare to the coming drama.

Esmeralda takes out a fancy lace handkerchief, blows.

ESMERALDA

You didn't know him, Mr. Trouble! Alonso was a very powerful man!

MAX

Alonso?

She blows again.

MAX (V.O.)
She honked into the hanky like a
goose. A cooked one.

ESMERALDA
Yes.

MAX
You mean Alonso as in Alonso
Montenegro?

MAX (V.O.)
Her wince said I was right. Not
many Alonso's left but this one was
famous.

ESMERALDA
You've heard of him?

MAX
Sure. A ruthless tycoon type. Made
a fortune in nanotech.

Max pours two drinks from a bottle on his desk.

MAX (V.O.)
Teensy robots that could get under
your skin and give you a damn good
itch. I hated robots and therefore
Alonso too.

MAX
(Handing a glass to her)
You better have a drink.

Esmeralda drinks too fast and chokes.

MAX (V.O.)
She choked as she took it too fast
and all I could think of was some
nice slow mouth-to-mouth.

ESMERALDA
You've got to help me. I'll be dead
in 24 hours if you don't!

MAX
Sure, I'll help you. Maybe. What's
the dope?

ESMERALDA
Alonso was no dope. He always knew
exactly what he was doing.

MAX

Why do you say was all the time? Is he...was?"

Pause as she puts the glass down on the floor, hand shaking.

MAX (V.O.)

Her hand was shaking like a superstring. They're the vibrations that run the world but they were stopping her cold.

ESMERALDA

My husband is dead, Mr. Trouble!

MAX

Run that by me again?

ESMERALDA

Alonso Montenegro died yesterday.

MAX

I didn't hear about it. From what?

ESMERALDA

Same as everybody. From being born.

MAX (V.O.)

Good line, I thought. Have to use that sometime.

MAX

Can you nail that down better?

ESMERALDA

His wife.

MAX

I thought you were his wife.

ESMERALDA

I am. I mean...was.

MAX

So you killed him?

ESMERALDA

I guess so. I suppose I made his life unbearable. He knew I was seeing other men. You see he was quite a bit older than me and...

MAX
I get the picture.

ESMERALDA
Do you? Have you ever been hurt by
love, Mr. Trouble?

MAX
Who hasn't.

MAX (V.O.)
Hurt's my middle name, I offered.
But she wasn't taking. Or something
like that. Fix later.

ESMERALDA
I think it was too much for him
eventually. He died of a heart
attack.

MAX
No one dies of that anymore.

ESMERALDA
Hearts still break, Mr. Trouble, in
spite of cardiogenics.

MAX
Well then I'd say you're pretty
much home free, murderwise.

ESMERALDA
(Gloomy)
You didn't know my husband.

MAX
True, but...

ESMERALDA
He would never, ever let death get
in the way of his plans.

FADE OUT:

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO

FADE IN:

INT: TROUBLE OFFICE - LATE AFTERNOON

Dusk comes in through slits in the blinds, very noir. Max
and Esmeralda in a near-clinch by the desk.

MAX (V.O.)

Dusk. One of those crazy dusks that settle on you like too much brandy.

ESMERALDA

(Pulling back)

Please, you're going too fast.

MAX

Sure, sure, hun.

MAX (V.O.)

Hey, I was used to being played with like a yo-yo. Story of my life.

MAX

(Backing off)

Look, why don't you tell me what this is all about?

ESMERALDA

(Breathy)

Yes, Mr. Trouble. I'll tell you everything. Everything.

But instead she leans forward for a deep kiss.

MAX (V.O.)

Breathless, she reeled me back in like a hooked fish. No, crap metaphor, rewrite later.

MAX

Jesus lady, you sure blow hot and cold.

ESMERALDA

I'm so confused, so desperate! You see Alonso's goon is following me. He's a biogen!

Big BOING on the soundtrack.

MAX

So that's it!

MAX (V.O.)

