

A SMALL BOX OF CHAOS



A NEAR FUTURE MYSTERY
ALAN ROBBINS

A
SMALL
BOX
OF
CHAOS

Also by Alan Robbins

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A Near Future Mystery

Alan Robbins

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AS EVERYTHING, FOR TRUDY

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CHAPTER 1



WEEKS IN DEEP TROUBLE

The grip around his throat softened, but only for a microsecond, letting in the teeniest gasp of air. That was good. It gave Aldo Weeks a glimmer of hope that he might actually live through the murder. The feeling, of course, was terribly premature. Like most hopes, it was cured in the next moment and, as he well knew, there was *always* a next moment. In this particular one, it became clear that the maniac strangling him was not letting go at all; he was just getting a better angle with straighter arms and better thumbs. Aldo, for his part, tried to twist out of the new stranglehold by pulling back, while also squeezing harder on the other man's neck. Much harder. But somehow the effort was not really working.

Ludicrously, the InSens—the interior sensor within the room—had figured that the rise in body temperature and the close positions of the inhabitants indicated increased desire. So it lowered the lights slightly to create a more romantic mood, changed the image on the digiwall to a beach at sunset, and played the smooth electronic vocal tones of a romantic loop by Synatra. Which was fine if you considered murder to be a form of lust. But Aldo did not. Nor did he get the irony either. He was far too focused on trying to wring his companion's neck before his own was.

In some ways the whole routine was comical. And would have been to anyone watching it onscreen, except that there were no vidcams in the bedroom. Had there been, a looker would have seen two men clenching each other around the necks, arms stiff as planks, faces beet-red and swollen, making a jerky two-step

towards the dresser. And, of course, from the right angle against the digiwall, all this was taking place on a tropical beach at sunset. Like some kind of bizarre folk dance on Worldnet, in which wild-eyed brothers wrestle for the same adolescent bride and kill each other in the process, leaving the girl tainted and unmarriageable.

The rising level of rage now tricked the InSens into switching over to some tekpop music with a solid rhythm to accompany the beat of pumping sex. The virtual wind stirred the sea into a fit. As the holophonic wave sought them out and focused the sound directly at them, Aldo noticed the change in music and was momentarily distracted. That might have accounted for his slight stumble as he stepped—or was shoved—backwards. It was a sorry move. The other man used the momentum to press forward and pin Aldo against the top of the dresser. He was the shorter and bonier of the two, but this new position allowed him to get a leg up. Soon he was perched like a vulture above Aldo, using his angle to enforce his derangement.

Now the apartment had decided that its occupants were close to climax and so it amped up the beat and released a scent of orchid pheromones into the air. This would have made Aldo cough but for the fact that there was nothing getting into his throat in any case. Looking up from below, Aldo could see the hair inside the man's flared nostrils, and he worried that this lousy view of the world—a ciliated black hole—would be his last. So he closed his eyes, wedged his knee against the man's thigh, and strangled back with every last ounce of verve left in his exhausted body.

The end was near, that much was obvious to all. His assailant was merely holding on until the inevitable triumph. The room was waiting only for a final gasp to show ocean waves crashing against a robust shore and to play the final movement of *Orgasmina*. And Aldo, for his own part, was just about ready to call it quits. Yet oddly, what flashed through his mind at that instant was not what he expected. At least not what they always suggested in the movies. That is to say, not his whole life from the first slap to the current one. Instead, what he experienced was only a quick review of the last few hours. The immensely, achingly, magnificently stupid events that had swept him out of his duller than dull life and into the hands of a murderous lunatic in a strange woman's apartment at midnight.

But even there, in that final fleeting moviola in his mind, there was no escape. Because that story too began with a strangle, with twitchy fingers wrapped around a defenseless throat.

"This is murder!" the woman gasped.

"Relax and enjoy it," Aldo said brightly as he tightened his thumbs at the back of her smooth pale neck.

"Arggh," she quipped. "You're strangling me."

He stopped, letting his hands drop to his sides, and realizing that his coy plan for seduction was falling flat.

"Is the pain gone, Cleo?" he asked tenderly.

"No, it's worse. Enough!" she said, waving him away like a gnat.

Aldo obeyed, but slowly. His position behind and over her was providing a very pleasant view down the valley between her breasts, one he did not want to surrender right away. But seeing that he had not retreated, she turned and gave him a damning look.

"Cut it out," she said, sliding forward in her chair and pinching the shirt closed. "You're engaged."

"Guilty," he said, miming handcuffs ruefully, a felon with feelings. But he still did not budge from the spot.

"And anyway, your fiancé just called," Cleo said. By now she had skidded down the length of her desk on her glider to get even further away from his hormonal huff. As she brought the message up on the desk, something about the way her fingers tickled the screentop reminded Aldo of a websim he had played in which this woman had been tapping ever so delicately on the tip of...

"Kyla called from the airport!" Cleo announced, snapping him out of his trance.

"She did?"

"Yes. She wants you to call her tonight at ten, at her mother's house. And remember, there's a three hour difference out there."

"At ten? That's one o'clock in the morning," he whined. "I'll be asleep by then."

"She also said that she loves you and would miss you terribly all week. I said you would too. You want me to play it for you?"

"No thanks, I'll call her later," Aldo said glumly as he went back to his own desk in the adjoining room.

The desk—like Cleo's, like all desks—was one big tapscreen which allowed him to bring up images, files, keyboards, texts, control panels, icons, and videos in any arrangement at any size anywhere on its surface. Or to transfer any of this information to or from any other tapscreens like digiwalls, his card, the carpad, or other desks. The only notable difference about Aldo's desk was that most people also kept coffee cups, photos, snacks, knickknacks, lucky charms, tissues, and

other debris somewhere on the surface. But not he whose motto was...*clutter is the enemy*. No, Aldo Weeks' desk was perfectly clear of all stuff; his screentop was neat and orderly, his office immaculate and bare. Clutter banished. Everything was in its place there. Paradise.

So it was a bit disconcerting when Cleo, from her station, took the liberty of intruding on all this by displaying his fiancé's call nice and life-size on the far wall of his office. The room went slightly dimmer to make the image seem more vivid and about as close to having her actually standing there as possible from a call. Behind her Aldo could see the lines of people stretching into infinity as they waited for the security check to board the plane.

The message was just what Aldo expected, which was good. He did not like surprises. She had hired a stander to wait in line for the first half day, but had taken her own place for the final four hours. She wanted him to call her that night at ten, at her mother's house. She loved him and would miss him terribly all week. But then, by way of a small gift, she linked to a shot of the two of them on their last vacation smooching in a hot tub, which floated up and remained onscreen even when her message from the airport ended.

Aldo studied the image like a doctor looking for a symptom. They certainly looked happy in it. They looked like the perfect couple. In fact, they *were* the perfect couple. Same age, same sense of humor, same consumer profile, same genetic prognostics, same hemoprobe ratios, same THI index. They had had all that tested after the first date. And he did—really and truly and in fact and all that—love her. There was no question about that. They were friends, partners, lovers. And unlike a lot of other traditionals who married for the stats alone, they even *liked* each other. Most amazing of all was that Kyla did not even seem to mind his—what was the best way to put it?—his fanatic obsessive-compulsive organizing. Yes, he thought as he tapped the desktop and dissolved the snapshot, love was surely not the problem.

Then what was?

In the mire of once again failing to find an answer to this, Aldo glanced back through the door to Cleo, hoping to catch a glimpse of her ankles or her knees or *something*, but she was already up and putting on her jacket to leave.

"So swoon?" he said, swooning. "I mean...soon? What time is it?"

"It's six o'clock," she said, the standard response on her turn of whatever game they always played at the end of the day. "End of the workday. The whistle blows and the promising young assistant heads home with dreams of promotion. Have a great evening."

"We could work late, you know," he suggested. And why everything that came out of his mouth sounded like a plea was beyond comprehension to him. "There is always plenty to catch up on. I mean, we're talking globality here, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, four weeks a..."

"Has the phrase anal-compulsive control freak ever been used in your presence?"

"Of course. But I take exception to it. This word freak...this is an unkind word."

"A job, Aldo," Cleo said abruptly. "A job is what you have so that real life seems precious. And I, for one, am getting back to mine. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

She lifted her hand at the doorpad scanner to open it but quickly pulled back and turned to him sitting all lonely and forlorn at his desk. "Haven't you forgotten something, Aldo?"

A goodnight kiss? he dreamed. But it was absurd and he knew it. How old was Cleo...25? And office affairs only worked out in the Flux, not in fatworld. Besides, he and Kyla had been living together for three years already...a measurable commitment. He recalled reading that there was supposed to be an itch in there somewhere, but they surely had a molecular cream for that by now.

As he watched Cleo waiting for her answer, the problem with his engagement clarified slightly. As he saw it now, the issue was not that the passion was gone; it was much deeper than that. Something looming under the surface. Something geologic, like a secret reservoir, under high pressure, down near the sleaze center of the brain. Or to put it more succinctly...lust. Yes, just pure dumb old lust. That is exactly what it was. Sex mania. Buried and seething and bubbling up in the presence of high heels, cleavage, skin, necklaces, hair, tattoos, belly buttons, and on and on. Yes, that was the problem right there. In a word...women.

But even so, the whole seduction thing was just a fantasy. He knew that. Like an elaborate FourD running in his head endlessly. Just something to get fissible about, to release the pressure down below. He never really acted on it and knew he never would. Not because it was wrong but because it was messy. Any affair he could imagine would automatically have been too confusing, too hard to manage, too unexpected. Disorderly! After all, his other motto was: *chaos is the real enemy*.

"Haven't you? Forgotten?" Cleo repeated.

"Forgotten what?" he asked.

"Put it on your list or you'll never remember to call her. Go ahead. Put it down now while I'm watching."

And so he did. He brought the touchscreen keyboard up to the center surface of the desk, called up his daily To Do list, and dutifully typed “Call Kyla at one o’clock” at the bottom, right under the reminder to “Calibrate the Fish.” Etched in virtual stone, the newly revised list was now instantly available to all his other devices and therefore unavoidable. This move seemed to satisfy Cleo and she turned and palmed the scanner. As she disappeared through the front door, Aldo got up and waved his hand in a graceful gesture over the desktop to close down the files. He shut off the digiwall, turned off the light, and left the room to return to its default settings.

Because it was a home office, the commute to his kitchen took exactly six seconds as he walked through the door behind his desk into his apartment. The office, which had its own entrance from the outer hall, occupied two adjoining rooms that were part of his six-room apartment. This arrangement, plus having the entire Web and all its goodies available on walls, tabletops, and tablets all the time everywhere, meant that he could live his entire life—every productive and consumptive bit of it—without ever leaving the apartment. Such a tightly woven cocoon would have driven most people nuts, and it certainly accounted for Kyla’s frequent brunches, outings, and trips. But it was perfectly fine for Aldo Weeks because it was stable and safe and neat and under control. There he could micro-manage his every waking second and pass it off as sanity. In good moments, this even struck him like some kind of cybernetic mastery. In bad ones, it was undoubtedly a form of thermonuclear nutsy-fagen agoraphobia.

At 5:11pm precisely if his timing was right—and it always was—Aldo had covered the fourteen paces into the kitchen and was pouring himself a micro-brandly to celebrate another day done without discord. But something different was in the works that night, something beyond his control, operating at the cosmic level. An entry on a grander list, so to speak, in a plan that went well beyond Aldo’s little quarkdom of activity. Something out of the ordinary, unexpected. A roll of the dice that Einstein said God did not play with. It was exactly the kind of surprise that would have scared the bejesus out of Aldo, had he had time to react.

Luckily he did not.

“Always wondered what you did here,” said the booming voice of a man sweeping into the room like a politician.

Aldo almost dropped his glass and in catching it, drips of the thick maroon liquid escaped and splattered on the counter, covering the face of a news anchor

reporting. He methodically wiped these up, while trying to appear casual about it, although his heart was racing.

"Wallace!" he said through a rage of precision. "Uh...how did you get in?"

"Cleo," he answered. "She held the door for me as she was leaving and I followed you in here. You didn't hear me calling you?"

Wallace walked to the counter and took a direct swig from the brandy bottle, which sent Aldo into a silent apoplexy. Visions of spit, drool, foam, spizzle, enzymes and all that oral mess flooded his cortex. It was all he could do to maintain his humanity.

"Here, have a glass," he winced, taking one out of the cabinet and leaving out the added "you disgusting blubbering pig."

"Thanks," Wallace said. "Cheers."

Wallace had recently moved into an apartment down the hall and had a habit of dropping by for a visit now and again. This of course was a habit that Aldo hated and he would have said so except that his job required cordiality. And he also, on some other vague level, liked the idea of being someone that someone else might like to visit.

"What exactly do you do here anyway?" Wallace asked, thumbing his comment back towards the home office.

"Me? I'm a traffic manager," Aldo said. He was watching Wallace's glass and holding the stained towelette at the ready, like a tense froggy waiting for a fly.

"A traffic manager. I see. So what does that mean?"

"Manage traffic?" Aldo explained.

The evening news continued to play on the surface of the counter just as Aldo had programmed it to, but sensing that this might distract his visitor from a swift conclusion, Aldo tapped it off. Then he wiped his nascent fingerprint away. Then he wiped the wiping away. Then felt relieved.

"Yes, I see what you mean. Traffic needs to be managed. And managers have to manage something. So why not have someone who manages traffic, etcetera," Wallace offered. "But what I'm getting at is...what exactly do you *do*?"

"I work for Ganesh Communications."

"Well, I know that. So do I. We all do. You can't live in this building unless you do. It's almost the only way to get an apartment here."

"Well, there you are then," Aldo concluded, yearning to be alone and rigid again. But somewhere in his brain—the old brain, reptilian brain, knower of ancient etiquette—he felt that he was being impolite. "Refill?"

"Absolutely. This is very good micro. So if I get your drift here then, what you're saying is that you manage the traffic for Ganesh."

“Exactly. Couldn’t have said it better.”

“What traffic?”

Anyone who has studied the subject knows that one advantage compulsives have over ordinary citizens is that they understand more about how things work. They see patterns—by turns annoyingly and usefully—in ordinary affairs. This was one of the reasons Aldo was so good at his job...his penchant for details, precision, pattern. In a world drowning in experience, this was his life vest. It gave him an edge and was therefore the reason he refused to take medication for his nitpicky psyche. And it explained above all why he was so lucky to have found Kyla, who was infinitely patient and forgiving.

Aldo used this talent now to grasp, in the give and take of their conversation, that Wallace was lonely and nosy and stubborn and would not give up until he had an answer. And so Aldo decided to put effectiveness above instinct and try to just relax and answer the question like a normal human being.

“Okay,” he said. “You’re new, so let me explain it. I’m sure that you know by now that Ganesh is one of the largest publishers on the Web. In fact, we publish 870 separate webalogs. Catazines, magalogs, digipubs, virmags...whatever you want to call them. From Art&Craft (Everything for Every Hobby) to Zig&Zag (The Last Word in Sewing) and everything in between.”

“Right,” Wallace nodded and dribbled. “I work for one of the softcores called Butt&Bush. But they may be moving me.”

“Exactly,” Aldo said. “So a company this big is very complicated. I mean, think about what we offer. Every webalog is a combination magazine, newspaper, encyclopedia, online site, exhibition, film studio, video program, book line, retail outlet. We’re on the Web, in the Flux, onscreen and in your life,” he summed, quoting the ads.

“Gotcha.”

“So there are products and sales and content and creative and production and writing and videoing and all that connected with every one of these. Plus graphics and design and functionality...”

“And stocking, warehousing, orders, fulfillment. Which is what they’re got me doing. Like we sell a line of pornobots you would not believe. They even have...”

“Plus advertising and copy and focus groups and consumer tracking. List management, printing, billing, clerical. See what I mean?”

“Sure. About what?”

“All this stuff?”

“Well, yeah, I guess. You mean it’s a big business.”

"A *very* big and very complex business. And other than the actual products that we sell, it's all digital. All just a flow of bits in the pipeline. Well, that's what traffic is. Traffic is the flow of all that information. Gazillions of tenobytes every nano flying back and forth and back. And it all has to be smooth and orderly otherwise you would get clogs, bottlenecks, backlogs. In a word—and I really hate to use this word—*chaos*."

"I see," Wallace said, finally getting a handle on something. "So you're kind of a guard against fuckups."

"I like to think of myself as an anti-chaotician," Aldo responded, with posture.

And he *was* proud of that. He knew that chaos was the way of the world, the natural descent into entropy and scuttermuss. But humans were here, at least in his telling, to bring order to the world with their calculus and Boolean logic and n-dimensional grids. And their lists. It was heroic what he in his small way did. He, Aldo Weeks, the champion of the first-this-then-that. Smoothing the way for clarity, making it possible to grow a pristine world of data out of the icky one of murk.

"Yes," Aldo followed up, "that is my humble little area of expertise. If not for me, I must say, nothing would be where it is supposed to be when it is supposed to be. People would live in a constant state of perfluxity, total confusion. At least here at Ganesh—and by the law of rippling effects—maybe even the galaxy."

Even neat Aldo Weeks was not above a sniff of hyperbole if the occasion occasioned.

"You do all that from your office desk?" Wallace asked. "I can't get anything done at mine. My desk is a complete mess."

"Hunh!" Aldo sniffed. "You can't work like that. Not in the Age of the Flux."

He demonstrated this lesson by tapping the kitchen countertop and transferring the contents of his desktop in the office to it. Like a master player on a hyper-organ he opened, enlarged, slid, and shut window after window of charts, vids, reports, webalogs. All of which was organized to the zed degree, like angels on parade in a computer vision of heaven. And then, of course, the lists and lists. The long ones, short ones, old and new ones. All carefully linked and cross-checked. Things to do today, tomorrow, and each of the other days of the week. Next year, next millennium, when the cows come home. And not only for the business but for everything else as well. His entire life. All his chores, duties, calls, birthdays, reminders.

"A little compulsive, wouldn't you say?" Wallace fluted kindly.

"Yes you can say that. But I say everyone has a choice in this world...compulsion or convulsion. Take your pick," Aldo summed, quoting himself. "Everybody

responds that way when they see my files. But think about it, where would we be without compulsives? Heisenberg obsessing over vibrating atoms, Proust and his remembrances, Darwin lining up finch beaks. Huh? Where?"

And he really believed that. Believed that his lists were the only salvation. That his faith in every choice managed and every act mastered was the one true faith. That in the final accounting, neatness would overcome sin and the pearly gates would open only for those who lined up their shoes the night before.

"You see?" he said proudly, as the last note of his visual symphony faded back to black.

"Let me ask you a question here, Aldo," Wallace said, pouring himself another drink. He lowered his voice as though trying to come in below the tact radar. "You ever actually see all the stuff?"

"This stuff?"

And even lower, "No, I mean the *stuff*. The real stuff."

"What real stuff?"

"You know," Wallace said coyly, rubbing his fingers together in an oily manner. "The goods, the merchandise. The bats and the balls they talk about in Bats&Balls."

It was a strange turn in the conversation and it made Aldo more than a little uneasy. The word stuff had come to mean the actual objects of fatworld, sometimes called the realzone or the sweat. Stuff meant specifically the physical objects of ordinary life as opposed to the virtual objects in Cyberia. Had he seen the stuff? Was Wallace questioning his buying, his consumer rating? Did this irritating neighbor work undercover for the Fed? What was he trying to find out exactly?

"I buy enough," Aldo said defensively.

"No, I'm sure you do. I don't mean that. I would never question your commitment. What I mean is...have you ever seen all the stuff. Not just what you buy on the Web but the things themselves...being made for example. The factories, I mean. The materials. Manufacturing, I think they used to call it. The actual physical...stuff?"

"Of course not. Why would I want to do that? Stuff is made in places that are sweaty, dirty, leaky. They're in India. Malaysia. Hot places."

"Hot can be rather interesting sometimes."