The dead husband had progged a biogen assassin to do her in. Biogens had no conscience, high-tech zombies programmed to follow instructions.

ESMERALDA

You know what they are! They're high-tech zombies...

MAX

Yeah, I just said that.

ESMERALDA

Then you know there is no way to stop them once they're programmed.

MAX (V.O.)

She was right. The mob used them all the time, the army was in love with them...

MAX

They pretty much run Washington.

ESMERALDA

That's why I have to be so careful. One false move and...

MAX (V.O.)

(Pouring two more drinks)
Perfect, I thought. Because if there was ever one false move...I was it.

MAX

Let me get this straight. Alonso set up his goon to do you in after he died. Is that the gambit?

ESMERALDA

That's right! It's horrible, Mr. Trouble. So horrible.

MAX

And what'd you do to earn this kind of devotion?

ESMERALDA

Nothing! I did nothing.

Esmeralda perches next to him at the desk, skirt falling like a waterfall over perfect legs, teasy curl of hair over her left eye.

Max laughs.

MAX (V.O.)

I had to laugh...she looked about
as innocent as a personal injury
lawyer.

ESMERALDA

What's so funny about personal
injury?

MAX

You read my mind. Okay, so you're
innocent. Just like every bum I
ever nailed. So what do you want me
to do? Guard your body?

ESMERALDA

No, Mr. Trouble. I want you to kill
him first!

Max chokes on the booze.

MAX (V.O.)

I looked at her for a hint of
satire but got back a stare
instead.

MAX

Come again?

ESMERALDA

(Welling up again)

I want you to kill him before he
kills me.

MAX (V.O.)

She welled up again and I handed
her a rag to mop the flood.

MAX

(Handing her the rag)

Nice idea, except for one problem.
I don't do murders.

ESMERALDA

But you must, Mr. Trouble!

MAX

Sorry, honey, I'm allergic to
homicide.

ESMERALDA

But he's not even human. He's a
biogen!

MAX

Even hybrids have rights in this crazy world. Life, liberty...all that other stuff.

MAX (V.O.)

After all, biogens weren't robots. They were real people with a few microchips in the right places.

ESMERALDA

They're murderers!

MAX

They're relentless, mindless, soulless. But flesh and bone, hun. Like a lot of folks I know. They eat, sleep, and watch bad sitcoms.

ESMERALDA

But when they're activated, when the signal comes through...

MAX

True, they're as good as bad zombies. But until they do that, they're just ordinary citizens like you and me.

Esmeralda steps away from him and broods.

MAX (V.O.)

She pulled back and I thought she might call it quits. Not sure how I felt about that. But it was only a windup...

Esmeralda throws herself at him again.

MAX (V.O.)

...and she threw herself at me like a lepton. Or maybe a neutron. Look it up later.

ESMERALDA

(Pressing against him)

Please, Mr. Trouble! You're a detective. You must have a gun.

MAX

(Nodding at his armpit)

Right here, hun. But it's mostly for effect.

ESMERALDA
I'll tell you the truth.

MAX
That would be a start.

ESMERALDA
Alonso found out that I was having
an affair. He knew he was dying, so
he wrote into his will as his final
wish that I be killed for my
indiscretion.

MAX
Tough call.

ESMERALDA
And believe me, his goon will carry
out his wish!

MAX
(Pushing her away)
Sorry, lady. I may be a patsy, but
I'm no fallguy. I avoid biogens.

ESMERALDA
But...

MAX
And even if I killed this goon of
yours, the cops would nail me for
sure. Not to mention the ASPCB.

ESMERALDA
Cruelty to Biogens? How can you
think of that when my life is at
stake?

She stands a few feet away, arms behind her, like a scolded
girl.

MAX
Everyone's life is at stake. So if
you don't mind, I'll take mine
first.

ESMERALDA
But the will would protect you. It
would prove that he tried to kill
me first.

MAX

Call me a cynical paranoid psycho
but I'll bet a man like Alonso
covered that particular track.

ESMERALDA

(Sadly)

All right then, you leave me no
choice.

Swinging her arm around, she is holding a gun, pointing it
right at him.

MAX (V.O.)

I thought she had gotten hold of
herself but it was my gun she
had. I wondered what it would cost
to add the word Patsy to the door.

MAX

(Arms up but wearily)

You're nuts! Crackers, bananas.

ESMERALDA

I may seem hungry to you, Mr.
Trouble, but I assure you I'm
desperate enough to use this.

MAX

What are you going to do, shoot me?

ESMERALDA

Not at all, Mr. Trouble. I'm going
to let my lover do that.

MAX

Nice sense of drama you got.

ESMERALDA

(Shouting)

In here!

A shadow on the other side of the door moves.

MAX (V.O.)

What I thought was a coat in the
outer room was a man. Standing
there the whole time, waiting.

Baby-faced KID in a too-big suit opens the door and walks
in, also holding a gun.

MAX (V.O.)
 A face I'd seen on a million
 wannabees. And I knew right off
 that he was stuck on the dame.
 Couldn't blame him, of course. I
 was too. Til now.

ESMERALDA
 Max Trouble meet Max Trouble.

MAX
 What the hell...

FADE OUT:

END ACT TWO

ACT THREE

FADE IN:

INT: TROUBLE OFFICE - NIGHT

ESMERALDA
 (Cool and calm)
 I must confess that I lied to you
 before, Mr. Trouble.

MAX (V.O.)
 No kidding?

THE KID
 Shut up!

MAX (V.O.)
 He was twitchy from too much sin.
 Or maybe just from having the same
 name as me.

MAX
 So which part was the lie? All of
 it?

ESMERALDA
 Just the made-up parts.

MAX
 As in?

ESMERALDA
 Alonso Montenegro was my husband
 and he did croak yesterday. He also
 found out about my affair.

MAX

(Scornful)

With him? That's not romance, it's kidnapping.

THE KID

I ain't napping now, pal.

ESMERALDA

It's all right, sweetie. This will all be over soon.

MAX

(Dripping)

Go on. You were finally telling me the truth.

ESMERALDA

(Sternly)

Don't underline that word with me. You have no idea what I'm dealing with here.

MAX

Why don't you give me all the sordid details.

MAX (V.O.)

I suggested, stalling.

ESMERALDA

The will is clear. It states that unless Max Trouble is killed within a week, I am cut out of the estate. I get nothing. After all I put up with living with that pig. His disgusting hands all over me...

MAX

In other words, all this biogen has to do is kill your lover and you get the money.

ESMERALDA

Yes. That was Alonso's final revenge.

MAX

Cute. But not exactly legal.

ESMERALDA

Alonso was above the law, Mr. Trouble. You of all people should

(MORE)

ESMERALDA (cont'd)
know that. And above his own death too. He has plenty of people who will see to it that his wishes are carried out. To the letter.

THE KID
Let's cut the chatter and get on with it.

MAX
If this runt and me got the same name, how do you know which of us the biogen will nail?

ESMERALDA
We don't. That's the whole problem. The biogen has been following me, waiting for me to lead him to a Mr. Max Trouble. Now both of you are here. It's only a matter of time.

MAX
Until what?

THE KID
He comes here and finds a dead Max Trouble. You. He ID's the corpse, goes home happy.

MAX
(Incredulous)
I was wrong, I admit it. It's not just you, hun. You're all nuts. Alonso, you, this kid...the whole bunch of you. Why don't you let me dial up a good virtual shrink.

THE KID
(Moving in)
I'm sick of all your cracks. And I ain't no kid neither.

MAX (V.O.)
He raised the gun and put me one crack away from oblivion.

MAX
(Lowering his arms)
Let's all just take it easy. This whole thing is out of some dumb screenplay.

THE KID

Not so dumb as you think.

MAX (V.O.)

He was a baby hood with bad skin
but at least he was finally picking
up the wordplay.