That was it. The talk was getting too weird for words, so Aldo mopped up some non-existent spills and took the glass from Wallace's hand.

"Well, really enjoyed this little visit," he said. "Nice talking to you. See you later. And really thanks for stopping by. Byebye."

"I'm guessing here, Aldo, but I'll bet you're one of those cavers who never leave the apartment. Eat, buy, work, play...all right here. Right?"

"Thankfully."

"No wonder you look so pale. You need to get out more," Wallace observed as the force of Aldo's effort propelled him backwards towards the exit. "This is not how man was meant to live, you know. We're adventurers, creators, hunters. Need to get out there and work up a sweat."

"Workouts every other day at 10:30," Aldo countered, flapping his flattish belly.

"Sure, but in the building right? All sensed and surveyed and climate controlled, right? And watching a country trail on the digiwall. And I bet you don't sweat."

"Hah," Aldo rebutted.

"I'm talking about out there, Aldo, in the city. Outside where there's some real life, not just data. Flesh and blood."

The countertop, right on cue, was prepping for dinner and had brought burners, menus, placemats, diet restrictions, and suggested recipes to the surface. There was some leftover pasta in one of the refrigerator modules and so, naturally, the Bay of Napoli appeared on one wall.

"Listen," Wallace went on, "I'm meeting some guys at a bar later. It's one of the old—well, you know—old types of bars. You know what I mean. A bar where people go? It's totally off the Grid. We're just going to have a few drinks. Why don't you join us?"

"Uh...I don't think so."

"Why not? There are real live women there, Aldo, not sims. Have you smelled a real live woman recently? It's heady."

"I'm engaged to a fiancé."

"I know. I met her. Lovely woman. And Kyla lives here with you, right? And therefore she too does not sweat climatewise. Ipso dipsy...she doesn't smell either."

"Could we please not talk about the smell of my love."

"Join us later. It'll be real human. Manly fun."

"I don't go out," Aldo finally admitted. He was practically shoving Wallace through the front door like clothes into a stuffed suitcase. "Something could go wrong."

Fact not opinion. It really *was* really treacherous out there. Out of control. The news proved it. And not just because chaos could follow from a single change in the pattern. That was a known law of nature. No, the *true* danger went

way beyond that. One slip up, one mistake, and great forces could come to your doom. Like taking the one wrong roll of toilet paper from the bottom of the pyramid of life. Not that Aldo ever bought toilet paper that way—in the flesh so to speak—but he had seen just such a gag in a commercial and it made him gag. And the treachery did not result from you not knowing better, or not working out every single detail ahead of time. It happened because some pimplehead did not balance it right and you stumbled into his mistake by not being careful enough. Even if the pimplehead was only fate itself, it still ended up on *your* head.

In a last desperate effort Aldo said: “Look, it’s just not on my list.”

“Oh yes, I forgot. Mister Organizer. You must have to put everything down before you can actually do it.” He was making a sly insult but, of course, Aldo did not take it that way.

“Correct!”

“Here,” Wallace said, taking an object out of his pocket and handing it to Aldo, who duly took it. “Consider it on your list. See you at 9:00.”

But he could tell by the look on Aldo’s face, somewhere between revulsion and terror, that this was unlikely. “Loosen up, Aldo. Life is an experiment. Try something new for a change.”

And with that, he was finally out the door.

Sitting down in the nightroom and gesturing for a spotlight, Aldo fondled the object he had been handed. He inspected it puzzlingly the way a bugman would take in a new variety of mosquito. It was riveting simply because it was a new thing. An actual piece of stuff. The tabletop over which his hand hovered was a tapscreen like all flat surfaces. Tapscreens were the new reality, gateways to the infinite land of the Flux. Virtual life. But an actual object was something quite rare, something to behold. And he beheld this one with due awe.

At first, he had no idea what it was...a piece of heavy paper folded around a tiny fence of cardboard pickets. Then he remembered something similar he had seen on a webvid and, mimicking how it was used, he ripped off one of the pickets and scraped it against a scratchy patch at the bottom. Sure enough...a wee flame sparked and danced. He had never actually seen a book of matches in real life, only onscreen, and it was fascinating. One by one, mesmerized like a boob with a bauble, he lit each match and watched the fire burn. The cover of the matchbook said “Missy Wiggles,” apparently the name of the bar Wallace was talking about. He knew what that was. It was a place where people smoked, where dancers danced, where live music was played. It was a hoochie bar, a lap-

dancing club, a singles scene, a jazzerie...remnant of a world lost to the datarama. A den of iniquity, of sensuality. It was down in Times Square, which was once again the boulevard of skin. But he knew something else about it too. He knew that the bar was also a euphemism for danger...out there, in the sweat, where the loons loomed. Where chaos rained.

Try something new for a change, Wallace had said. Something new. For a change. These were petrifying ideas, but not without some molten appeal. The old lust thing rising up again. Would he dare? Normally not, but there was a tingly heat as he held the flaming matches in his fingertips and it eventually burned a hole in his better judgment. It was a small hole but just big enough to stumble through on his way to an adventure.

So sad that it turned out to be the worst choice Aldo Weeks ever made.

By 9:20 that evening there was still no sign of Wallace or the others and that is when Aldo asked the barman and realized that he was in the wrong place at the right time. True there were dancers dancing, smokers smoking, and singles sniggling, but this was Misty Swingles, not Missy Wiggles, and Aldo was trying very hard not to see that as the first tremor of a major quake still to come. But he could not convince himself and shuddered.

The bar was packed with seekers trying to find each other, holding drinks like crystal balls before prospective mates. Aldo for his part felt totally out of place. In the first place, he had not played the seduction game in years and had completely forgotten how. Secondly, he was not really looking for anyone. He was looking for *something* but he did not even know what that something was. And finally, this was all unnervingly real. Not some websim he could pop in and out of without guilt, but actual life with all its consequences. In his reflection in the mirror behind the bar he could see in his own tired glances, in his eyes without mystery, and in that sappy smile the signal that he was taken, hopelessly paired, and long past his last exploit. Not to mention completely out of his element with no screens around to manipulate or data to shuffle. Nervously he began to line up the empty glasses before him on the bar and was about to equalize the traces of liquid in them when she came in.

He sensed her entry long before he could actually see her. In fact, everyone did. The sea of heads parted, creating a wake around the woman entering. She was not just another woman; there were plenty of those around. This was a vision of a woman, an amazement of a woman, a gasp of a woman. She was poured like syrup into a tight black dress made of some sensuous fabric, not recomb silk or incloned cotton but a glisteny, creamy thing like dark tan skin after a sunshower.

As she walked in, she seemed able to perfectly balance her curves impossibly on slender heels. And when she pulled herself onto the stool next to him, her bare arms gleamed under the heavy light. Aldo thought he could see her pores breathing and he felt the old hot steamy flash rising from below. He even wiped his forehead with a damp palm.

She had long thick red hair that curled like a waterfall down her back. Her face was perfect, sweet and saucy at once, eyelashes so long they eddied the smoke when she blinked. When her drink was delivered, she brushed the lush hair from her face and kissed the straw with luscious lips as she sipped. Aldo puckered too, unwittingly, and at just that instant, incredibly, she turned to him and spoke. Her black eyes were midnight pools into which he giddily dove.

"You look familiar," she said softly, like an oboe.

"I do do I?" he tooted. But he quickly changed his tune, making it lower and slower to try to harmonize with hers. "Maybe I've seen you here before," he lied. She actually looked like one of the fantasy women in a pornosim but made real. A sex statue brought to life.

"Maybe. Or somewhere else."

As she wriggled on the seat, Aldo studied her contours like a lunar surveyor. It was a real gosh darn of a landscape, the ideal balance of mountain and valley. Shoulders sloping in to the collarbone then down to the breasts, the inward sweep to the waist, the vale to the hips, and so on all the way down to toesy toes. And filled with caves all along the route that he longed to explore. Not used to being with strange women, he did not know quite what to do, but an archeologic gender memory told him to keep the conversation going at all costs.

"What's your mane?" he finally managed, studying the meanders in her hair. "I mean...haha...what's your name?"

"Victoria," she answered, and her nimbus lips seemed to blow it to him on spearmint wind.

"Wow. That's some name."

"It's real too. And you?"

He thought for a moment before responding.

"Me? Uh...John. John Doe," he said quickly, trying not to roll his own eyes.

"Come on. John Doe? Really?"

"Dole," he enunciated carefully. "John Dole."

"Well hello John Dole," she said and clinked his glass with hers.

As she leaned towards him, the flesh on her right breast rolled like a wave and her shoulder muscle swelled under deep skin, then vanished. He would drown there, he thought, with all his might.

“Are you alone tonight, Mr. John Dole?” she said, massaging him with a stare that peeked out from under a red curlicue.

“Well...yes...sort of.”

“Me too, sort of. I had a date but something happened. So now I’m free.”

“Something bad?”

“I thought so before. But things are looking up,” she said and squeezed his thigh, very gently but just enough to pump an entire liter of blood from his lungs into his groin. Expertly, as though she had studied circulation in the philandering male, *homo genitalis*.

Aldo glanced back at the mirror and noticed that all had changed. The dankness of the bar had given way to a soft darkness. The voices now seemed muted and lyrical. In the mirror, her face was perfect, smooth and sculpted. It could sell webalogs, shampoos, anything. And his face next to hers, although it did not quite measure up, no longer seemed to be so out of place. Perhaps it was the drink or that the light had changed. Yet as he studied it, his own face now seemed rather usual and common. Like someone in a car ad. Not alluring or sexy, but not quite so pathetic either. Forgettable. And that was a huge improvement.

In a strange way, it was only in the full flatness of the mirror that Aldo suddenly felt comfortable. It was as though they were onscreen and that made her much more accessible to him. He could now see that the most amazing, the most riveting thing, about her was that she seemed so...natural. Unretouched. Even pristine but in an erotic way. Only a bioscan could tell for sure, but even on the closest inspection there was not a trace of adjustment, of manipulation. No implants or explants, no Botox, no anthroplastic grafts, no Solar Honey suntone, no bubonic injections, no liposculpting, no corneal etching, no pheromonic dusting, nothing. She seemed like a natural beauty and that was the most seductive thing of all about her...that she was imperfect. But in the most flawless way imaginable.

She finished her drink, took a deep breath, and straightened her back. The hair danced, the breasts ballooned, the thighs swished. He could actually hear them, which meant that she might have been wearing stockings...unheard of in decades among real people. Aldo’s prostate gulped.

“The only thing is, I really hate these bars,” she said. “They’re so noisy.”

“Oh, me too. Never can stand them for too long.”

“I like you, John Dole. You seem like a decent kind of guy. Why don’t we go somewhere? What do you think? Let’s go somewhere, okay? Somewhere else.”

“Go somewhere?”

The thought caught him full in the chest since it implied moving about, traveling in the world, and that meant the real world, fatworld. Was she suggesting that they actually walk through the city? He had taken a huge risk by coming to the bar in the first place and was still alive. But to now go somewhere else? He was already in hot water; he did not want to boil in it.

"Yes," she said.

"Somewhere like where?"

"Well...I live on the Upper West Side. We could go there. Just to talk, I mean. I'm not trying to seduce you or anything like that. Unless you'd rather not."

An amusing idea, he thought, giggling to himself like a ninny. After all, the whole thing was crackpotted. He never went out, never came to a place like this, never took risks, never tried anything new. Never seduced women. Yet here he was in a bar in Times Square with the queen of all wetdream queens coming on to him. To *him*! Danger alarms must have sounded but he did not hear them. It was all too Plutonian—totally out of whack—for normal caution to apply. Buzzers went off in his superego but he ignored those too. Instead he paid careful attention as she ran a long red fingernail along the thick cushion of her lower lip. It slowly deformed and rebounded under the pressure. He ached to do the same and that ache pressed out all other thoughts. And suddenly the absurdity of it all seemed so...so right.

"God," he muttered. And for a moment he thought she thought he meant her. Maybe he did.

"What do you think, Mr. Dole?" she said, placing her hand on his love handle and lightly scratching the skin at the back. Sparks went up his spine, shorting out any remaining decency. After all, she was really too perfect for reality. Even the way she touched him, a complete stranger, more thrilling than Kyla's known tricks. The whole thing was too good to be true. Much too good. It was witchcraft. But even that realization did not stop him.

As she turned in the seat to get up, the round mounds of her behind rippled a hidey-ho and the material of the dress clung to the muscles like a hide. Aldo took a quick gulp of his drink to stifle an impending howl. It was all happening so fast that an otherwise obvious thought took a very long time to form in his mind. Namely, what if it was not love but business at first sight? What if she was not lured by his face but something more practical...his wallet. He put his hand on her shoulder and turned her around gently.

"Listen," he said, resisting the urge to plunge into her cleavage and bob for the answer, "I don't know how to ask you this."

"Is something wrong, John?"

He moved close enough to suck on her ear lobe, pretending it was noisy.

"Are you...a...I mean...you're not by any chance...a...you know..." he fumed, knowing that there was no way to ask without insulting her if she was not, but no way to proceed without finding out if she was.

"That depends," she said coolly.

"I mean professional."

"I work, if that's what you mean."

She turned to him so that she was speaking directly into his lips. Her breath enveloped him like a sauna that he began to sweat in.

"No, I mean...is this...what you *do*?"

"Not too often," she said. "When it feels right, I do what I do. I mean, life is short, John. Don't you think?"

He tried again.

"What are you...exactly?"

"You know what I am, John?"

"No."

"Well let me tell you," she said, moving closer and pressing her nipples into his. "I'm a woman."

"Ah," he said, all the way down to his molars.

"A woman who likes to take chances. To enjoy herself. That's what life is all about, isn't it?"

"No," he said, about taking chances.

"You don't think life is about enjoying yourself? About pleasure?"

"Oh that. Sure. Hey...pleasure is my middle name."

And on the basis of that negotiation, he followed her out of the bar and over to Broadway to get a taxi. Times Square, always exhilarating throughout its lifetime, was now an infinite funhouse of images, a kinetic virtual sightscape with tapscreens and hi-def mirrors and holograms covering every surface. The architecture of the buildings had vanished beneath an explosion of pictures on every wall, and overhead, looming beyond, on every plane, underfoot, floating before you. Yet even in this combustion of ads, trailers, teasers, streamers, dataframes, celebrity biospots, even in the midst of so much to look at, Aldo noticed that they were being watched as they strolled. Or rather, that *she* was being noticed simply because she was so noticeable. Her look, her walk, her movement. Interesting, he thought, that somewhere on earth, out there outside the Flux, outside the digital kingdom, pure animal sexuality was still magnetic. He had not realized that and the lesson was almost worth the entire excursion.

In the taxi to her apartment, they talked about living in New York, in America, on earth, in a corner of the Milky Way. Aldo realized that, besides having legs as smooth as neolithium, Victoria was also a nice normal intelligent person. She had ideas, thoughts about, opinions. Not like the mindless perfectly formed bobos you encountered in Cyberia. And how amusing it was to him to find someone like this inside the realtime erotic hallucination he was obviously having. By the time they reached her apartment, his acceptance of this delusion was total. Standing behind her and studying her shape from heel to nape as she stood at her front door, Aldo made up his mind. He decided right then and there that Wallace had been right. Not Heraclitus or St. Augustine or Spinoza—who were all dead anyway—but Wallace from down the hall. Yes, man was indeed on a quest as they all thought and it was in fact a quest for knowledge. But it was for a certain kind knowledge that could only be obtained through *her* body. Answers to important questions about texture, taste, tingle. There was simply no other way to know these things. No better way. And he decided that it was his duty as a man to find out.

Deep in his panting reverie, this was the kind of hotsy-totsy bullshit that Aldo Weeks could live with. So it came to pass that as Victoria placed her hand on the scanner to unlock the door, far from doubting his own actions, Aldo was eagerly ready to help read the whorls of her palm.

C H A P T E R 2



DISPOSE OF BODY

Victoria's apartment was in a stately brownstone on West 89th Street near the Hudson River. It was elegant and refined and might very well have been custom-ordered from House&Home, one of the upscale Ganesh webalogs. There were lean gray couches upholstered in soya leather, thin titanium laser lamps, a new holophonics system, a lush tropical tree genetically tweaked for indoor light. An antique French poster for tires showing a buxom nymph on a bicycle was being displayed in the center of one of the digiwalls. This was the home of someone with a cat, a live one not a petbot, and a bond portfolio. In other words, a real person, a person of substance and that made Aldo feel much safer. The ravenous and illicit sex he had in mind might not work out, given chaos theory and all, but at least nothing dreadful would happen to him here.

Or so he thought.

The front windows in the living room looked out onto the street, and Aldo positioned himself in front of them while Victoria settled in. When she was ready, she walked over to him slowly, all the way across the room. Her walk was a study in the juggle of poise and undulation. When she got to the spot where he was standing, she moved in easily between his legs and put her hand on his neck. It felt quite natural. Even so, Aldo pulled back slightly to avoid scorching her.

"Where's the cat?" he asked.

"You're looking at her," she said.

"Rrrrrrr," he purred.

“Would you like a drink?”

“Anything.”

She gestured in front of a nearby scanner and the razor blinds on the window closed. Uplights came on that made the ceiling glow, the kind of light lovers love by. The walls of the room, preprogged for seduction, had been slowly morphing through a series of tastefully restrained wallpaper patterns and now turned soft and fuzzy at the edges, like sleep. Wind chimes tinkled. There was the faint odor of oleander in the air. It was exactly like Aldo’s recurrent dream about a torrid affair with a voluptuous stranger in a nice apartment. The only problem was how to proceed without waking himself up, as he usually did.

“Nice apartment,” he said, following her into the kitchen and faking the smooth tones of a womanizer.

“I enjoy it,” she said. “I’ve been here a long time.” She took a silver earring from her fleshy lobe and placed it on the counter, which responded by showing a tongue licking an ear.

“Oops,” she said, “that was a joke I played on someone. I forgot to reprog it.”

“Naturally,” he crooned, but it came out real smarmy. “Nice kitchen, too.”

It really was. All Metaline and simmarble. That kind of thing mattered, he thought...kitchens and uplights and wind chimes. The details. The counter had a wet spot on it that he could not resist wiping up but even the towel made a lovely sound, like a sonata for rags. Leaning onto the counter, her breasts like melons, the mound of her rump behind, her hair spilling onto her shoulders in just that way, her bent arm catching the light just so...it was everything his prayers ever promised. What he actually wanted to do was to slow things down even more, so it would not all be over too quickly. Linger in the moment for as long as he could.

“Ice?” she asked, pushing the glass towards him.

“This,” he said, slow as a poet, “is perfect.”

It was 11:00 by the time they got to the bedroom. They had flirted in the kitchen, hugged in the living room, kissed in the hallway. By that time Aldo was the willing slave of guilty pleasure, his thoughts reduced like a sauce to panting clichés. She was a woman, he was a man; pleasure was a gift; life was short. All that. Just like in crummy foreign skin flicks, he thought, but he did not care. At that point, nothing more than a gob of hormonal plasm, he started to reassess his own sex appeal, his looks, his relationships. His destiny even.

Aldo was sitting on the bed as she reached behind her neck and began to pull the zipper down. The knuckles in her backbone danced between the opening cur-

tains. She looked at him as she did this, seeming to enjoy his thrill. Then she tugged at the upper corners of the dress and it slipped off her shoulders, which were alabaster knobs in the soft light. At the perfect pace—intensely slow, like fluids merging—she began to pull the dress down off her arms.

Aldo watched, with a bongo for a pulse. And he thought to himself...this is really *really* too good to be true. And he really really was right. Because without noticing it, the dreamy veneer had already developed a slight crack. It started as a pounding. At first Aldo thought it was simply his heartbeat, but he soon realized that it was coming from out there, from outside of himself. Someone was pounding at the door to the apartment.

"Who's that?" Aldo said, darting from the bed with nowhere to go. He was thinking *Morals Squad* but he did not think there actually was any.

"I'd better see," Victoria said flatly, but the fear she was trying to hide came through. And the pounding got louder.

"Sounds bad," Aldo said. "Maybe you should ignore it."

"You stay back here," she cautioned.

Stiffly, she pulled the dress back up over her shoulders, then closed the bedroom door behind her as she left the room. Headlines loomed in the darkness as Aldo waited. Sex Fiend Whacked For Good. Another John Doe Dead. Weeks Slain In Love Nest. Killer Victim Escapes Via Heart Attack. It was amazing how productive one could be as the axe fell. Reluctantly, he opened the door just a crack to watch the event unfold.

The pounding was even worse by the time Victoria reached the door. Just as she placed her hand on the palmscreen, the man on the other side kicked open the door. He came barging in, a furious blur, and the impact sent her flying backwards. She regained her balance and for a moment he stood still at the threshold. Then he slammed the door shut and advanced again. He grabbed her by the hair, shouting too loud for her to answer.

"A little business on the side, cookiedoll?" the man yelled, twisting her hair into his fist.

She tried to kick him in the shin but missed.

"Let go of me," she shouted back.

"No one double crosses me," he bellowed and punched her in the chin.

The blow sent them both stumbling back down the hall towards the bedroom where Aldo was hiding. He was hoping the commotion would stop by itself but, of course, that would have been too simple. It took two more blows for his sense of valor to overcome his terror and he charged out.

"Stop that," he shouted, stepping into the fray.

He grabbed the man by the wrist, but another punch caught Aldo on the cheek. Victoria took a swing and hit the man in the head. None of this helped settle the matter. Soon, all six arms were twisted into a complex knot as they tumbled like clowns back into the bedroom.

"This him?" the man yelled, focusing his rage on Aldo alone.

The redhead slipped free of the man's clinch and went gasping for breath in the corner of the room. Balanced now as a pair, the madman went straight for Aldo's throat. After a prolonged and awkward wrastle, they wound up in a double strangle with the stranger pinning Aldo against the top of a dresser. From underneath Aldo could see the hair inside the man's nostrils, and this was the precise moment that caused him to worry about that unsavory view being his last. Aldo, for his part, was just about ready to call it quits and knew that this was the moment of truth...he had to act fast or succumb. But he was in a bad position on his back and felt his grip slipping. His eyes were burning. Then he lost his hold and dropped his right arm on the dresser.

Which is where it might all have ended but as the room stupidly began to play Orgasmina, Aldo felt a heavy object under his hand. It was square and hard and had edges. He clenched his fingers around it, swung his arm around with all his might, and smashed it into the man's temple. There was a loud thud followed by a release of air and pressure. Everything died...the sound, the digiwall, the heat. Time itself. The mad eyes went cold as the man stiffened, jerked, twitched, and collapsed in a heap on top of him.

Aldo let the heavy object fall to the floor. Then he waited for his soul to answer the recall. When he could again feel the breath of life, and blood back in his aorta, he began to slither out from under the body that was draped like a blanket on top of him. The man's eyes were wide open, only a few inches from Aldo's face. Disappointed eyes, Aldo thought, as though waiting for an apology. Aldo shoved him off and started to get up, but he was still trapped. The fingers of the man's left hand had somehow gotten wedged inside Aldo's collar.

"Do you mind?" Aldo shouted as he squirmed free, not seeing the humor in the question.

"Is he...?" Victoria began to ask. She was wiping tears from her cheeks and trying to heal the rip in her dress by pushing it back into fashion. Aldo studied the dead silence for a moment before reaching a conclusion.

"Sure looks it."

"Oh...my...God," she said and started to sob.

Aldo wanted to comfort her. That would have been the nice thing to do, the kind thing. Or at least say a prayer for the deceased. A few words of tender lam-

entation. Last rites. But under the circumstances, he could only mourn for the stranger in his own private way, and that was by heaving into the toilet bowl for a very long time.

When he got back to the bedroom, Victoria was trying desperately to light a cigarette. But her hands were shaking so much that she could not make the lighter and tip meet. Aldo's own hands, either from the strain or the shock, were numb as sponges. He could barely feel them as he rubbed his throat at the choke line.

"What do we do?" she said over and over, finally throwing cigarette and lighter onto the floor in disgust.

"Who is he?" Aldo asked, trying to get a grip on things.

The apartment had gone still, almost as if it could sense the tragedy. Perhaps it could, he thought, since the InSens system was programmed to respond to motion, heat, and location. But could it tell a dead body from a sleeping one? Self-defense from homicide? Did it have an opinion about what had taken place? Even though there were no vidcams in the room, Aldo suddenly felt observed and accused.

"I don't know," she said. "I have no idea who. I've never seen him before. Bursting in like that. He was insane. He could have killed me."

"What are you talking about?" Aldo shouted.

"Him! Him!" But she could barely look at the dead man.

"No...I mean...you must have known him. He sure knew *you*."

"No I said."

"What about the double cross? He said you were double crossing him."

"I'm telling you...I don't know. I don't know who he is. He's nobody. Nobody at all," she shouted back, collapsing on the bed.

"All right, all right. Take it easy," Aldo said, finding a hidden pool of strength. He sat down on the bed and stroked her calf. "It wasn't our fault. He was trying to kill you. And I stopped him. Shit, I really *did* stop him."

Aldo got up and inched closer to the body, not knowing what to expect. He had never seen a real live dead person before. Let alone made one. No matter. It was absurd, some sort of sick joke. But the weird twist of the left foot, the dangling right arm, the cadaverous tongue, and the bulging blind eyeballs all said the same thing. This man was not getting up to deliver the punchline.

"What the hell are we going to do?" she pleaded, hiding inside her own folded arms, her voice weak and muffled.

"How should I know? Call the police, I guess."

“No no no!” she said, pulling herself up and looking at Aldo frantically.

Victoria suddenly looked like a completely different person than the one in the bar. Her face was swollen. There was a wide welt on her chin. Her mascara, which was expensive and impervious, still formed messy stripes down her cheeks. It was a fright mask, he realized, signaling that the dream was officially over. Aldo had stepped out of it and right onto the far side of the moon. Yes, that had to be it. It all made sense now in the acute psychosis of his terror...he was an astronaut on a secret mission to mine Droolite, the stupid ore, and Victoria and the dead man were mirages from space madness. Absolutely. How else to explain all this? And oh how he longed for his warm apartment and neat home office back on earth. But all that seemed light years away.

“Did you hear what I said?” she snapped, drawing him back.

“Huh?”

“No cops!”

“Why not?”

“No police. I don’t *do* police.”

“But it’s not our fault. It was self-defense.”

“No cops. No way. No!”

“But what else can we do? There is nothing else to do. We have no choice.”

She sniffled, wiped her face on the blanket and rubbed her headache. “We have to get rid of him. We have to get rid of him.”

“Now wait a minute!”

“We have to get rid of him. We’ll get rid of him and it will be okay.”

“Are you crazy? We can’t do that. We can’t get rid of the body. That’s murder!”

“And what do you think this is, buddyboy? Shoplifting?”

“It’s self-defense, that’s what it is. You’re allowed to do that.”

“Oh sure. And just who is going to believe that? The cops?”

“They’ll have to. It’s true.”

But as he looked at the gaping mouth and the smear of blood on the man’s left temple, even Aldo had doubts about that one. Second thoughts. Then thirds and on to fourthsies. Like suppose the cynics on the jury did not see the simple logic of it all? Suppose the courts needed to make an example? Suppose the cops called in the room itself as a witness and the room bore a grudge? Or say the DA was a nutcase who lost his brother the exact same way?

“Maybe I should search him,” Aldo said, grimacing. “Maybe there’s another way out of this.”

“Like what?”

"I don't know. Maybe he's wanted for something. Maybe we're heroes."

"Yes. Maybe we can pin something on him," she said, nodding Aldo on and flicking her fingers towards the cadaver.

He walked over to the dead man calmly, so as not to disturb him. The body was still propped up oddly on the dresser, the torso lying flat on the surface and the legs straight to the floor like tent poles. On closer inspection, the man was older than he thought at first, about 60, and smaller than his rage had implied. With the delicate touch of a pickpocket, Aldo tugged slightly at a part of the jacket that stuck out. As he did, the body slowly began to slide backwards off the dresser.

Suddenly the man stood up and looked Aldo right in the eye. In fact, the body was simply pivoting over stiff legs on its way to falling down. But from Aldo's close position it looked like a second confrontation. The dead man's arm, flailing from the momentum, even slapped Aldo on the cheek. A final reprimand! Aldo grabbed the lifeless hand and went tumbling down with it. This time he landed directly on top of the corpse and was left staring into the white face. Hell all over again, which as any thoughtful person knows, is precisely what hell is. But this time the mouth had dropped open giving Aldo a fine view of the man's stunning nu-ceramic dental implants.

When he regained the thinning thread of his composure, Aldo slowly searched the dead man's pockets but found nothing. No wallet, no card, no identification at all.

"Well?" Victoria said from a safe distance, getting antsy.

"Nothing."

"Good. Great. Maybe he's nobody."

"He can't be. Everybody's somebody."

Aldo got up and maniacally brushed himself of every trace of the dead man's dead skin cells. Then he went into the living room to get away from the sight too. Victoria followed him, holding the hallway wall all the way for support.

"Now what?" he muttered to no one in particular, collapsing on the couch.

"Now it's perfect," Victoria answered. "He has no card. No ID at all, right? That's what you said. Right? Right??"

"Right."

"So that means that no one will know who he is."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that no one will know him."

"No one...who?"

"Anyone."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"When we get rid of him. When we dump him. No one will know who he is."

"Jesus, what the hell am I doing here?" Aldo whined.

But Victoria was suddenly focused and cogent.

"We have to dump him," she decreed.

"This is complete and total insanity."

"We'll dump him."

"Stop saying that."

"It could be done."

"It's crazy."

"Don't you see? We have no choice. If we tell the police, we have to explain why you were here. Call me cynical, but I'm guessing there's a complex answer to that. And then we have to explain why *he* came here, and what he wanted and how *you* killed him. There's no end to it. We'll be tangled up in this forever. But if we just get rid of him, no one's got to explain anything."

"But what if someone saw him come in?"

"It's almost midnight. The block is dead."

"What about vidcams?"

"This is a Grid-free block. They voted down the vidcams. There aren't any on this block."

"You can vote down vidcams? I didn't know that."

"Will you track, please? Forget the vidcams. The point is...no one knows about him."

"He still could have been seen."

"It doesn't matter anyway. Even if he got blipped by the Grid before he got to 89th Street, or even if someone saw him on the block, no one will connect him with us. Or us with him."

Aldo rubbed his head, but the pounding inside was not a simple ache. It was the growing knowledge that she was right, that there was no easy way out. Not without an endless mess of confessions and investigations. Chaos in action, which Aldo well knew never ever wound up as a blessing.

"I don't know," he said.

"Well I do."

"Maybe you're right."

"I am."

Mechanically, he went to his jacket and took out his card. Just holding it in his palm gave his confidence a boost. When you can organize, you can manage; manage, cope. Words he lived by. Everyone had a card, but to Aldo his card was

a sacred object, a talisman that gave his life meaning. It was his key to his own life. The card was a palmtop, web connection, phone, camera, ID, recorder, money, and PDA all in one single device only slightly thicker than the old credit cards people used to carry. When he had the card, he had all the tools of the modern world in his hand. He sat down on the couch and said his name aloud to activate the device. Instantly, an inner section popped out, doubling the size of the card and creating a touchscreen large enough to read and work on. Thus braced, he began to dictate a list, a brand new and high priority To Do list. This was really just a way to anchor his sanity but, as always, it worked. Even as the card began to convert his words into onscreen text, he could feel the macrocosm returning, the spinning slowing, pulsars at the edge of space back in sync. And the headache starting to ebb.

"What are you doing now?" Victoria asked.

"Making a list," he said.

"What for?"

"To get things straight," he said, and read aloud from the tiny screen. "One, straighten up the room. Two, clean up the blood stain on the rug. Three, wipe off any biotracers from all surfaces, both his and mine. Four, throw out the broken mirror. Five, reprog the bedroom to erase the event from the InSens system. Are there any vidcams in the apartment?"

"Two in here but I turned them off."

"Six, check that out. And seven, dispose of the body."

"Eight, get as far away from here as possible."

"No! That's one thing we cannot do. We have got to make it all seem normal. Normal night, normal next day. Normal normal," he said, putting the card down and pacing the room. "What time did he get here?"

"Eleven-thirty I think."

"Someone could have heard the commotion. One of your neighbors maybe."

"There's no one under me. And the person in the rear apartment is away."

"And upstairs?"

"I don't know."

"We have to know."

"What do you want me to do? You want me to go upstairs and ask them? Pardon me, did you happen to hear my friend bludgeon an intruder to death about an hour ago? No? Oh, well, sorry to disturb you."

The burst of sarcasm as comic shtick was something Aldo hardly expected from an erotic Miss Universe and it made him laugh.

"Alright, forget it," he said. "But he might have told someone he was coming here."

"He didn't."

"But maybe he did."

"No. He never told anyone he was coming."

"You don't know that. How would you know that?"

"Because...he didn't want anyone to know about us."

Aldo stopped in his tracks. Stopped dead, like a flitting bug pinned by a lethal clause. Hoping he had simply gone hard of hearing from the strain, he turned to her slowly and said in a crushingly polite whisper, "What was that?"

"He never told anyone about...us," she repeated quietly.

"I thought...you told me...you never saw him before."

"I did."

"Did what? Say it or see him?"

"Look...I knew him, okay? I knew him. What do you want from me, my whole life history? I knew him. He came here before."

"Why did you lie to me?"

"Don't you get it?"

"No I don't."

"I was trying to protect myself. And you. Both of us. I thought we could get out of this clean. No names, no details. Just get rid of him."

"You listen to me," Aldo said, looming over her. "I just killed someone to save *your* life. That's not something I do. You want to get out of this? Well so do I. But you either tell me the truth or you can count me out right now. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Now did you or did you not know him?"

"Sort of."

"What sort of?"

"He was a sort of friend. He came here a few times."

"How many times is a few times?"

"I don't know! I don't have a damn retinal scanner. A few times."

"All right. So he came here a few times before. What's his name?"

"I don't know."

"What?"

"I swear. All he told me was that his name was John."

"That's it? Just John?"

"John."

"And you believed him?"

"It doesn't matter what I believed. People believe what they want to believe. He told me his name was John and I called him John. I'm sure *you of all people* can understand that...John."

"All right, forget it. You're right...the names don't matter anyway. You say he was a friend?"

"Sort of a friend."

"What does that mean?"

"Use your imagination."

"And what about the double cross that he was shouting about? What was that all about?"

"That I *really* do not know. I have no idea what he was talking about."

"He didn't want you being with other men. Is that it?"

She didn't answer.

"Well is it?"

"I'm telling you I don't know! I have no idea what he wanted. I didn't know him the way you *know* people."

"No?"

"Look...a friend of mine introduced us. She said he was loaded. Really rich like a trillionaire or something. So we went out once. It was okay. He didn't seem like a crazy. Guys can go loony on you sometimes. I've had that happen. But this guy seemed all right. So I gave him my number."

"So you were dating him?"

"You still don't get it, do you? Where did you grow up...in the Vatican?"

"The Bronx."

"Then don't be so thick. This is the way I live. I have friends. Boyfriends. We go out. We have fun. They buy things for me. Give me presents. See?"

"Yeah, I see."

"Don't give me that look. I'm not a hooker. I'm in the personal services business. And believe me...I'm worth it. You sure thought so a few hours ago."

"Forget about me. We have to do something with *him*. What else do you know about him?"

"Nothing. He called me up a few times. Sometimes he came over. We'd have some fun. He'd give me money or maybe he would buy me something. It was no big deal. I could see he had a temper, but he was never mean to me. I don't allow that."

"And that's it?"

"That's it."

"You don't know *anything* else about him?"

"Nothing. I don't know who he was or what he did or where he lived or anything. He didn't want me to know and that's the way I like it."

The reminder icon on Aldo's card began blinking as it lay on the table. Aldo raced over to it in order to touch the screen before the device announced the message...which was to call Kyla by one o'clock.

"I have to make a phone call," he said picking up the card and holding it in front of his face. "It's kind of personal." He nodded in the direction of the bedroom.

"Oh no, I'm not going back into the bedroom alone."

"Just for a few minutes."

"It's my apartment. You want privacy, then *you* go in there with the dearly departed."

The body was still on its back on the floor, hands down at the sides. Rather formal, even funereal, which in some perverse way was comforting to Aldo. Still, he tried to find a seat so that he would not actually have to see it. But this was no use. Like the subject of a surgical lecture, the body was visible from everywhere. Victoria, who could not bear to be in the same room with it, also could not bear to be by herself. So she crept into the hallway and stood just outside the half-closed door, holding herself in a tight hug.

Aldo called his fiancé on his card and tried to put on a happy face for the camera. Thinking ahead, he had pulled the covers down and rested his head on the pillow, making damn sure that there were no details in the background behind him that might be incriminating.

"Hey babe," Aldo said a bit too gaily when Kyla answered the call.

"Hello? Aldo?"

Furtively checking the body, it seemed for an instant that the dead man had twitched. Aldo gasped. But it was just a flicker in the room light.

"What's wrong?" Kyla asked.

Her face and voice seemed a billion billion miles away.

"Wrong?" Aldo honked. "Nothing. What could possibly be wrong? Nothing's wrong."

"You never call me babe. It sounds strange."

"I...I just woke up. Woke up to call you. I guess I'm still half asleep."

The dead man's head moved a bit then rolled over to the side. This time it was no optical effect; he was looking right at Aldo now.

"He must be dead," Kyla said in an aside to someone.

“What? What’s that??”

“He’s dead,” she repeated. “Oh sorry Aldo, I was talking to my mother. You must be dead tired. I won’t keep you on. But I’m glad you called. Everything’s fine here. My Mom sends her love.”

Kyla’s mother made a brief appearance on screen and waved. Aldo weakly waved back.

“How...how was the trip?” he asked.

“I picked a terrible old websim to watch called Dead Men Tell No Tales. Ever see it? Very stupid.”

At which point the lower jaw dropped towards the floor and fell a tad off kilter, giving the deceased the appearance of yawning.

“Oh God,” Aldo said and closed his eyes. But the image was inside his lids as well.

“You did? Well I really couldn’t watch it, so I did some work instead. Anyway as you can see, I got here okay and the weather’s great.”

Now the tongue dropped out of the gaping mouth and landed like a cigar butt at the corner of the lips.

“Aldo, do me a favor? Check and see if I left my silver necklace on the table? I can’t find it.”

“Necklace? Table? Um...uh...I...can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Can’t get up. Pooped. Comatose. Stiff as a board. I’m unconscious.”

“Poor baby. Just sit up and see if it’s on the table. It’s expensive. Point the camera.”

He groaned. And a thin spidery strand of slaver dropped from the dead man’s tongue to the carpet, where it glistened in the light. Aldo moaned to stifle an impending scream, which Kyla luckily took as exhaustion.

“Oh all right, never mind,” she said. “You sound tired. We can look later.”

The spittle beaded on the rug, then soaked into the pile.

“Miss me?” she asked.

“Mucho,” he said.

“Me too. Speak to you later on. Love you.”

“Love you.”

And he tapped off and dropped the device onto his stomach but with a delicate gravity, so as not to further disturb his very late and very slobbery roommate.

CHAPTER 3



A UNIVERSE OF CLUES

“All right, we get rid of him,” Aldo said.

He held his hands up, palms forward, to stop any further discussion. Victoria had no intention of arguing on the dead man’s behalf. They were back in the living room near a cold fireplace, having left the corpse alone in the bedroom to dribble in peace.

“Where?” Victoria asked.

“New Jersey,” Aldo said.

“Why New Jersey?”