MAX

I don't get it. How did I come to
figure in this genius plan?

ESMERALDA

It had to be you.

MAX

Catchy tune but why me?

ESMERALDA

Alonso didn't know who my lover was
or what he looked like. He just
knew the name. So the will simply
says that Max Trouble must die.

MAX

You people are obsessed with names.
Ever hear of DNA, biotraces, face
recognition?

ESMERALDA

We've been very careful and never
left any traces. But one slip-up
and Alonso managed to find out the
name. Nothing else...just the name.

MAX

(Shaking his head)

And that's why you picked me?

THE KID

The databank coughed you up. Right
there under T. Besides me, you're
the only other Max Trouble around.

MAX (V.O.)

Poor kid, there was fear in his
eyes. But I was afraid of the cold
chill in hers.

ESMERALDA

We kill you and when the biogen
shows up he finds a dead body. He
ID's you and finds out that MAX

(MORE)

ESMERALDA (cont'd)
 Trouble is dead. His mission is over. Once Alonso's people are satisfied, I'm home free. I'll claim that you were my lover and I can collect my money.

THE KID
 Bye bye bigmouth.

ESMERALDA
 I'm sorry for all this...well...all this trouble, Max. I know it's not right. But face it, real people don't matter anymore, just data. The fact is that any Max Trouble will do.

Max laughs, shakes his head.

MAX (V.O.)
 Some scene with them holding me at gunpoint, ready to cancel my ticket, and me laughing like a fool. But it really was funny.

MAX
 Nice plan, Esmeralda. Kid.

THE KID
 Don't kid me.

MAX
 But there's one slight problem.

THE KID
 Oh yeah? What's that?

MAX (V.O.)
 He was daring me to find a loophole. I gave him a crater.

MAX
 I'm not Max Trouble.

ESMERALDA
 What??

MAX
 Yeah see...I'm not Max Trouble. So killing me won't accomplish anything. Biogen shows up, finds me dead, snorks out my identity, then still goes and hunts down babyface.

THE KID

He's bluffing, stalling for time.
Let me do him and get this over
with.

ESMERALDA

(Shrill)

What are you saying?

MAX (V.O.)

Her eyes glowed with rage and I had
to admit that she was a real looker
when deranged.

MAX

Max Trouble. That's not my real
name. It's the one I use for this
business. Sounds good. Some nice
letters on a door.

ESMERALDA

(Looking at the door)

On the door. So?

MAX

Check the databank. Junior didn't
dig into it, he just saw what he
wanted to see.

Max moves to the other side of the desk but the kid
threatens.

MAX

Take a look for yourself. Max
Trouble? Real name...Maxmillian
Troubleski. I cut it down because I
paid by the letter.

THE KID

That's impossible.

MAX

Check it out. Troubleski. It's
Ukrainian/Polish/Hungarian. My
grandfather was a count, my father
a no-count, and I could barely
count. That's evolution for you.

THE KID

(Sputtering)

This is crap! I saw his name in the
databank.

MAX

You saw my moniker, you monkey.

THE KID

Who you calling a moniker?

ESMERALDA

Shut up both of you! I need time to think.

MAX

I can prove it to you. Just access the databank from there. But try to read beyond the first two words. If you can.

THE KID

He knows we can't access from here. The console has touch ID.

ESMERALDA

(To Max)

Then you do it. But slowly.

THE KID

Could be a trick.

Esmeralda motions for Max to continue. He taps the desktop and a virtual screen appears in thin air. Text onscreen is an exact transcript of their conversation. The kid reads it with his finger up like first grade.

THE KID

You recording all this?

MAX

Like I told your lover here. I'm working on my life story. Memoir implant. It's automatic.

Onscreen those words appear.

MAX (V.O.)

At least the kid could read. Still hope for him in the prison library.

Onscreen those words appear.

THE KID

Yeah but I ain't going to no library, pal.

Max pokes the floating image and brings up his own bio. The kid reads that.