“That’s where they dump everything. He won’t stand out in Jersey.”

“Fine.”

“Do you have a car?”

“Yes, it’s parked around the corner.”

“And it’s all legal and charged up and everything?”

“Yes.”

“Then here’s the plan. I’ll go around and get the car and bring it in front of the building. Then we can carry him out of here together. We can prop him up between us, like he’s drunk.”

“Oh no! I am not helping you carry him out. I’ve had enough of him for one night.”

“*You’ve* had enough? Lady, I don’t even belong here. That corpse in there is *your* corpse, not mine. He’s *your* John in *your* apartment. If you want him out of

your bedroom then you are helping me carry him. I am not slinging him over my shoulder like a deer.”

“Okay okay, we’ll both do it. Then what?”

“I’ll drive out to New Jersey and dump him somewhere. Meanwhile, you stay here and neaten everything up. And I mean *everything*. You’ve got to wipe out every trace of him and me...physical and digital. Do you understand? When I get back, I’ll park the car, give you back your card and that will be the end of it.”

Victoria agreed, less out of rationality than desperation. She got her card out of her bag and started to hand it to Aldo but she stopped midway and hovered.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“How do I know you won’t double cross me?” she said.

“Meaning what? How could I double cross you?”

“How do I know you’ll come back? You’ll have my card.”

“I can’t start your car without your card.”

“Yes, but I can’t live my *life* without it. You could dump him *and* dump the car, and leave me holding the bag.”

“Don’t be hysterical.”

“Well...how do I know?”

“We have to trust each other.”

“I’ve never trusted anyone in my life and I’ve done very well by it. I’m sure as hell not going to start with you.”

“Victoria, listen to me. We have no choice. If the police trace all this back to you, you could turn me in. And vice versa. We have to trust each other. We’re in this together.”

“But you know where I live. You’ll be in *my* car and you will have *my* card. I don’t know anything about you. I don’t even know who you are.”

“I told you.”

“Sure, I know. You’re John. And he’s John. They’re all John. Am I crazy or do you see a pattern here too?”

She had finally been able to light a cigarette. From the color, Aldo could tell that it was not even nobacco; it was the old kind, the one that killed you. Yet she was sucking on it like it was supplying her with oxygen rather than choking it off.

“I can’t tell you who I am,” Aldo said after a pause.

“Why not?”

“Because you could double cross me just as well.”

“How could I do that?”

"How? Like you said, I'll be driving around New Jersey in a strange car with a strange dead man in the strange back seat. What's to prevent you from calling the cops and putting the whole thing on me?"

"We have to trust each other, like you said," she said while blowing out a cloud of smoke that made it hard to see clearly for a moment.

"Okay," Aldo said after a long pause, "then you'll have to come with me. It's the only way."

"Never," she barked and twisted herself into a knot at the edge of the couch. "I'm not driving in my car with *that* in the back seat. Never never!"

"All right," Aldo said, doing his best to negotiate through the rising tide of suspicion. "Let's do this."

He took out the small leather case that held his card and offered it to her.

"What's that?" she said, eyeing it like a dead fish.

"It's my card."

"What do you want me to do with it?"

"We'll trade. I have to take your card in order to drive your car. But I can't do anything if you have mine. I won't have an ID, I won't have data access, I won't have any money. I can't even get into my own apartment building without it. You could keep it until I get back."

"You must have a backup."

"Of course I do, but it's in my apartment. Which I can't get into without this one."

"Apartments use hand-print scanners."

"My building is special. You need both your hand and your card."

"How do I know you're telling me the truth? It's just a card for chrissake. For all I know, you could have stolen it."

"Look, Victoria...it's all I have. You saw me use it before to make a call. It recognized my voice so you know it's mine. And anyway, the police can hack into it and read it. They can trace it back to where I live, all my accounts, my websona, everything. I'm leaving it with you. If I don't come back, my life is all yours."

"I don't know."

"It's the only way, if you won't come with me."

"It's crazy."

"No it isn't. It makes sense. This way you won't know who I am, so you can't double cross me. But you could locate me or turn me in if you had to, so I can't double cross you. And vice-versa. See?"

"I don't know."

"Now let's get going before it's too late to do anything. Where's your car?"

"On the next block. It's a red Shanghai."

But she was still sitting on the end of the couch in a cold sweat, frozen by doubt. A stray beam of city light coming through the blinds on the front window gave her a ghastly blue tint. A phantom without a fan. Aldo put his arm on her clammy shoulder and twirled a lock of hair away from her eyes.

"I'll be back. I promise," he said.

"Okay," she said stiffly and continued to stare at the floor as he walked out.

The card he had given her was the usual type...thin transparent plastic showing a hologram of Aldo's face at the right angle. Yet this little sliver of polycarbonate contained a vidcam, monitor, touchscreen, passport, car key, and all the other digital devices one needed to live. All packed, by the magic of nanotech, onto a card you could pick your teeth with. She knew she could not activate it by saying the name 'Aldo' because the card would not recognize her voice. So without thinking more about it, she opened the drawer of a table near the couch and took out a small flat gray box. She shoved the card into it, and waited until the yellow light lit. Then she took the card out, put the box away, and waited.

Finding the car was easy since it was the only red one on a street filled with Shanghais. The hybrid diesel/fuel cell from China was the car of the moment. But red was not. Red was a retro color, a throwback to a romantic age of motor-ing now that nightrogers and iridians and rhodopsins were in vogue. With Victoria's card he easily opened the door, started it up, and initiated the driving programs. But once he drove around and parked in front of the building, getting back into her apartment was not as simple. Aldo had been paying too much attention to her legs and not enough to her apartment number and he had no idea which buzzer to touch. He was staring blankly at the names on the list—ears flat out and eyes as round as the vowels in moron—when a woman opened the lobby door abruptly.

"Wha!" he jumped.

"What happened to you?" she said. It was Victoria.

"I didn't know which one it was."

"I told you. It's the red Shanghai."

"Which buzzer I mean."

"It's that one. Conner. Is the car all right?"

"Fine."

"Let's go already. I think he's...it's...beginning to smell funny."

The apartment looked great, as good as new. But just to make sure, Aldo walked the dead man's path. There was a scratch in the surface of the digiwall

from the door when it was kicked open, but nothing anyone would notice. The rug in the hall on which Victoria had slipped was back in place. And the poster that had been deleted when she rebooted the apartment was back on display. The bedroom too was tidy. There was no trace of the slaughter anywhere. Except, of course, for the guest of honor who was lying primly on the floor, looking calm and pacific. The face had lost its shock and had settled into a bland mask. The only sign of violence was the bump on the side of his head, and a dried drip of blood near it.

Aldo went down his list with Victoria, making sure she had done everything. She had. That left only one task on the list, one more thing to do. The final piece of business...dispose of the body. To do that, they put on their jackets and got on either side of the dead man, hoisting him in parts like an enormous marionette. He was thinner but much heavier than they expected. Twice Victoria lost her grip and sent the body jangling back down. Aldo wondered for a moment if the weight gain had something to do with the departure of the soul and if so, what that meant for God and man. But the spot of blood he suddenly noticed on the carpet stopped his sermonizing cold.

"You didn't clean that up," he said.

"Clean what up?"

"That blood on the carpet."

"I can't get it out."

"You've got to."

"I tried."

"Try again."

With the body now in a standing position, they rested the armpits of their uninvited guest on their shoulders. When they thought they had the right balance, they walked stiffly to the front door, his legs dragging like rakes.

"This will never work," Victoria said.

The dead man's head had lolled over to her side, so that he seemed to be whispering to her, giving her his belated view of things.

"It has to work," Aldo said, adjusting his grip.

"I can't look at him. It's making me sick."

"Then don't look."

"I can't not."

"Pretend he's drunk."

"I can't. He doesn't look drunk. He looks exactly like a goddamn fucking dead guy!" she said, wincing.

"Take that," Aldo said. He was pointing to one of her hats hanging on a peg near the door. It was a brown felt fedora with a red feather in the band. Victoria took it with her free hand and gave it to Aldo who placed it rakishly on the hanging head. They both looked at it and frowned.

"There," Aldo said, pretending it worked better than it did. "He's just drunk. We're just two friends helping a drunk buddy down to the car. That's all. Now let's get going."

"I'm going to be sick."

"Swallow it," Aldo said.

Left left, right right, left left...they marched like a dance team down the hall. Around the landing, down the stairs, and out the front doors. From the front of the building, the car at the curb seemed like a distant oasis at which they might never arrive, but they pressed on.

"You sure there are no vidcams here?" he asked, surveying the street. The block was empty except for a lone woman walking towards them. A quick calculus suggested that they would cross paths right before the car but the logistics of turning around and going back inside were impossible. Naturally, Aldo thought. Chaos again. He refit the dead man's hat to obscure the bruise on his temple.

"Oh dear," the woman said as she approached, "is he all right?"

She stopped directly in front of them and was blocking their advance. She was squat and dowdy, wearing black orthopedic shoes and thick glasses.

"Oh just finey diney!" Aldo said.

"He doesn't look very well," she said, refusing to give way and taking a closer look. "Are you taking him to the hospital?"

"Yes," Victoria hissed.

"No," Aldo answered. "Home. We're taking him home. He just needs to lie down, that's all."

They tried to nudge the woman out of the way. But instead of standing aside she reached up and touched the dead man's chin.

"His color looks bad. You should take him over to New York Hospital. They've got a very good emergency room there."

"Not that good," Victoria said.

Her half of the body was succumbing to gravity and throwing the team off kilter. Aldo felt the tug, compensated for it, and took the entire weight on himself.

"No no, he'll be fine," Aldo said, edging past the woman and struggling to get the rear car door open. "He just had too much to drink. You know, knocking back nuclears all night, the sot."

"Much too much," Victoria agreed. "But at least we're sure that he will never do *that* again."

"I know because I'm a nurse there. That's how I know," the woman said as she took out and consulted her own card. "It's just two o'clock. Dr. Boyle is on now. He's very good. I can call it in and prepare them for you to arrive. You know, I could come with you if you're worried."

"So very kind of you," Aldo said.

The door of the car was now open and he was holding the body up with both arms. Victoria was standing on the curb, her arms folded in a neighborly manner, and she was shivering. Aldo braced himself for the final push into the back seat of the car. But as usual, the dead man simply would not let go. The two of them were soon in an impossible clutch, clowns in a skit about small cars, and about to somersault together.

"Are you sure? I wouldn't mind coming," the woman said. "I can sit with him in the back seat."

"No need. He's fine."

Aldo's voice was hoarse and strained, like that of a fat man making small talk while delivering a refrigerator.

"Just fine," Victoria said.

"Well then I'll say goodnight. I hope your friend is all right."

"Yes," Aldo said, the sound muffled from speaking directly into the dead man's underarm. "He will be."

He finally had the body in the right spot at the back door but it still was not cooperating and it looked for an instant like Aldo might end up inside the car and the corpse in the gutter. Eventually he used what must have been some sort of mortician's judo and crouched, pushed, and flopped the body onto the seat, while also ripping open the skin on his forefinger against the dead man's belt.

"What now?" Victoria said when she heard him yelp.

"What now? What now?" he shouted. He was one more question away from going sidesplitting funhouse berserk. "He just told me how he wants a QUIET LITTLE CEREMONY WITH PLENTY OF CARNATIONS!"

"Shhh! Keep your voice down," she said, giving him a handkerchief from her pocket to staunch the blood.

In the car Aldo tried to take a deep breath to calm himself, but it came out in gasps. The rear view mirror was focused directly on the dead man's face. The hat had fallen off somewhere and the man seemed to be glaring at him in impatience. Aldo reached around and pushed him over against the door. Then he adjusted

the mirrors, seat, wheel, seatbelt, sensors, and indicators using the tapscreen, and began the drive, leaving Victoria standing alone on the sidewalk.

Aldo drove uptown with the caution of a hearse chauffeur which, in a sense, he had become. He knew that there were vidcams along the way and that the slightest traffic infraction would send alarms throughout the Grid. He was about to turn onto the 96th Street entrance to the West Side Highway, when a man in blue slid up alongside him. He was on a UniBoard and Aldo instantly noticed the familiar blue and white colors and the flashing dome atop the handlebars. Aldo tried to go invisible but only managed to be even more noticeable. The cop, wearing sunglasses, looked directly at him, then at the car, then motioned for him to pull over. Time stretched like a rubber band while the cop slowly rolled to a stop behind him, slowly stepped off the UniBoard, and ever so slowly came to Aldo's side of the Shanghai. It snapped when he rapped on the window.

"Is something wrong, officer?" Aldo jumped.

"Yup, 'fraid so."

"Did I do something?"

"Yup, sure have."

He lowered his hand to hide the bloody handkerchief that was tied around his finger and pretended to have one arm, half a face, and no story worth telling.

"You're drivin' awfully slow," the cop said. "Is everything all right?"

"Oh yes. I'm just cautious by nature. Can't be too careful," Aldo said.

"You're not driving under the influence of anything, are you there sir?" the officer asked.

"Oh no no no no no," Aldo said too quickly.

"Would you please bring up your data on the screen, sir?"

"Absolutely," Aldo said as he played the tapscreen in a frenzy, variously turning on and off the GPS, the air, the wipers, the Web, and the directional. Aldo tried to get hold of himself, hoping against hope that there was no problem with the car or with the fact that it did not belong to him. There was no law against borrowing, but without his own card he could not prove who he was. Nor could his passenger. Aldo knew that if the cop insisted on an eyescan—not to mention an autopsy—he was sunk.

"Take your time, sir."

"Yes," Aldo said.

Something squawked from the patrol UniBoard and the cop checked the screen on his wrist.

"All right, sir, I have an emergency call. Please watch your driving and obey all traffic rules and regulations. Especially at this time of night."

"Will do. Right away. And thank you very much, officer, thank you very *very* much," Aldo said, trying to sound like the most normal one-armed, two-faced, insomniac ever.

But instead of leaving, the cop peered deeper into the car.

"He okay?" the cop asked. He bobbed an infrared beam at the rear window and Aldo realized that the officer was not wearing sunglasses at all. They were night vision filters.

"He's great."

"Doesn't look great."

"Just drunk. As a skunk. I'll get him home and he'll be fine."

"Drive carefully, sir."

"I will, officer," Aldo shouted after him. "And thank you. Thanks for everything."

Watching him walk away in the rear view, Aldo had to fight the urge to blow the officer a kiss for not strapping him into the electric chair right on the spot. Assuming that they still had the chair, and that there were straps, and that it was still electric.

Aldo proceeded to the George Washington Bridge, all the while trying to find a balance between slow and careful and fast and furious. Potholes taken at that middling speed caused the dead man to roll back and forth like he was in the throes of a bad dream. That was one nightmare from which Aldo wished that he too could awaken.

"Please wake up," he even mumbled to himself. "Please?"

But he never did.

Instead, the dream got worse along with the road and by the time he got to the exit ramp off the bridge, it shattered. By then Aldo had begun to see the entire trip as a kind of test. If he passed, he reasoned madly, he would be allowed to go to prison for life. If he failed, he would spend eternity ferrying shades to the dark shore of New Jersey. Either way, his ordinary existence as the simple Aldo Weeks was over, that much he knew.

A bridge man in a green uniform was holding him up while a truck backed up. There were no other cars. The man kept grinning at Aldo throughout the wait, while Aldo sat back to keep his face in the shadows, avoiding both the worker and the bridge vidcams. But when the truck came to a full stop in the middle of the road, the bridge man walked over to the car.

"It'll just be another minute," the man said. "Nice car."

Aldo said nothing and tried to distort his profile as a disguise.

"I got a Shanghai too," he said. "You like it?"

Aldo did not answer.

"Great car, isn't it? Really thinks for itself. The fuel cell sometimes gets a little hot though. You notice that? This one a 2040?" the bridge man asked.

At that instant the truck moved and Aldo stomped on the pedal. In the rear-view mirror, which wrapped across the windshield from one side of the car to the other, he could see the man shouting and pointing at him. Thinking that he had run over the fellow's toe, Aldo stopped the car and looked back.

"You got a flat, Shanghai. Right rear," the man shouted.

"No!" Aldo insisted, still making Quasimodo with his cheeks.

"Flat as a pancake."

He did not think that cars even got flats anymore now that tires were made of regened abalone fiber. Yet somehow he knew with absolute conviction that the time to realize that he was wrong about that was right now. "What's next?" he muttered, afraid to actually ask out loud.

At a dark spot on the exit ramp he opened the trunk to find, not surprisingly, that there was no spare tire, only a can of tire inflator. His first thought was to inhale the foam and be done with it. Actually using the can to inflate the tire only occurred a few moments later. Aldo bent down near the wheel and hooked it up. The dead man's head was resting against the window, observing his progress.

"Dead?" a voice asked.

Aldo popped up like a gopher to find another bridge worker in a tow truck alongside the car.

"Who him? Nah. Just sleeping."

"Car dead?" he asked again.

"Oh! No, it's fine. Just fine. Everything's fine as can be," Aldo said.

"What's the problem?"

"Tire," he shouted.

"Sure you don't need a tow?"

"Nope."

"If you change your mind, I'll be back at the toll."

"I won't," Aldo said, tossing the empty can into the bushes on the far side of the embankment.

The road he took in New Jersey went from the base of the bridge south along the shore of the Hudson River. Further south, across from the Upper West Side, the shoreline was a colossus of condos that dwarfed the ones across the river. West Manhattan they were calling it. But the little stretch of roadway just south of the bridge was still undeveloped and the drive down it was bleak and raw. It

was perfect; it was isolated and totally off the Grid. There were no working street-lights, no vidcams that he could see, nobody and nothing. A chill wind was in the air. Black clouds obscured the moon and stars. A dandy night for ghouls.

On the right side of the roadway was an old stone wall barely holding back the dirt of a low cliff. Parched bushes on the hill looked like demonic fingers reaching out. To the left was the chilly Hudson River, and between the road and the river was a long dank mudbank. Only an occasional concrete lot with a warehouse, an abandoned diner, or a bowling alley broke the gloom. In the dark, with the lights out, the few buildings there seemed ominous, a Goth world of dreadful shapes. Aldo drove slowly past this grimscape, looking for the ideal burial site...the right balance of desolation and serenity. An undisturbed spot that no one would visit. And above ground. He was not prepared to dig.

One abandoned lot on the left side of the road looked promising until he noticed a sign in front that said NO URNS. Must get a lot of burials out this way, he thought, not laughing. But it turned out to be just a sick joke...an ordinary NO TURNS traffic sign on which some pranksters had painted out the letter T. Aldo pulled in. The lot was perfect. A tall fence blocked views on one side and a dead warehouse provided cover on the other. There were no other buildings anywhere nearby and no other signs of life anywhere. He parked the car on a cracked concrete slab at the front of the lot. Beyond it was a muddy stretch of ground reaching all the way to a black barge half sinking into the inky river. And best of all, there was a large green commercial dumpster sitting in the middle of the lot like a mausoleum.

The body was much easier to get out of the car than in. Aldo yanked it into a sitting position with its feet straight and its knees together like someone waiting to try on a pair of shoes. Then he took hold of the left arm, gave it a solid tug, and hoisted the body over his shoulder. In the twenty yards from the car to the dumpster, Aldo was back in the war carrying a wounded comrade across a mine-field. The fact that he had never *been* in a war did not seem relevant since the illusion was overpowering. Once at the dumpster, he hoped to flip the body inside. But the wall of the dumpster was too high, over five feet tall, and so after several ridiculous tries he came up with another plan.

Leaning the body like an ironing board, he climbed up and balanced himself on the rim of the dumpster. Then he grabbed the body under its arms and pulled up with all his might. But as the dead man's head reached Aldo's level, it flopped back. With eyes wide open, he seemed to be looking directly into Aldo's face with a quizzical gaze that said, "What on earth are you doing now, you idiot?"

Unable to take this inquisition one more time, Aldo gave a mighty heave-ho, yanked the body up and over, and tumbling into the dumpster it went. But then something caught on something in the way things do in the snaggy world and Aldo lost his balance and fell in as well. Soon he was thrashing about in smelly garbage, the corpse clinging to him like flotsam. The more he tried to swim out, the more entwined they got; there seemed to be extra arms everywhere and each push and pull brought them closer together. Aldo was soon drowning in crud. During one desperate move, the dead man actually slipped forward and smooched him on the lips.

And even when he was finally free and stood up knee deep in goop and turned to go, it was still no use. Galactic forces seemed to be at work. A button on his shirt, amazingly, had gotten buttoned in the dead man's buttonhole!

"Let go of me," Aldo demanded, enunciating every word. "Just let go!"

And in his delirium, he could have sworn he heard the clear resonant answer "no way," but that might have been the wind. The dumpster was filled with rotten apple cores and peels; it smelled like a peuton, the new subatomic particle with four cycles of stench. And it was thick as a bog. The body was only partly buried in it and a lilywhite hand, a black sock, and a blue knee stuck out. Aldo did as much rearranging as he could bear, then climbed out.

All was still outside the cosm of the dumpster. The dark night was still dark, the empty lot was still empty, the waiting car waiting. And there was still no one around. But from his position at the dumpster's edge, Aldo could clearly see that there was now a neat trail of footprints leading the way back to the car. Aldo put his foot in one to check his hunch and found that he was right...the footprints were his own. The weight of the body on the way in had caused him to sink into the mud just enough to leave molds for the police to show to the jury. Taking a large piece of board lying on the ground, he dragged it over all the footprints on the way back to the car. It left a pathway in the mud but at least not one that could be traced back to his own guilty feet.

And so it was finally over. He sat in the car and breathed for the first time in hours, celebrating the first moment that he was not all tangled up with his victim. Oddly, there was no grief, no sadness, no real remorse. And that bothered him. After all, it was a dismal end even for a madman. Are we not all one rage away from oblivion, he wondered? Do not the lowest among us deserve some sympathy at the final hour? He decided that a few words would not be out of order. A last remembrance to ease the path to the other world. It was only right.

"Good riddance," he said, putting an end to the whole business.

The drive back to the city was quiet, with no surprises. None at all. Not even as he picked at the scab of his wound and failed to notice that the handkerchief he had tied around his finger was now missing.

It was 5 o'clock in the morning by the time he got back to Victoria's apartment. She gasped when she opened the door. Aldo looked exactly like the bogeyman she used to imagine as a girl: his clothes were glazed with sweat and mud; his right index finger was caked in blood; his hair looked like the undermat of a carpet. And he reeked of rotten apple.

"What took you so long?" she asked, but sharply, as though he had gone around the corner for the paper.

"I was having way too much fun," he said without amusement.

She, on the other hand, looked much better. Her face was washed and her hair brushed. She was wearing a long satin robe. Not quite the fantasy knockout he had fallen for in another lifetime, but not the fiend he had become either.

"I was starting to get worried," she said.

"Couldn't find a good spot for a while."

"For the car?" she asked.

"For the car? The car?" he sputtered, failing to achieve the high mockery he wanted. "Not for the car...for the *goddamn corpse!*"

"Shhh! What do you mean a good spot?"

"I mean that there were no vacancies at the local cemetery so I had to STUFF HIM IN A GRAVE WITH SOMEONE ELSE! What do you think I mean??" He was at the end of his rope. The one they hang you with. Victoria saw that and quickly ushered him in and closed the door.

"But you did?"

"Did what?"

"Find a spot?"

"Yeah, a pleasant little spot in a dumpster by the river over near..."

"Don't tell me. I don't want to know about it," she said backing away. "You smell really terrible."

He tried to sneer but all he could muster was a sorrowful grimace.

"Is it okay?" she said by way of apology.

"I think so."

"Can I get you anything?"

"A pardon," he spit.

They exchanged their cards and then, in a kind of sleepwalk, Aldo made a final check of the apartment. He went over everything with her one more

time...the scratches, the dents, the traces, the apartment's computer system. It looked all right, which is to say that it all looked erased. The spot of blood on the carpet was not completely gone but he was too tired to care. He tapped at the last item on his list—dispose of the body—and the card put a check next to those words. Done. List finished. Then he collapsed the card into itself and returned it to its leather case. As they walked to the door, Victoria picked something up and handed it to him. It was a heavy object wrapped loosely in a sheet of paper.

"Here," she said. "Take this."

"You didn't have to," Aldo said, thinking irrationally that she was giving him some kind of gift.

"Take it," she said, shoving it into his hand.

"What is it?"

"The thing."

"What thing?"

"The thing you...you know..."

Aldo folded the paper back to find a metal cube with a mazelike design on the top side.

"Is this mine?" he asked, with perfectly deranged logic.

"It's the thing you hit him with."

"What?"

"It's the murder weapon."

"Don't say that!"

"Take it."

"I don't want it."

"Me either. Just take it."

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

"I can't look at it."

"Then get rid of it."

"You do it," she said and shrugged it away. "I don't want anything to remind me of tonight. Please."

Always gracious, Aldo folded it back up and tucked it under his arm.

"Is this going to work?" she asked. It was a plea not a question.

"It's going to work," he said. A prayer not an answer.

They stopped for a second at the door to think of something to say. There was nothing.

"Goodnight," Aldo said, opening the door.

"Yes, goodnight," Victoria said, closing it.

No doubt destiny really did have a memory, he thought. The longest memory imaginable. In which every single event, no matter how small, was raveled into the fabric of space/time, there to be read by anyone with enough leisure and sense and desire. Quantum laws of narrative in which even the merest trace of an occurrence—antiquarks sparking, say, or wishes swishing—are permanently recorded. How careful did one have to be in such a universe? Aldo had done his best to hide his trail, but there were, he knew, more than a few glitches. Like the one, two, three, four eyewitnesses and who knew how many casual observers he had not seen. Plus appearing on every single vidcam from 89th Street to the Bridge and beyond and back. Not to mention his DNA and skin cells and what-not on the car, in the apartment, the dumpster. And then there was the whopping clue of a dead body floating in a swamp of old apples. By themselves, of course, each of these meant nothing. Incidents in the vast unfolding cosmos, tidbits in the datastorm that made up all of life on earth. But extracted from the soup of their surroundings, isolated and noted, they were nothing less than an entire subgalaxy of clues. Of course, some fanatic detective would need a damn good reason to find, scan, and integrate all of them into the big picture, meaning Aldo's picture hanging on the precinct wall. Someone would somehow have to suspect him first, then piece together the sequence of events, and only then methodically gather all the clues to make the case.

And just how likely was that to happen?

C H A P T E R 4



ADDER ON THE CASE

It was already the morning rush hour by the time Aldo Weeks walked the eight blocks back home. This was encouraging since he knew that his image on the Grid would be lost among all the other walkers. His building, the Urbana on the corner of Broadway and 96th Street, seemed to his weary eyes like Oz looming in the distance. The Urbana was a prime residence, one of the newest of the hypercondos, a small town onto itself with 1,000 apartments and a health club, a garage, two restaurants, arts center, town hall, quadraport, and the highest of high-tech living inside. All of its security, access, output, sensors, usage, and internal networks were run by an ArtAn system. ArtAn stood for Artificial Analysis, the next iteration of the massively integrated computer net. In other words, the building was smart; it could think for itself, evaluate and conclude. But like all smartech, it had a dumb genius, on the order of a baboon with a degree in accounting. Aldo well knew that the building would have recorded him leaving last night and not coming back until the next morning. This was an unusual pattern of behavior for him that could be noted and reported to the security technician, but there was no law against spending the night out. Still, the sense that the building already knew something was up made him feel queasy as he walked into the lobby.

Exhausted from his night of involuntary homicide, Aldo dragged himself through the entry routine. He waved at the guard on duty who was busy watching the monitors in front of him, paused briefly as he passed by the front desk for

a thermal scan, held up his card for passage through the security gate, and then flashed his palm at the scanner for an ID. The wallscreen at the rear of the lobby was showing a montage of windows with various forms of information...news, celebrity gossip, stocks, weather, diet updates. As he passed these on his way to the elevators, Aldo was at the outer limit of his fatigue and barely noted the woman giving the breaking news report in one of those windows.

"Web magnate Gordon Karkas has been reported possibly missing," the head said. "The Urbana has indicated that the eccentric billionaire left the building last night at ten o'clock and has not returned. The building, which he owns, notes this as unusual behavior and police are investigating."

No, Aldo did not hear a word of it. Thanks to the oblique angle of the wall, the morning bustle in the lobby, and his own stupor, he managed to arrive at the elevators with only a fleeting glimpse of the face they were showing onscreen. Still, something about that face lodged in his short-term memory. That face. Was there something familiar...

"Did you hear that?" one guard said to the other. "Mr. Karkas is missing."

"I know. You didn't know?"

"No."

"I knew."

"I didn't know. You knew?"

"Yeah. You?"

"No. This friggin' building don't tell me nothin'."

Aldo did not hear that exchange either, being just out of earshot. But waiting for the elevator, he had the odd sense that something was trying to signal him from inside his own brain, from the back of the skull where images are handled. Something about a man's face. He rubbed the top of his neck to get in touch with it, but it was no use. It was just out of reach. Even the digiwall at the rear of the elevator was showing it, but the car was crowded and he was facing front.

Back in the safety of his apartment, Aldo went through each room and touched everything in sight. Unlike most people, his apartment was not stuffed with stuff. In the age of the image, objects had taken on an almost religious aura and most folks had large collections of them in closets and containers and cabinets. When you went visiting, you were almost certainly agreeing not only to dinner and conversation, but also to an evening inspecting precious curios. But Aldo Weeks—devotee of pure data—was committed instead to the virtual and his apartment was as spare as a monk's cell. By design, he made an austere life, as immaterial as possible. He was aware of the magnetism of objects, of course. Well aware. He knew that every thing touched had mass and therefore enough gravity

to make a dent in the fabric of existence—no matter how shallow—into which one could tumble. That was the problem; it was the tumbling that terrified him.

Still, to comfort himself now that he was home again, he methodically touched the few items he did own...the chair, refrigerator module, digiwall, the smartbed, every towel in the closet, the Neuroliner. Communed with them one by one. This enforced a kind of tactile truth, reassuring him that it was all still there and that, by association, he was too. He showered and scrubbed, had his soiled clothes sent to the local cleaners, and got into a nice clean sleepsuit. Then he called Cleo and told her to take the day off because he was under the weather. He got into bed. But no matter how hard he tried, turning every whichway and inhaling repeated doses of Slumba, he could not sleep. This was not due at all to his new criminality, but rather to the nagging sense that there was something important that he should know about but did not.

When he finally drifted off, it was into his favorite dream in which he is sitting in his study in a London townhouse. The clay pipe, the fireplace, the oaken desk, the lamp, the glass of port, the sound of hooves on the street outside. He is there surrounded by botanical specimens, oddities from the corners of the earth, and he is methodically and neatly affixing each to a sheet of paper. Below the specimens he writes out a series of detailed labels including place of origin, scientific name, date of discovery. From the sharpened goose quill dipped in India black against the surface of the coarse paper, comes a scraping sound, the ink like blood flowing from a wound, the bruised flesh, the metal block, the battered skull...

He startled himself awake, gasped, wondered if he had just dreamed. And sleep was no use any more. What was I just thinking? he kept thinking. But he could not think of it.

The following morning he was back at his desk, having slept for an entire day and feeling better than he had the right to. It was amazing how a little sleep could wipe the conscience almost squeaky clean. And happily, everything in the office was in order too. Just as he left it...blank. The two chairs were lined up carefully across from the desktop. The door to Cleo's space was flat against the wall. The trash pail that was always empty because there was no trash, was empty. No disturbances, just the way he liked it. By 9:00, Cleo was in the outer room doing her work. Everything in order. Nothing had changed.

He took out a pencil from a drawer below the desk and prepared to start his work. He never, of course, had any need at all for a pencil. It was the age of the screen. But he liked to chew on it both dentally and mentally, as an inspiration. As a kind of icon to the ordered mind. It was all there in the pencil, he

thought...notation and indication, erasure and the wearing down. But as he studied it, he found something that *was* wrong. On another day he might have ignored it—and probably not, in any case—but this morning it was too awful to bear and he found that he simply could not continue. There was no point. No point at all. And *that* had never happened before. Cleo always sharpened his pencil. And how could the tip, which he never used anyway, break? This was truly disturbing. And he thought that it could all—all of it, every bit of it—fall completely apart starting with that very point.

“Cleo,” he said, walking out to her desk. “What’s the matter with this pencil?”

“I don’t know. Try shaking it,” she said without looking up from her tap-screen.

But he was too caught up in himself to get the joke and he actually shook it.

“I’m a little busy, Aldo. What could possibly be wrong with a pencil?”

“There’s no point.”

“This is the year 2040, Aldo. The age of the cybervers. We talk to our desks, tap into the Matrix, delete our mistakes. We don’t *use* pencils.”

“I know, but I really have to start the day with a sharp pencil. It gets me going...like a cup of coffee. And this one is broken.”

“Yet still we must go on.”

Cleo finally looked up from her desktop to find that he was serious. And much more than that...pathetically serious.

“Jesus, Aldo, you look awful,” she said. “You really shouldn’t let something like this get to you. Life is way too short.”

“Points matter.”

“This is more of the obsessive/compulsive thing isn’t it?”

“Not at all.”

“It’s not like somebody died a violent death.”

He shivered.

“Okay,” she said, feeling sorry. “I’ll see if I can find something to sharpen it with. Sharp as cheddar. I promise.”

“Thanks,” he said and went back to his room.

She was right of course. This *was* the age of the cybervers, an awkward term that no one really used outside technical documents. She was referring to the uber-system of digital information, the world-wide electronic network. Computer communications were now so deeply woven into day to day life that they could be mistaken for the key thread...pull it and everything would unravel. People no longer *used* computer networks, they lived in one. What had once been

telegraph then telephone then cable then satellites was now the one system. What had been the Arpanet then the Internet then the World Wide Web was now this allsurmounting, everywhen-at-once, comprehensive, wireless and wily information whizbang. What had once been entertainment or communication or surveillance was now a single, massively computing, planetary neural net. What had been dumb and then clever and then smart now used artificial intelligence and analysis to evaluate and mediate and suggest. The digital convergence of the previous century, in which all encounters were transmuted into bits in a datastream, had now evolved into a global totality that challenged the pre-eminence of the old world of atoms at every level.

It was all the one thing now...the endless flow allover and each and everywhere of digital information making words and images and pictures and mathematics and logic. But by the rules of change, even this one system had evolved into complexities, had differentiated into intersecting structures. Like the gods of ancient religions, this system had aspects or attributes. People used different words to refer to these. It was the Web as a vast record of information available to everyone everywhere. It was the Grid in its ability to locate and track any particular person as they acted in the physical world. It was the Flux as an all-encompassing entertainment network. And it was the Net in its military and surveillance aspects; the Synplex as a compendium of every movie and television show ever made; the Matrix in its ability to create a new virtual world within the old one; Cyberia as it presented a vast unknowable wasteland of data that could never be calculated or grasped.

Within all of this, a single pencil with its gritty point and rubby eraser was about as useful as a splinter, except to the extent that Aldo Weeks could use it as a wand to orchestrate his thoughts. And that is why it mattered at all and was worth fretting over.

Sensing his presence, the desktop brought up a series of windows for him to evaluate: the schedule for Hills&Dales, the country living webalog, was quite late; the budget for Ups&Downs, the stock market prognostic, was due in two hours; Seven&Seven, the mixology site, needed a list update pronto; and someone was ringing the outer tone to get in. Aldo saw all this, saw it with the same old eyes, but it meant nothing. In spite of his great love of details and accounts and traffic, he still could not seem to focus. He was even numb to the numbers that he so loved. Instead, what he could not get out of his head was the image of those dead eyes staring at him. Thirty hours later and he was still murderstruck.

That perhaps was the reason that he did not jump out of his skin when the lights in his office went out. And when the bright spotlight hit him in the pupils, he did not make a fuss. Nor did he bristle at the first blunt question. He simply accepted that the investigation had been concluded and that the interrogation had begun. Somehow it all seemed right and proper...and inevitable.

"Where were you that night?" said a voice on the other side of the spotlight.

Aldo did not actually recall being arrested, but he assumed that nervous amnesia could account for that.

"Nowhere," he replied, squinting at the beam, trying to block it with his fingers.

"Cut the shit, Weeks."

"Home. Right here. I was home," he said, wondering how they found out so quickly.

"Expect us to believe that crap? Think we're idiots. You got a witness?"

"I called my fiancé," he said automatically and wondered why he had failed to rehearse all of this ahead of time. "At around one. It'll be on my card."

"Cards can be fixed."

"Ask my fiancé, she'll verify it."

"She'll say anything you teller to. She's your damn girlfriend! Better confess, Weeks, and get it off your chest. You'll feel better."

Aldo was about to do just that when he had a comforting insight instead. This wasn't happening. He had not been arrested at all; this was just an elaborate web-sim he had forgotten he signed up for. Simulation technology was getting more convincing every day and this was the topper, so vivid he mistook it for his life. That was the only explanation. Because the man asking the questions was now in view. Aldo could see him clearly and he could clearly see that it was...the dead man! Yes. It was the man he had killed in Victoria's apartment, his face frozen now like a life-size photo worn as a mask. He was standing there holding the light on him.

"Why are you lying?" the phantom asked, stepping closer.

"I didn't mean it," Aldo said. "It was just a big mistake. It was an accident."

"That's supposed to make up for it? Tell it to my widow."

Aldo desperately wanted to scream and end the nightmare but he could not find his voice. And as he slapped his own head he realized that he was not wearing his simscape. Nor could he seem to shake himself awake. Not because he lacked the will but because there was nothing to wake from and no program to end. It was not a delusion...the dead man's face really *was* advancing on him.

Then, just as suddenly, the inquisition stopped. The room went luminous again and Aldo could finally see that it was nothing more than a guy holding a flashlight, with a picture of the dead man's head stuffed into his shirt collar. The intruder yanked the picture out and threw it towards the desk, where it took a breezy spin and landed upside down. The whole ordeal was just a stupid practical joke.

"No really," the prankster said, sitting down noisily in the other chair. "Where were you the other night?"

It was Loren Adder, one of the security techs in the building. Adder was also an amateur twit and a possible missing link to that evolutionary dead end *homo sap*. He was a nobody with no clout and nothing to do but man the front desk at the Urbana. Aldo's response to him only mattered to the extent that he could practice his alibi, but even so he could not seem to work up the steam to provide one. He was using all his energy to try to force his blood pressure back down.

"Huh?" Adder said. "How come you didn't show up at the bar the other night? Wallace said you were gonna meet us. Whadja do, forget?" Adder smiled and put one heavy-duty black shoe up on Aldo's desk. He had crooked teeth, spiny hair, a pinched nose, dermal scars. The worst features of both man and rodent in a kind of perverse reverse genetic engineering. Aldo could not stand him, no one could. But Adder was blessed with a sensibility too dense to pick up on it and he could thereby live his life thinking well of himself.

"Do you mind," Aldo finally managed, nudging the thick sole off his desk.

"Didja go to the wrong bar or somethin'?" Adder asked, nibbling his lower lip with his sharp mousey teeth.

"I...didn't feel too well," Aldo explained. "I stayed home."

"That I could believe. You look like shit. Flu?"

Aldo sniffed.

"I know just what you mean," Adder said, taking a black beret out of his pocket and searching the inside of the headband idly.

"Looking for something?" Aldo said, meaning some misplaced gray matter.

"Nah," Adder said, not meaning a thing. "Shit."

"You said it," Aldo said.

"Holy cow," Cleo announced from the other room. "Did you hear the news?"

"What news?" Aldo shouted back, praying along the lines of Adder's reassignment to the Negev.