MAX (V.O.)

His hand was shaking like an autumn leaf but when he was done it was winter in his soul.

THE KID

He's right. It says Maxmillian Troubleski.

As we move left, we see through the floating screen with mugshot, data, and name to Esmeralda looking furtively, thinking, scheming.

MAX (V.O.)

She was a real player, already thinking through her next move.

She VERY slowly turns the gun on the kid.

MAX (V.O.)

Slowly, like the end of some sad song, she slid the gun away from me and towards the kid.

THE KID

What are you doing, dollbaby?

ESMERALDA

Sorry sweetie, he may not be Max Trouble. But you still are.

THE KID

Me?? But we're partners! I was going to kill him for you! And then we were going to split the money and...and..."

MAX

(Wearily)

And there is no money without a dead man named Max Trouble.

THE KID

Then let's find another one.

ESMERALDA

But now you're the only one left in town.

The kid puzzles, thinks, shifts, and points his own gun at her.

THE KID

There must be another way!

MAX

There isn't, kid. Not if she says so.

THE KID

This is nuts. You can't kill me. I love you.

ESMERALDA

I know you do, sweetie. And I'll always feel good about that. But I have a date with a billion dollars. I'm sure you can understand...

Max slowly reaches under his desk.

MAX (V.O.)

I edged over to a gun I had hidden. But I didn't get far. Something clicked inside junior's head, something dark and tragic, and it didn't spell Esmeralda.

Max dives for the gun, Esmeralda shoots, series of shots, chaos. Music slowly rises.

Max emerges from behind the desk to see both bodies on the floor in a mangle. Sparks from the kid's wounds, a green slime oozes from hers.

MAX (V.O.)

The kid's wound sparked and spizzled...a cybernetic ticker. They were real good at that now but even a bionic heart could get you killed.

Max kicks the gun out of Esmeralda's hand, studies the ooze.

MAX (V.O.)

I knew she was too good to be true. She was a Monroe, a pleasure anthroid. Sexy as they could make them. But just as dead in the end.

Sound in the outer room, Max raises his gun and listens.

MAX (V.O.)

Waiting for some neckless goon to wander in, find his dead Max

(MORE)

MAX (V.O.) (cont'd)
Trouble, and be on his way. Unless
something went wrong, which it
always could.

Eyes on the door, he backs around to the far side of the
desk, located glass and bottle and sits down.

MAX (V.O.)
What I couldn't get was how anyone
could be so dumb.

He pours himself a drink.

MAX (V.O.)
How they could want something so
much that they would risk
everything to get it. And lose it
all in the end.

Drink in one hand, he keeps the gun pointed at the door with
the other. The theme song returns as a faint echo.

MAX (V.O.)
Then I thought...that's why the
dead got it good. They can't risk
their lives for something they can
never get. Sweet.

Moving to the left brings the virtual screen into
view. Above lines are added as Max thinks of them. Max
notices the screen.

MAX (V.O.)
Crazy business. This was the
pinpoint world, dataworld, the
universe of tracking and tracing.
Biotrace measures, retinal scans,
DNA sampling, face recog...everyone
everywhere listed, accessed, known,
located.

He is reading as these are added.

MAX (V.O.)
Yet it all came down to that crazy
name I inherited. Just a
name...flimsiest of all traces.
Maxmillian Troubleski. Even I
thought it sounded like a chatty
drunk in a skeezy bar.

As the words "skeezy bar" get added to the screen text, Max taps something and the screen collapses. We move through to focus on the closed front door with the name in reverse.

MAX (V.O.)

But what the hell, it saved my life
this time. And what is a name
anyway besides some letters on a
door.

A huge dark shadow looms on the other side of the letters on the door.

MAX (V.O.)

You never really know who anyone is
anyway. Not these days. Maybe least
of all yourself.

Opening song rises to full strength again as the door, name, shadow fade into a blur.

FADE OUT:

END ACT THREE

THE END