"Karkas is missing."

"What?" Aldo said.

"Gordon Hardin Karkas," she said, appearing at the doorway. "He's missing."

The two men were silent in return. Aldo because he was dumbfounded, Adder because he was simply dumb.

"Helloh? Anyone home here?" Cleo asked. "You know, Gordon Karkas, CEO of Ganesh Communications? That would be the company we work for. Owner of the Urbana? Am I speaking Uranian here?"

"I know," Adder said. "That's what I came to tell you guys. About Karkas. He left the building two nights ago and he never came back." He was pointing to the photo he had been wearing as a gag, now laying on the desk.

Aldo did not need to look at it, but he did anyway, simply as a test of his mettle. He held it up and matched the face to the one stored in his neurons. Nose to nose, teeth to teeth, eye to eye. And now suddenly the obvious hit him like a revelation. And all the little nits that had been picking at him came together into one big understanding. There was no doubt about it. It was the same man! The one in the picture and the lunatic from Victoria's apartment were the same person. This was more than a nightmare; it was some sick version of the American dream. Aldo Weeks had managed to kill his own boss and landlord in one swell foop.

"So this is what he looks like," Cleo said, taking the picture. "I've worked for him for four years and he lives right here in the building. But I've never even seen him. Have you, Aldo?"

"No. Never ever seen him," he answered. Meaning, of course, not until he stared up into his nose and clobbered him to death.

"Nobody's seen him," Adder said, spinning his cap on his finger. "He never used his vidcam when he made calls and he hardly ever left the penthouse. He was one a them there...whadayacallits."

"Recluse," Cleo said.

"I love it when you use words like that, darlin'. Say it again."

Thinking Cleo was flirting with him, Adder shot her a rodential wink, to which she responded by exhaling and dropping her bust one full size. Repulsed, she turned to leave. But Adder quickly stood up and moved even closer to her. He was taller than one hoped and angular, like a hatstand. He put on his beret with a soldierly flop...failing on the soldierly but achieving the flop.

"When're you going to let me get in your pants, huh doll?"

Cleo blanched and pushed him aside with a sanitary fingertip. "Thanks but there's one asshole in there already," she said and went back to work.

"Why are you carrying his picture around?" Aldo asked Adder.

"To show around to the tenants, since nobody knew what he looked like. I'm gonna try to get some information about him."

"You?"

"Hey, you think I'm just a security tech around here? Well you're right, but not for long. I got bigger plans."

"Why not just post the picture on the building network? It's already on the news."

"I got my reasons."

"You have reasons? That alone is amazing."

"If I post it, then the building knows I posted it. For now, I'm keeping a low profile about my involvement as regards the late Mr. Karkas."

"Late? I thought he was missing."

"Mind if I close your door?" Adder asked, waving to Cleo and shutting it before Aldo could answer. "See Aldo, here's the thing. Officially he *is* missing, but just between you and me? He ain't missing. He's found."

"Found? What do you mean found? He's found? How?"

"Dead, that's how. In a garbage dump over in New Jersey. This morning."

"Already??"

"Most missing bodies are found in the first twenty-four hours," Adder said confidently.

Aldo had already brought up a series of news channels and reports on his desktop and was furtively scanning them for information. "I don't see that anywhere. How do you know this?"

As Adder leaned forward to share the secret, his words were carried on a sour cloud of cheesy breath. "As luck would have it, the detective investigating the case turns out to be...who?"

"The detective? The case? How should I know?"

"Guess."

"Sherlock Holmes."

"Don't be funny. Sherlock Holmes is dead. Everybody knows that."

"Okay, then. I give up. Who's the detective?"

"None other than my cousin Erle. He's a cop with the NYPD. Detective, I mean. Plus, he's gonna let me in on the investigation too. Sort of like a...a..."

"Dupe?"

"A consultant! I mean, is that astral or what? I may be able to break the case for them. Now why do I say this? Because I figure that maybe someone here in the building done it and this building is my turf after all. So I'm gonna do some snooping around and see what I can see."

"Why someone in the building? What would make you think that?"

"Hey, why not? The killer gotta live somewheres. So why not here?"

"That's ridiculous."

"No it ain't, Aldo, just think about it. This whole building is full of people just like *you*."

"Me?? What do you mean like me?"

"You know, people who worked for Karkas. Most every tenant here in the Urbana works for Ganesh Communications just like yourself, in home offices. I mean that's how you *got* this apartment, am I right?"

"Yes, but..."

"So who would rather kill a boss than someone who worked for him? See what I'm saying? Maybe one of the tenants here offed him, like in some kind of extortion deal or something. Or some weirdo sex thing. Nobody knew what Karkas was up to and I figure the cops could use some inside dope."

"Well, if they need any inside dope, then they sure got the right guy."

"Yeah, I know. I mean who better than yours truly to check out the tenants here while Erle dicks around with clues and all that other shit. I could end up being security boss around here if I play my genes right."

"Do the cops know anything else?" Aldo asked, as casually as humanly possible. "Just that they found the body in a dumpster in New Jersey?"

"What dumpster?"

"You said they found the body in a dumpster in New Jersey this morning."

"No I didn't."

"Yes you did."

"No."

"Yes yes."

"No, I said a dump. Like where the trucks go to dump all the garbage. What makes you think it was a dumpster?"

Aldo took a deep inhale that wheezed around a constriction in his throat. "Oh haha, yes, well. Dump, dumpster. It's the same thing," he said.

"No no. It ain't the same thing. Companies throw their garbage into dumpsters. Then the trucks go around to all the dumpsters and collect the garbage. Then they go out to the dump and dump it. See the difference? The dump is a big pit full of trash and that's where his body was found. But it's interesting that you said *dumpster*."

"I didn't *say* anything. I was just asking."

"Maybe not, but you *said* dumpster."

"What the hell difference does it make what I said?" Aldo choked. "Dump, dumpster. The only difference between them is a little 'stir'. What's the damn difference?"

"Hey, don't chew my ear off. It's just that only some of the garbage at the dump comes from dumpsters. A lot of it comes from garbage cans and street cleaners. So it's funny that you should say dumpster since the cops think Karkas' body actually *did* come from a dumpster."

"Yeah, that's what I thought you said."

"No I didn't."

Aldo knew he could have asked the office to play back the transcript of their conversation, but he was afraid of just what that would tell him. "Forget it!" he said. "Just tell me...why...why do they think it was in a dumpster?"

"Clues. That's the beauty of police work. Conductive reasoning."

"What kind of clues?"

"You seem pretty interested in all this."

"Me? No. I mean Karkas was my boss after all. And I just..."

"Don't deny it Aldo, you love this shit. It's better than any of the cop web-sims. It's like...what's it like?"

"Real life?"

"Exactly. I'm into it too. I love it. Hey, that's why I went into the security business in the first place. To use up my mind. But after I flunked the police test, I had to..."

"What kind of clues?" Aldo insisted.

"Well, according to Erle the body should have stayed buried under all the garbage in the dump. It wouldn't have been found maybe forever that way. But it didn't stay buried. One of the drivers found it because it was sticking out. Sticking up out of the garbage. And why is that? Because the seagulls had eaten away most of the garbage on top of it, and that exposed the body. Clue. Now guess why the seagulls did that."

"I have no idea."

"Go on guess."

"How the hell should I know? I wasn't there!"

"They smelled apple peels," he said, demonstrating the idea by sniffing the air with his twitchy snoot. "That's what was on top of the body. It was sunk under a pile of apple cores and peels."

Aldo was beginning to feel himself sinking, swirling in a tide of premises that never seemed to reach a conclusion. "Apple peels. So what?" he snapped.

"So as it just so happens, seagulls love apples. They chew it and shit. You know, seagulls?" He flapped his elbows to help the idea along.

"Yes, I get it," Aldo said, dropping even deeper. "Seagulls...what about them?"

“So these here seagulls, they been busy eating the apple peels all day. Picking at them, eating them, you know. That’s why the body was sticking out, and why the driver found it and why he called the police. And that’s where your dumpster comes into the picture.”

“Where exactly?” Aldo asked, wondering if the pain he was having was a new coronary or old indigestion.

“Well, Erle figured it this way. That many apple peels had to come from a commercial source. I mean, no one eats that much apples. Take me for instance. I like apples as much as the next man—an apple a day and all that—but we’re talking a lotta fucking apples here, pardon my Greek.”

The console before him began to shift and change as the room noted that Aldo had been sitting in his chair but not accessing the touchscreen for a long time. That meant possible trouble and so in addition to what was there before, a new set of queries and notes and dataframes began jumping up all over the place: to call Derek at Dribs&Drabs; to run a hemoprobe; to log in the budget; to take his energy inhalant. Any moment now, the room would take his vitals, find his pulse up, and ask him if anything was wrong. He touched the screen randomly to demonstrate that he was still working.

“Look, Adder. I’ve got to get back to work here. Does all this with the apples and the seagulls lead anywhere?”

“It sure does. Erle figured that commercial garbage like that must’ve come from a...what? A commercial dumpster! Your dumpster. So he checked out businesses in the area that use up a lot of apples.”

“You mean the police are out looking for a company that dumps apples?”

“Nah.”

“They’re not looking?”

“They stopped looking.”

“They gave up?”

“They found it.”

“Oh God.”

“Yup. Right on the Jersey shore, just south of the bridge. There’s this place where they make natural ointments and such. It’s a factory right on the Hudson. They use a shitload of apples every week, and they dump the peels and cores in a dumpster near the building. Erle figures that’s where the body was first dropped.”

“But there was no factory near the dumpster,” Aldo insisted.

“Say what?”

“I said,” he said, gathering himself, “there *was* a factory near the dumpster?”

"Yep, right down the road. They keep the dumpster away from the building on account of it stinks."

"Is that it?" Aldo prayed. "Or is there anything else they know?"

"You're really into this shit aren't you?"

"I sure love a good mystery."

"Fuck!" he said and slammed his hand down on the desk, causing a shimmer in the liquid aluminum surface.

"Don't do that," Aldo said, his left heart valve fibrillating.

"That's exactly why I went into police work. My folks could never understand it. They thought I should have pursued a career in micro-sewage instead. But see...I love a good mystery too. I love figuring all this kind of crap out. You really get to use your noodles. Much more than in fixing sumps." A poke at his own forehead sounded a hollow note.

"Is that it?" Aldo pressed. "Apples, dumpster, seagulls."

"I'm telling you, Aldo, no matter how fancy they get with ArtAn and DNA and GPS, I think you'll find that you still need your basic three B's for police work," Adder explained as he got up to leave. "Brains, bullets, and balls."

"So that's all they know then."

"So far. They got the body though, so they can do all sorts of tests and shit. Now that I know you're into this, I'll keep you posted. Erle promised to keep me up on any developments so I can carry on with undercover work here."

"What does Erle want you to do exactly?"

"Keep my ears and eyes open. Be on the alert. Look for anything that might point to the creep, just in case my theory is right and he does turn out to live in the building."

"The cops think that too? That he lives here?"

"Actually they don't. But I'm gonna prove them wrong."

"Why?"

"Because it's my big break," he said, opening the door to Cleo's space and walking past her. "This is my chance to make a name for myself. Maybe even get out of this fuckin' slimepit. Pardon the Greek." He scrunched his lips towards Cleo as he opened the outer door and left.

She scrunched back in distaste, smiled at Aldo, and pretended that she had not been listening to the entire conversation on the console.

New list.

But rather than recite it, Aldo brought up a keyboard and typed it in furiously. This was a list of everything that it seemed the police knew so far, at least accord-

ing to Adder. He felt calmer once it was recorded because lists had that effect on him. And the fact that it was not a long list meant one thing to him...they did not have much to go on.

They had found the body and would examine it. But nothing on it could possibly point to him, he told himself. Any biotracers would have been lost, or at least hopelessly muddled, in the thermal swamp of the dumpster. That's why he had picked it. They would discover a generic bump on the head that could have come from any generic blunt object wielded by some generic blunt of a person. The body would tell them nothing else. He put a check next to those items.

And they had found the dumpster. But that too would yield nothing. There were no footprints; he had erased them. No tire tracks; he had parked on a concrete slab. No vidcams around the site. No witnesses after the bridge. No reason to assume the killer drove in from the city. The only clue was the one item he could not account for...the bloody handkerchief. But the dumpster had already been emptied and if they had not found it so far, they probably would not. He checked those items as well.

And even if they did find the handkerchief and traced it back to Victoria, there was still no way for her to find him. She knew nothing about him, not even his name. There were some people who could identify him—the nurse on the street, the cop on the UniBoard—but they would need a reason to. And besides, eyewitness testimony, so confused and troublesome, was no longer admissible in convictions. Or so they claimed on the cop shows.

Conclusion?

He was still safe.

He put a check mark next to Victoria's name, the last item on the list, and closed the window to get back to work. But by that time, there was so much unfinished business onscreen that the computer misread his signal and started flashing the word "Victoria" like a birthday banner across the top of the desk.

He ignored it.

C H A P T E R 5



A HINT OF TANNIN

The health club on the third floor of the Urbana was pure SOTA. The initials stood for “state-of-the-art” facility. It was a smart club that knew your body better than you did. It constantly monitored all vitals, compared these to its databank, and reported on the status of your blood, heart, energy, enzymes, protein, sugar, mood, pulse and a whole soup of acronyms no one but the computers understood anymore. Even Aldo, master of data, was overwhelmed by that much self-knowledge; he did however appreciate the thoroughness of it all and managed to squeeze in his half hour of exercise every other morning. But thrown off by the events of the last few days, he changed his pattern this time which—big surprise—had all sorts of unplanned repercussions.

He was late that morning getting to the third floor. Before putting his clothes in the locker, he went to the bathroom in the club, which he had never used before. There he discovered that the toilet required card access, which he never knew before. This was because the toilet recorded and analyzed output, which never would have occurred to him before. Innocently taking out his leather case, he retrieved his card and flashed it before the scanner, which he had never done before, only to find it abruptly rejected by the toilet.

Unwilling to accept this rebuff, he went through the whole routine again. And then a third time. Finally, he held the card up to the light and examined it like an intern with a CAT scan. As there was nothing to see, he saw nothing and assumed that the scanner was on the fritz. Which it never was but he would not

have known that. And so he tried to open the bathroom door by brute force, shoving against it with all his might to open it inwards, which it didn't.

"Stop that!" a muffled voice shouted, and Aldo instantly assumed that the voice was in his head. Instantly he was back wrestling with the madman again, pushing, pressing, grunting. When he finally let go, the door flew open and the man inside the stall, who had been pushing against him, staggered forward.

"What the hell are you doing?" the man said. It was Huang Franck, one of the other Ganeshers in the building. "I'm trying to get out of here."

"Trying to get in," Aldo insisted.

"It's a toilet, for chrissake, not a saloon. The door opens *out*."

"Sorry, I got carried away," Aldo said sharply, stepping over to the sink where all the soap in the dispenser was not nearly enough to create the lather he needed.

"Is it off yet?" Franck said, adjusting himself as he washed his own hands.

"Huh?" Aldo jumped.

"The spot of blood."

"What?? The what?? What are you talking about?" Aldo shouted, glaring at his hands as though they belonged to someone else. "What spot? I don't see any blood."

"Take it easy, Aldo. It's just a joke. You're washing your hands like Lady Macbeth, that's all. You know, out out damn spot and all that?"

"Very very very funny."

"Listen, do you have that customer update for me? I was hoping to get it first thing. That's when you said."

"I'll have it for you when it's ready," Aldo snapped.

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Of course I'm all right," he said, still washing maniacally despite the rawness of the skin. "You'll just have to wait. I've got a lot of work on my desk. I can't do everything at once."

"It's not like you to be late with anything. In fact, you're *never* late. Everyone knows this. You're the most organized person we all know. Are you sure everything's all right?"

"Yes yes fine fine," Aldo chanted, wringing his hands with the towel.

"You know, this is good. Yes, I think screwing up is a good sign."

"There's no screw-up. Nothing is screwed up."

"It proves you're human and not just some ArtAn machine. Sometimes it seems like we all work for the system and not the other way around. Are you getting out into the sweat enough? Fresh air and all that."

"Plenty. More than I need."

"We ought to have mandatory fuckups. Keep us human."

"Heh."

"I say...to the barricades! Workers revolt! You have to lose but your chairs. The more mistakes the better. As long as no one gets killed," Franck laughed as he marched out, leaving Aldo to a new bout of demented scrubbing.

Feeling a bit better after his triathamill, Aldo went for lunch at Lemurs. This was the restaurant on the 60th floor of the Urbana, where people in the building who worked for Ganesh met for lunch each day. The lunch was merely an excuse to gather F2F—face to face—and enjoy the company of actual bodies rather than the vaporous images of Cyberia. This was one need that the engineers could never seem to master, no matter how virtuoso their virtuality...the urge to mingle. Aldo saw his lunch group at a table in the back; it included Wallace, and Carla Marks from Hem&Haw, and Gene Field from Ups&Downs.

"Hey killer, what's up?" Wallace said.

"Don't call me that," Aldo answered harshly.

"What happened to you on Monday night?" Wallace asked. "We waited at the bar."

"Something came up. I couldn't make it."

"Thank heavens you're here, Aldo" Carla Marks said. "You may be the last rational man at Ganesh. What's your take on this Karkas deal? We can't stop talking about it."

"Karkas? I don't know...is he still missing?" Aldo asked with dramatic nonchalance.

"Missing my ass," she answered. "He was murdered. They found the body already."

"I didn't hear that. Was it on the news?" Gene Field asked.

"No, it hasn't been on the webcast yet. News travels much faster by rumor. It was all over the chatnet by noon."

"I didn't start to work until noon," Gene Field apologized. "I...had to take the morning off."

"Why?"

"Well...I was recovering."

"Furniture?"

"I was recovering from surgery. I had an emergency appendectomy yesterday."

"And you had to recover from that?" Carla Marks asked. "That's in/out these days. Was there a problem?"

“Sort of,” Gene said, but he was whispering, hoping no one would be interested enough to press. They were.

“So? Are you all right? What was the problem?”

He studied the group for a moment, resolved himself to something, and continued, somewhat embarrassed about the confession.

“I was in the country visiting someone,” he explained. “It was an emergency. So...I...had to...have a doctor perform the surgery.”

“A doctor?”

“You mean an actual *human* doctor? A person?”

“It was an emergency. I had no choice.”

Now the tenor shifted from the lure of his secret to concern for his safety. Other than the most exceptional transplants, all operations were performed by cybersurgeons. These were robodocs, ArtAn nets hooked up to precision machines. They were exact and fast and dexterous. No one had heard of ordinary surgery performed by a human—with that sloppy, clumsy matt of fat fingers—in years. The idea seemed positively medieval.

“Oh my lord,” Carla said, putting her arm around him. “You poor thing. No wonder you had to recover. This is terrible. Are you all right?”

“I think so. I mean, I feel okay. Actually, I’m hungry and that’s a good sign, I guess. Let’s eat.”

They entered their orders onto the tabletop and returned to the main topic of the day...the murder of their boss, Gordon Hardin Karkas. Aldo thought to stay out of the discussion entirely but soon saw that his silence would have been even more suspicious.

“Gee I...haven’t been following this,” Aldo said, trying not to sound too hungry for information. “Do they know anything...about...who might have killed him?”

“His body was found in a garbage dump in New Jersey,” Carla said. “They think someone conked him on the head and dropped him in a lot up near the George Washington Bridge. And it was not just a whack-and-run job either. I heard there were signs of a real struggle.”

“Somebody must have been trying to rip him off,” Gene said. “He was loaded.”

“How could they rip him off? No one uses money anymore,” Wallace said. “Only as graduation gifts for kids.”

“They could steal his card.”

“What for...his card’s no good without his voice.”

"Oh please, there are plenty of ways around that. There are decoders. Besides, they could force him to access it and then kill him."

"Carla's right. The Feds have scanners that can decipher the card. And if they have them, you can bet the crooks have them too."

"Of course," Aldo said brightly. "That must be it. It was a mugging. That's why there was nothing on him when they found the body. Must have been stolen."

It was a happy conclusion simply because it was so conclusive. And it was one that Aldo hoped the police had also reached. He only wished that he had thought it without saying it out loud. But in the still moment that followed, it would have been easier to recall a cough than take it back.

"Nothing on him when they found the body?" Carla said, somewhat surprised. "I didn't hear anything about that."

"It's a rumor I heard," Aldo fudged.

"*You* were on the chatnet? I thought you were always too busy with all your lists and schedules to trade gossip. Nice to know you have a dark side there, Aldo"

"Okay, so tell us what else you know." Gene Field said. "Don't hold out on us."

"Me? Know? Nothing! I just heard there was no card when they found the body. That's all."

"And who told you that?" Carla asked.

"I know who it was," Wallace offered before Aldo could change the topic. "I'll bet it was Loren Adder. He told you, didn't he?"

"Who is Loren Adder?" Carla asked.

"He's one of the security techs here in the building," Wallace answered. "He was out drinking with us the night that Karkas disappeared. His cousin is a detective with the NYPD and they've put him in charge of the Karkas investigation. Adder told me he was going to start snooping around. That's how you found out, Aldo, right? From Loren Adder."

"No. Well...I mean maybe. I mean, he might have mentioned something about it," Aldo confessed. "But I wasn't really paying any attention. I'm too busy trying to get all of you bots to keep to your timelines." Aldo had the distinct sense that the growing length of his nose was interfering with his vision.

"Okay, so you and Adder are friends. Did he tell you anything else? Anything juicy?" Carla asked.

"Nothing at all," Aldo replied. "Nope. The whole thing is just one big fat mystery. They'll probably never find the mugger."

"Like Karkas himself," Gene Field said. "I mean, talk about a mystery. He was our boss and yet no one knew anything about him. Did any of you ever see him...I mean in the realzone?"

"Everybody thought he was just an ArtIntell with an ID."

"There was nothing artificial about his fortune, I'll tell you that. The guy was worth trillions."

"I never even saw him onscreen, let alone in the sweat. Didn't even know what he looked like until I saw the news."

"That's what I'm saying," Gene said. "Nobody knew anything about him. Except that he sure loved ampersands."

"The pervert."

"No, my dear. Ampersands are those ubiquitous little 'and' signs that run our lives," Carla explained, tracing a curly specimen in the air. "They're what separates the men from the boys. As in Men&Boys, our clothing zine."

"I thought Men&Boys was about sick love."

"Well I also heard that Karkas was a real religious freak," Gene Field interjected.

"I heard that too."

"Born again?"

"I guess he is by now. He was into reincarnation."

"He was a Buddhist?"

"No, Hindu."

"That's impossible," Carla said. "The only god Karkas prayed to was Mammon, creator of the inverse tax."

"I heard about the Hindu thing too," Gene said. "I heard he went to India every year to see his guru or something. That's about the only time he ever left the building."

"What kind of businessman has a guru?" Carla asked.

"They all do now," Wallace said. "Now that the economic models are all based on quantum mechanics, finance is the same thing as prayer. Karkas was apparently a real believer in reincarnation and mantras and all that stuff."

"Good for him. So he'll come back as a Planck Strategy and make another fortune. What do you think, Aldo?"

"Um...about what?" Aldo asked, finding a distraction in the waiter bringing the food.

"About Karkas. About reincarnation."

"I don't know, but if it's true I sure hope he doesn't hold a grudge," he answered with conviction.

But no one else had any idea what he was talking about.

Back in the office, Cleo was heroically trying to juggle the jumble that the incoming data had become. As they sat at their desks one room away, each appearing in a window on the other's screen, Cleo relayed all the messages, requests, complaints, snafus. Some she had been able to handle, but some she had not and these needed his immediate attention. Aldo managed this as best he could, while also scanning all the news sites for any Karkas updates. But it was all the usual blab...the tragedy in Africa entering its fourth decade, the opening ceremonies for the Michael Jackson space station, test for a new inhalant to cure the rising addiction to new inhalants, the daily Genome Report, the monthly Flux Awards, the annual invasion of Iraq. And of course, the all important Consumer Debit Track which took the pulse of the nation.

Meanwhile, there was an annoying, flashing pop-up telling Aldo that the office was ready to turn him in to his local health clinic if he did not run a hemo-probe immediately. Aldo dutifully placed his arm in the scanner. Infrared lasers wove through his skin and tissue to get to the bloodstream where they caused the cells to fluoresce and release their hidden information. It was called 3-photon microscopy, he knew, but it felt better than that. Warm and tingly, more sensual than technical. In a few moments, a new window opened up on his desk with 400 different test results that meant nothing to him, but that was instantly sent to his medical adviser. Meanwhile, a friendlier notice gave some preliminary suggestions; his PPI was cranked which was bad, he should try to relax; his serotonin was drained, take a pill; his LDL was down which was good, keep it up; his homocystene was unchanged which was meaningless, have a great day.

Then a new message appeared, a note from the cleaners telling Aldo that his clothes were ready. That got his attention since these were not just any clothes, they were *the* clothes and he needed to get them back before they turned state's evidence. So without even thinking much about it, he put everything on pause and got up to leave.

"I see that you have to try to relax," Cleo said confidently as he headed for the door.

"You were monitoring my test results?"

"Let's be frank, Aldo," she said. "I have access to everything on your desk. That's the way you wanted it. You set it up so I could learn how it all works, right? Well everything's a mess lately, so I don't know what to look at and what not to? So I look at everything."

"That's called surveillance."

"It's called trust."

"I'm going out to..."

"To get your clothes out of the cleaners. I know, I saw the message. Why not just have them delivered as usual?"

"Oh...I just decided to use the cleaners down the block rather than the ones in the building," he singsonged, trying to make light of the admission. "You know, try something new for a change."

"You? New?"

"It's no big deal. I'm just going to walk over there and pick up my clothes. I'll be back before you can..."

"Outside? You're going outside? To the cleaners?"

"Yup! Be right back."

"Stop right there fella! I'm calling the police! What have you done with Aldo Weeks?"

"Don't be silly. They're just cleaners down the block."

"Yes, to your normal Manhattanite that is just what they are. But you are not. Normal, that is. You don't go outside. The whole place is lousy with chaos and bad things happen and all that...remember?"

"Ridiculous," he said and danced through the door as gaily as possible.

The realization that Cleo, to whom he had been vaguely attracted since she was hired, saw him only as an absurd control freak was disturbing. He *was* one in fact, but he had hoped that she viewed it with admiration not derision. A possible new list came to mind, once this whole Karkas business was resolved...best ways to loosen up and go with the flow. He could not imagine what might go on such a list, but he figured that he would have plenty of time to work on it in the joint.

"Stop that man," someone bellowed as Aldo walked out the lobby, sending a quiver up his backbone. "Hold it there, Mr. Weeks. We've got something to ask you."

It was Loren Adder at his post at the security desk, watching the various vid-cam inputs come and go. Suddenly identifying with a mad bomber, Aldo lowered his gaze to avoid eye contact and tried to pass by the desk thinly. Hoping to slip into the crowd like a virus.

"Hey, hang on a nano," Adder said, unjacking himself from the console and walking over.

"What's the matter?" Aldo asked. "Is there a problem?"

"Problem? No, there's no fucking problem. Unless you figure that our boss has been bashed to death, then maybe there's a problem."

"I'm in a hurry," Aldo said, in a miffy snit.

"Well excuse me, mister busyman. It's just that there are some new developments in the case and I just thought you might just wanna hear about them. But maybe I'm wrong."

"No, I mean yes," Aldo said glumly. It was not a matter of wanting of course...he had to.

"Well arighty then, please step into my office," Adder said, leading the way to the rear of the lobby.

Loren Adder's so-called office was a former closet beyond the bank of elevators and next to the custodian's supply room. It was dim and contained only a stool, a tiny card table, a small metal locker, and a mini refrigerator. No Grid, no vidcams, no Web, no tapscreens; in fact, no hint of the 21st century at all. The room was painted a queasy green as supply rooms had been for eons. Roaches frolicked there in the wee hours. And far worse for Aldo, it was all off kilter. Nothing lined up with anything else.

Adder sat down at the table and drummed his fingers on a page that read *How To Pass The Police Test*. Every tap sent quivers through the text. This was a piece of chamelic paper in which multicolored microcapsules embedded in the paper changed their orientation, and thus their color, in response to a tiny electric current running through the weave. The entire contents of the page could be changed instantly. Thus, one single sheet could contain an entire book. Unlike an ultra-thin tapscreen, chamelic paper was disposable once used and had taken the place of workbooks and newsletters. By drumming on the upper right corner of the sheet, Adder was turning the pages of the book into an animated blur. For a moment it stopped on the chapter called Rules of Evidence.

"You know, I'm studying up," Adder said. "I'm gonna try to pass the Police Test again. I figure why waste my life in this joint when I could join the force. May the force be with me! The test's damn hard too. You gotta know all sorts of brainy stuff like math and shit. This'll be my sixth try."

"You said there were new developments in the Karkas case?"

"Yep. Some new clues have come to light as to the identity of the murderer."

"What kind of clues?"

"You really wanna hear about it?" Adder asked, coaxing.

"I'm fascinated," Aldo replied, coaxed.

"Okay," he said closing the door. He was jittery with excitement, much like a pervert with new porn. "But you gotta promise not to squeal. This is classified info I'm giving you. Top secret. Police reports and shit. I know 'cause of Erle. But no one else can know. You know? Mum's the word. Deal?"

“Deal.”

“Remember I told you they found the body and the dumpster and all that? Well this is where police work gets so atomic, see? It turns out there was all sorts of clues around to help us piece together what happened.”

“That’s impossible.”

“First off, there was blood on the corpse. They don’t think it was his blood but they don’t know for sure. It was what they call degraded, meaning it wasn’t good enough for a good DNA scan. Garbage really fucks up DNA I guess. Methane or something.”

“Thank God for that.”

“Guess so. But anyways, it suggests that whomever killed Karkas maybe cut himself.”

Aldo put his right hand, the one with the large cut on the finger, into his right pocket with majestic insouciance. “Where exactly did they find this blood?” he asked.

“They found a tiny little amount on his tie. Almost impossible to see because of the color. At least the murderer probably didn’t see it.”

“Because it was red,” Aldo recalled.

“How’d you know that?”

“Know what?”

“How did you know that the tie was red?”

“You just said it was a red tie.”

“Did I?”

“Of course you did. How else could I know something like that? What do you think, I killed Karkas?” he laughed, perhaps a bit too heartily.

“I don’t think I did say that.”

“You must have. Red blood, red tie. You implied it.”

Adder squinted for a few seconds, not at Aldo but inwardly, at the tiny dry thought blooming in the wasteland of his intelligence. “Are you psychic, Weeks?”

“Don’t be dumb. What other clues did they find? You said there were other clues.”

“No I mean it. You’re psychic aren’t you?”

“No.”

“I heard about people like that who can break murder cases. Who can see into the future and figure out how something happened.”

“That’s seeing into the past and I’m not psychic.”

“But you knew it was a red tie. It could have been any color, like say blue or green or yellow or maybe an orange tie with silver stripes or...”

"I get the point," Aldo jumped in, unwittingly using his bad hand to rub his temple. "And anyway, I meant the blood. I meant that the blood was red."

"Oh. Well, gee, I dunno. We're getting all confused here. In any case, the point I'm trying to make is this...the tie turns out to be another clue."

"Why is that?" Aldo asked.

"Well...think about it. Guy goes out late at night, midnight or thereabouts. And this particular guy is Karkas who *never* goes out. Plus he gets all dressed up in a suit and tie. A red tie, like you just said."

"Didn't say!"

"That's pretty unusual. So why would he do that? Get all dressed up, I mean, that late at night. 'Cause he's going out somewhere, right? Not out to the store or nothing or for a walk. Not dressed up like that. So maybe you say he's going to a business meeting, but this here is a guy who runs his whole business from his computer. This is a guy who is a...whadacallit..."

"Recluse."

"Right, who hardly ever goes out at all. So maybe—just maybe—we figure he's going to see a woman. Maybe he's going out to meet some broad somewhere. Or maybe going over to her house. You see what I mean? I mean the guy's all dressed up and everything. Maybe he's going to get a little mooky-wooky," Adder said, making the universal symbol for mooky-wooky with his fingers, which struck Aldo as being especially nasty.

"Don't do that," Aldo grumbled.

"But here's the thing...see...rich guys like Karkas can get anything they want anytime, right? And I mean out in the fatworld too, not just sexbots and sims. He probably had some little pussy he was pumping in his so-called off hours. You see what I mean?"

"No."

"Me neither. If I ever get married it's going to be to death do us part. That's my philosophy."

"I certainly hope so for my sake," Aldo said. "I mean for *your* sake."

Adder leaned back on the stool and gave his crotch a good scratch. He reached back into his locker and pressed a button on something until it clicked. This was a lost maneuver in an era of tapscreens and struck Aldo as slightly creepy until the music began to play. Not the endless looping of tekpop but something quite different, a song maybe. Aldo had not heard one since he was a kid and it came with the oddest sensation that the sound was coming from somewhere, a single location. He twisted his head around to find that it was true. The song was coming from the locker. Very odd. It was not holophonic at all. Holophonics was based

on tonars, carrier signals of coherent sound waves that could be pinpointed. It was 3D sound that followed you around the room and gave you the feeling that you were always at the center of it. What you heard seemed to be coming from inside your own head. But the music Adder was playing was tinny and distant and echoed in the small room like a question.

"You like that? It's an old CD player," Adder said as Aldo goosed his neck around to try to adjust to it. "My Dad had it."

A bland grin formed on Adder's lips as the music seemed to soothe him whereas Aldo, upon hearing it, suddenly felt alone and isolated, cut off from any hope of harmony. The grim room, Adder's spiky face, the dark light, the disorder, and now this music not engulfing and caressing as it usually did, but screeching at him from a distance, echoing sadly like the blues in an abyss. It was almost too much to bear.

"So is that it?" Aldo asked, fingering his ear to cure it. "The police think he was visiting some woman?"

"It's a theory. And maybe someone nailed him on the way to see this broad. Or maybe she had something to do with it. Maybe it's her blood on his tie. See what I mean? So tell me, what's your type?"

"Me? I have no idea. How should I know? I don't memorize the numbers. I thought you said the sample was degraded anyway."

"Not your blood type, you doobie, I mean broad. What type of broad do you like?"

"Oh that! Engaged. I'm engaged," Aldo said. He had his hand on the door in a death grip, feeling that he had to get out of there, away from the dungeon and back to the safety of the Grid. "Is that all?"

"Lissen a this guy...is that all. All what? You're free to go. You ain't exactly under arrest here."

"I mean...is that all they know? That the killer bleeds and may be a woman?"

"No, there's one more thing. And this is a good one. Remember the apple peels? The apple peels that was in the dumpster?"

"I remember."

"We figure—actually Erle figured it but I helped him figure—that in order to dump the body in the dumpster, the killer probably had to get in there with it. It would've been too hard just to toss it in, on account of the dumpster being tall. Plus there was a coupla muddy footsteps on one of the ledges. So we figure the creep maybe even tried to bury the body under the garbage inside the dumpster. That was a big mistake."

"Mistake? Why is that?"

"Because at that point he had to come in contact with all that apple slime."

"So what?"

"So it turns out that apples have this shit in them that could help us find the killer. It's called...like...what the hell is it? It's called...tanning acid or something like that."

Aldo dropped his hand from the door and perked up. The possibility of new data always had the effect on him of focusing his energy. And this of course was data that could hurt. So he instantly took out his card and brought up information about tanning acid on his screen. As always there was a massive amount of material but Aldo was an expert at scanning for relevance: also called tannin...; water-soluble phenolic compound having molecular weight between...; the word tannin comes from an ancient Celtic word for oak, a typical source of...; tannin used in converting raw animal hides to leather because it...; also used in water filtration, dyes, and...; genetically engineered apples being made in which natural tannin content greatly enhanced...; major new treatment for intestinal bleeding, colonic ulcers, bleeding hemorrhoids...

"Tannin," Aldo said. "They use it to treat intestinal bleeding."

"Right, tannin! That's it. And this stuff is in the apples. Plus these were genens we're talking about, they were scientifically enhanced to produce weapons grade tannin that you can really shove up yer ass. And if the killer got into the dumpster, he probably also got all slimed up with apple gunk when he buried the body. Airgo...he maybe got tannin all over his clothes."

Aldo at this point was visibly reeling. Could there possibly be any more ways in which the cosmos had recorded his every single move that night? Each one an arrow—a big fat pulsing argon laser of an arrow—pointing all the way back to himself. It was absurd. He might just as well have announced his *secret* activities that night on the Monte Lee show.

"Say he did," Aldo offered, gulping down some reflux, "so what does that..."

"Have to do? Well, let's say the creep took the clothes he wore to the cleaners the next day. To clean them off. That would make sense since they were probably all messed up."

"Maybe he didn't. Maybe he burned them or buried them."

"Okay, but maybe he was an idiot and didn't. Your average killer ain't exactly your genius with a capital J, Aldo. He or she wouldn't know, for instance, that this stuff in the apples causes an invisible stain. It only comes out when the clothes are dry cleaned. See, the chemicals they use in dry cleaning bring out the stain. So when this here alleged killer got the clothes back, there'd be stains all over from the apple gunk."

“There would??”

“So maybe the cops start going around to all the cleaners in the area to see who brought in clothes around that time that came back with stains all over.”

“But how do they know where to look? The killer could have gone anywhere after he dumped the body.”

“They don’t know. But here’s where your logical thinking—your conduction—comes into play. They start nearby.”

“Nearby where?”

“Where they found the body. In Jersey.”

“Ah, that’s good,” Aldo said, with an audible sigh of relief.

“That’s good? Listen to this guy. You sound like they’re out there looking for *you*.”

“I meant good and smart. That’s smart of them.”

“Oh yeah, thanks. But to tell you the truth, I really ain’t all that smart. This is just basic police work. To be perfectly honest whichya, when I catch the creep it won’t be because of my brains.”

“I believe you there.”

“It’ll be because I’m stubborn. I may not know all that adding and subtracting shit,” he said poking the book on the table and returning to the cover page, “but I’m relentless. I’m like one of them nanobots they use to scrub out your arteries. Put me on the trail and I never stop, ever.”

Out of breath from racing all the way to the cleaners, Aldo tried to stand in line invisibly, the very model of slack and slouch, just another guy, a someone of no consequence. Just one more dull fellow waiting. He had brought the clothes to this particular cleaners because it was a throwback to a more forgetful era with its plastic bags on rolls, the tailor in front using a manual sewing machine, triptych of mirrors and, above all, because it seemed to be off the Grid. No vidcams, no fancy records, no tapscreens. As he waited on line, he rehearsed in his mind a method for picking up the murderous garments swiftly, without any fuss. And getting out of the store before he or his clothes registered on anyone’s consciousness. In and out like a gamma ray. But the clerk returned from the revolving rack without his clothes, his forehead rippled.

“Beddybad,” the man said.

He was speaking a form of Cleanerese, an argot that allowed him to deflect complaints and questions. It was not any real tongue but a compendium of all the languages of generations of immigrants for whom dry cleaning had been the

gateway into the American dream. It was undoubtedly taught at the cleaning academy along with the two-shirt special.

"It's not ready?" Aldo interpreted. His voice was as forgettable, or so he hoped, as a tune on an ocarina. "I'll just come back some other time." But he turned to find the other five people on line staring right at him.

"No ready," the clerk said, trying to detain Aldo by volume. "Is diffycul. Most dis jacky."

"That's all right. No problem at all," Aldo said and started to tiptoe to the door.

"Yesyes. Poblom. You wait." The clerk shouted a gabble of syllables to someone in the back who shouted back.

"Never mind, it's not important," Aldo said.

But it did seem important to all the other customers in the store who, having nothing much else to do, were supremely focused on the mystery.

"Poblom," the man said pointing to the ticket. "Wit disclose. Jacky. Big poblom."

"Stain!" shouted the one from the back.

"It really doesn't matter!" Aldo had opened the door but new people coming in were blocking his path and picking up on the concern of those already present.

"Beddybad stain," the man repeated. "Come from froo. Or vegeble. No see before clean. Now see." The man shouted to the back again. And from the rear, behind the racks and the steamer and the seamster and the bags of clothes, came one clear resounding phrase in perfect diction.

"Apple stain!"

"Yesyes, Missaweeks," the counterwoman said. "Come from appo. We fix. Two days. You come back. Okay?"

But Aldo was gone. Long gone and halfway to the drugstore to buy a numbing megadose of aspirin. Or a fatal one, if that could be arranged.

C H A P T E R 6



NOT A NICE MAN

Between tapscreens and the Synplex and chamelic surfaces, samples of the old fibrous sheets called paper that once carried information were hard to come by. In fact, they were odd enough now to have their own acronym and were known as POPs...pieces of paper. But Aldo had located an antiques dealer who sold him an entire ream which in this day and age might last a lifetime. He also bought a small printer to use with the paper but he kept this hidden under his desk lest anyone accuse him of hoarding information. Data was, after all, the ultimate consumer product and was supposed to be available to all, not sitting in an inaccessible pile of POPs.

Aldo used this setup every so often to print out something that he wanted to keep privately, that is to say, anything that he wanted to have a paper copy of. And what he almost always wanted to keep in this form were his lists. Lists were the most relevant of his documents and he truly believed that it was only in lists that a person's true biography was written. Letters, memoirs, diaries...these were all fictional. But a list was an actual relic of a lived life...a record and an accounting, not a lie. Needless to say, he was quite alone in this obsession.

It was for these reasons that Aldo had the habit of printing out his daily To Do lists and storing them as a pile of paper in a drawer under his desk. He had read the classic diaries—of Samuel Pepys, of Anne Frank—and longed to record his own time on paper in the form of his daily lists. That there was not a jot of literary skill in any of this, that his piles might only serve to prove his anal character,

and that his lists were potentially the most boring documents in the history of documentation...this never occurred to him. Instead, he fantasized about someday publishing them with an ironic title like *My Life in Details* or *Memoirs of an Unventurer*. But as the hours and days since *the event* passed by, these deadly dull reminders were being buried under new kinds of lists. Deadly murder lists. Lists of possible clues, unseen clues, clues that only work in movies, missed clues, forgotten clues. Clues that only a fool like Adder could figure. Aldo was looking at the most recent one on the top of the pile, worried that his own psyche was somehow being buried in the process, when he noticed Cleo standing at the doorway.

"Coffin?" Cleo suggested.

"Wha??" he jumped.

"Would you like some coffee?"

"Oh no thanks," he said, and closed the drawer.

"Listen, Aldo, I just got a call from Elvin, the editor of Pork&Pen? He was very upset. The vid wasn't even on, that's how bad he was. He says you missed the deadline on the promo update."

"I did?"

"It was due yesterday?" she said. "He's afraid some of his pig breeders will drop their subscriptions because of it."

"Shit."

"You've never missed a deadline on anything before. Never. Not in all the time I've worked with you."

"Yeah yeah, so I missed one. Big deal. They're just a bunch of damn piggers anyway. Fuck'm."

She blanched. He had never cursed either.

"I'm worried about you, Aldo. You really have not been yourself."

"Ridiculous!"

"You have not flirted with me in days, you look dreadfully awful, you've gone sour, and your desk is a mess. I mean *look* at it. This is not the desk of Aldo Weeks. You've got hidden screens and warnings all over and why'd you turn off the sound? I can try to cover for a lot of it but not everything. You'd better tell me what the hell is going on."

"I've been preoccupied."

"And now you've actually missed a major deadline. Something is definitely wrong. Don't you want to talk to me about it? If you're in some kind of trouble, no matter what, I'm here for you."

Luckily, the call signal began to flash.

"Talk to me, Aldo."

"Nothing's wrong, Cleo. Not a single damn thing. I'm just going through a bit of a personal crisis here and getting a little behind in the work, that's all. Could you do me a favor and please run interference on this call?"

She backed up to her desk, tapped into the call and zapped it over to him. "It's for you," she said sadly.

Aldo paused for a moment to compose himself before the vidcam.

"Hello there," said a voice.

There was no vid on the other end, which was a little impolite, but that could always be a glitch. The voice was female, so Aldo knew who it had to be. And the sultry tone he simply mistook for long distance.

"Sorry I didn't call you last night, Kyla," he sputtered. "I was busy. How are your folks?"

"Nice of you to ask Mr. Aldo Weeks. But I don't have folks."

"Huh? What's that? Who is this?"

"It's Victoria. Victoria Conner."

Aldo looked into the vidcam with an expression similar to finding a slug in a hotdog. He moved to disconnect the call, saw the futility of it, then pressed on.

"How...how..."

"I'm fine. And how are you?"

"How did you find me?"

"Well, I'm embarrassed to say really. I did something I know I shouldn't have done. But it was for my own protection, you understand. I mean...under the circumstances."

"Did what?"

"Well...the truth is, I ID'd your card while you were...well...while you were on your little trip."

"You ID'd my card?? How did you do that? That's impossible. You can't do that."

"A friend of mine gave me a scanner that can do it. I'm sorry. I'm not a crook, Aldo. I only use the scanner in cases of emergency. And this was one of them, don't you think?"

He knew that crooks and cops had such readers, but it never dawned on him that some civilian, some woman living in a nice brownstone apartment might also. Then again, it made sense. The scan she ran on his card must have screwed up his access code and that was why he had not been able to get into the bathroom in the health club. How much else she knew about him he could only guess but he was too frenzied to even try.

"I know I shouldn't have done it, but I was scared," she said. "I didn't really know what I was doing."

"Why are you calling me?"

"Haven't you been watching the news? They've been showing his picture all over the place."

"Yes I've seen it. But why call me about it? I thought we had an understanding."

"We did, but this is different."

"How do you figure that?"

"Well...I didn't know you lived in the Urbana. I mean you live in *his* building. He was your landlord. He owned the damn thing."

"So what? Everybody lives somewhere."

"So you were surprised that *I* knew him? If I remember correctly, you were very upset that I knew him. Well what about you?"

"Well what *about* me?"

"Come on, Aldo. A guy that you murder just by chance happens to own the building that you just so happen to live in? That's not weird?"

"Don't use that word."

"But it *is* weird."

"I mean the other word. It was self-defense," Aldo rasped. "We both know that."

He peered through the door to make sure that Cleo was not listening in as he suspected that she frequently did. Especially now that she was worried about him. But he could not see her from where he was sitting.

"At first they thought he was kidnapped," Victoria went on. "But then this morning they said that they found the body. You told me you left it in a safe place."

"Have the police seen you?"

"Why should they see *me*? They can't connect me with it. They wouldn't know about me. Unless of course *you* talked to them."

"Of course I didn't."

"Then no one knows anything."

"Of course not. How could they?"

"So we're still safe."

"Is that why you're calling? To find out if I told them anything?"

"To tell you about using the scanner on your card. And to apologize."

"Forget it. And don't call me anymore."

“What’s the big deal? Even if someone knows I called, they still wouldn’t be able to connect us with Karkas’ death. Would they?”

There was another flash onscreen but by now, Aldo’s once orderly desk was a mess of competing information. In his paranoia, Aldo associated the new flash with a webtap, the kind they use as evidence in federal cases. He peered around the open door to find that Cleo was now at the far end of her desk near the vidcam, the area of her workstation where she set up her calls. So while Victoria chattered on, Aldo froze his own image online and crept out and snuck up on Cleo.

“What are you doing?” he demanded upon arrival.

“Hang on,” she jumped, turning towards him. “Don’t do that. You scared me. You’ve got a call on line two, too.”

“What line are you on?”

“Three. My sister. Want me to call her back?”

“No. Who is it on line two?”

“It’s Loren Adder. You want him?”

“Yes. Zap it over,” he said, returning to his own desk and tapping back into Victoria’s call with his realtime image. She would notice the change but probably assume it was some malfunction. That kind of thing happened. Meanwhile, he put Loren Adder’s call on hold.

“I’ve got to go,” he said. “But don’t worry. They’ll never find out about us. It’s going to be all right. Just don’t call me here any more. We can’t run the risk. Understand?”

“Say what?” said the coarse voice at the other end.

It was not Victoria at all. Now it was Loren Adder. Aldo’s heart hiccupped. A series of warbles came out of his mouth before he could speak.

“What the hell is this?” he shouted. “What is going on here? Is this a goddamn tap?”

From the other side of the office wall, Cleo shouted back, “What on earth are you doing Aldo?”

“My office is tapped!”

“It’s your head that’s tapped, the office is fine.”

“What the fuck is going on here?”

Cleo came to the doorway and spoke slowly, like a psychiatric nurse with a reason for a syringe.

“Aldo. Calm down and listen to me. The call you had on line one,” she explained, “was the woman who called you, okay? You touched something and disconnected her. Then Loren Adder’s call on line two switched over and you

tapped into it. But his vid was buried under all the stuff on your desk so you didn't know who it was. And you just disconnected my call on three."

"What happened to Victoria?" Aldo said, slapping windows frantically into and out of existence, in a beautiful analogy to a mind unraveling.

"Okay now who is Victoria?"

"No, I mean my fiancé," he whined.

"That was Kyla on one? I didn't recognize her voice. Aldo!"

"What?" he shouted, still decomposing.

"What's with you? I'm telling you, she disconnected. Stop hitting the tap-screen, take a deep breath, and talk to Adder on line one," Cleo said, leaning over his screen and getting Adder's image up and center in three simple moves. She returned to her desk shaking her head.

"What was all that about, Weeks?" Adder said. "Why shouldn't I call you?"

"What...do...you...want?" Aldo intoned.

"Boing boing boing. Crime update," he said, snapping his fingers. "You want to hear about it or not? No skin off my dick."

"Yes. Go ahead. What's it about?"

"New York."

"What about New York?"

"The murderer came from Manhattan to drop the body in Jersey. They're pretty sure of it."

"Oh no."

"Oh yes. They traced possible routes he might have taken and they all seem to lead to Manhattan. A repairman at the exit ramp remembers a car passing through that night at around 3 a.m. A Shanghai. Pretty common car. Can't recall anything about it though."

"The repairman on the bridge," Aldo said, louder than he thought, as he added that clue to his latest list.

"There you go again," Adder said. "Now how the hell could you possibly know it was a repairman on the bridge?"

"You just said."

"I don't think so."

"You said," Aldo said, his voice quaking with restraint, "that a guy at the exit ramp of the bridge remembered a car. You want me to play it back. That is what you said."

"I didn't say bridge, just exit ramp."

Aldo bit his own lip, hard, to avoid sprizzling in rage.

"Think about it. There are two tunnels and six car ferries going back to Manhattan too. All have exit ramps. You know, you keep all this psychic shit up, Weeks, and you're gonna help me solve this case whether you want to or not."

"I'm not psychic!"

"You sure?"

"I had it tested. It was just an irritable bowel."

"Yeah well it seems to me that you're either psychic...or you did it."

"Look Loren, I'm busy. Was it the bridge or not?"

"Oh it was the bridge okay. The cops tried that route first, since it was the closest to the dumpster and in police work you always try the obvious thing first. Sure enough, one of the repair guys working on the bridge, like you said..."

"Like *you* said!"

"...remembered this car coming through real late. Not much else though. Not even the color of the car. They were working under argon lights which turn everything orange."

"What about the vidcams on the bridge?"

"Now you're talking. No luck. They were there repairing the cameras so none of them were working. Creep caught a break there."

No vidcams! And no car color. Aldo immediately started a new and very promising list. A list of anti-clues. Pure luck. All the traces he could have left behind that might have convicted him, but would not.

"So I've put together a little scenario here," Adder added. "Lemme try it out on you and see if it holds juice. Okay?"

"Go ahead."

"Number one, you got it in for Karkas."

"Me??"

"I don't mean *you* you. I mean someone. Put yourself in the creep's shoes for a minute. You've got it in for Karkas. For what reason, we cannot say as yet. So you stake out the building here. Then last Monday, late at night, Karkas goes out and you follow him. Let's also say that you follow him to his girlfriend's house. Remember he was dressed up. Then let's say, to make things easy, she even lives right here in the neighborhood somewheres."

"Why say that? That's ridiculous. She could live anywhere."

"Why not? Simplest things first, right? He can walk there and not be noticed by anyone like a taxi driver. Okay. So you follow him there, you bump him off—boom boom boom—and you throw him in your car. Then you drive him over the bridge, see the bridge tech, drive down the Jersey shore, stick him in the dumpster, bury him under the apples and drive back. Possible?"

"No. Not possible. Absolutely not. No way."

"Why not? I thought it sounded good."

"What kind of total jerk would do something so obvious? If you go to all that trouble to kill someone, you would have to work it out a lot better than that. It would leave too many clues and witnesses. And you'd pop up on the Grid all over at every vidcam. It must be more complicated than that. I'll bet the killer is just trying to make you *think* it happened that way. To throw you off. If I were you, I'd figure all these clues are fake, false leads."

"You know, that's not a bad way to think about it. Except that Erle had the same idea that I had...well actually he kinda had it first. And anyways the hunch paid off because they found this aircan."

"Found what?"

"You know, a can of tire inflator."

The words conjured up an image only too easily and Aldo quickly added it to a different list...the Clues They Hang You With.

"Yup, it was on the side of the road near the exit ramp. The exit ramp off the bridge," Adder said. "Can you believe it? The creep got a flat while driving around with the dead body."

"Ridiculous. That could belong to anyone. There must be hundreds of cans around there."

"Sure it could belong to anyone. But a good cop makes up a whadayacallit? Makes up a...hi...hi...hype..."

"Hypothesis."

"Right! Like you make believe about something and see what you get. Take this here can for instance. Now you're right...it could be anyone's. But you pretend that it belongs to the perp and see where it gets you."

"What could an empty aircan get you?"

"Oh just dead skin cells, DNA, fingerprints, thermal residue patterns. What you call your biotracers. If they find any on the can and they match the ones found at the dumpster—bam bam boom!—you got another piece of the puzzle. By the way, I didn't say it was an empty can."

Aldo passed over that one and said: "They found biotracers at the dumpster? I thought it was full of garbage. Wouldn't it be all...garbagey?"

"Yeah, but they found this old piece of board that matched a trail left on the ground. Erle thinks the creep may have dragged it over some tracks he left in the mud. Could be fingerprints on the board."

"Well are there or aren't there?"

“Dunno. It’s not back from the lab yet. But of course even if some show up, it won’t do any good unless the creep is on file somewheres. Not everyone is in the BioBank. Unless of course Erle goes along with *my* suggestion.”

“Which is?”

“Sample all the tenants in the Urbana.”

“That’s insane. You can’t do that. It’s a violation of privacy.”

“Not if everyone agreed to go along with it.”

“Everyone in the Urbana will not agree to be biosampled. I guarantee it.”

Aldo knew that much for certain because he positively knew that there would be at least *one* holdout.

“They can get a lot of this stuff off people’s desks. They wouldn’t even have to submit to scans and probes.”

“It’s still a violation of...”

“Hey, fuck it,” Adder interrupted. “I don’t give a shit about violation of nothing. I told you and I told Erle, I’m gonna catch this creep if I have to bust every hump in this building.”

“People are bumped off all the time in this city. What’s gotten into you about this? What’s the big deal?”

“Hey! We ain’t talking about throwing a cigar butt in the terlet, Aldo. This is murder. And I’m a cop...I mean, I’m an officer of security. And this is my turf here. No one kills no one here without my permission. I swear to you, the creep is gonna burn for it.”

“There’s no death penalty in New York anymore. Is there a death penalty in New York?”

“Fuck New York. I’m talking hell, Weeks. Burn in hell.”

In gray sweatpants, scuffed sneakers, and a loose blue krylon sweater—and without the dramatic highlight of Moonglo lipstick and mascara—Victoria Conner looked like just another attractive woman fondling a melon. Her hair was pulled back into a thick mid-western pony tail, and the voluptuous curves of her body were flattened by the fabric of her sweater as it changed its weave to adjust to the humidity in the air. It would have taken a stretch of the imagination to see in this casual beauty the red-hot vamp of barstool dreams.

Standing flat like a nurse, she put the cantaloupe in her shopping bag next to a carton of Cowmel, the regened milk “smooth as a cow and dry as a camel.” She flashed her card at the register and went back home. But even as she closed the front door to the apartment behind her, the air density seemed wrong. Although the apartment gave no warnings as she walked in, she still had the odd impression

that someone was already there, waiting for her to arrive. Frightened by that idea, she walked quickly down the hallway. She tried to ignore it as she put her groceries away, but by the time she was done the tension was too much and she gave in to it. Quickly—to get it over with—she marched into the front room to find a stranger sitting on her couch waiting. He had the boxy face of a boxer, with a square jaw and a flat nose. His eyes were narrow. Fat teeth gleamed like keys as he smiled a jazzy smile. The hint of a pompadour, an ancient hairstyle from a lost age of tough punks, gave his head a shiny crest. He was a wide man, with arm muscles under his suit jacket. A powerful neck. Thick fingers. But his legs were crossed at the knee and this added an incongruous gentility.

“Who the hell are you? What do you want?” she said. She only had to call out for help and the apartment would notify the police, but she held back. His calm air—besides fooling the sensors—suggested that he belonged there. To her way of thinking that meant one thing...that he was a cop.

“Relax, Red. Have a seat,” he said. His voice was like the valve on a steam radiator. And he had a slight accent like a thug from any seedy europolis like Sofia or Bucharest or Belgrade. And a lumpy blue suit to match.

“Sit down and we can talk. I’m not going to hurt you. Unless you want me to,” he added and made a full piano keyboard with his mouth again.

“Are you a cop?” she asked.

“Could be.”

“Who are you?”

“Why don’t we say...I’m...Detective Green.”

“Do you have a badge?”

“Sure I got a badge. And I worked damn hard for it too.”

“Mind if I see it?”

“It’s in the laundry. It was a real dirty badge.”

“How do I know you’re really a cop?”

“How do you know anything, Red? You believe it, that’s how. Now sit the fuck down.”

“Wait a minute...”

“Siddown!”

She should have done what he said and avoided any misunderstanding. Instead she instinctively made a dash for the bedroom where she could close him out and call for help on her card. But this was a pointless move. For one thing, there was no one to call. She did not want the police around and there was no one else. And years of paint had made the door impossible to shut anyway. She knew that and therefore was not very surprised when he shoved it open easily. He

grabbed the card from her hand and, still holding her wrist, threw her onto the bed. Then he climbed on top of her, pinning her arms to her sides. His wide flat tie hung like a tongue licking her chest.

"Get off of me," she demanded.

Her voice had a lovely tremor that made him smile again. He was the kind of man who thought that vulnerable beauty was beauty at its best.

"I'll scream," she warned.

"Go ahead," he said and held the thick stump of his fist three inches from her nose. But even before she had to make the choice, he got off of her and relaxed on the bed, even lounging on it like an old friend. "No, you got me wrong, Red. I don't want no trouble. I didn't come here for that. I'm a businessman."

"So what is it you want?" she asked.

She didn't move. She was afraid of staying and of going in equal parts.

"You got a real nice place here," he said.

The bed swayed as he got up and began to slowly pace around the perimeter of the room. For a while he seemed to be assessing the walls for a reprog of the morphing wallpaper patterns. But then he stopped fast and looked directly at her.

"You're a pretty girl. No wonder he came here. How much do you charge?"

"Who came?"

"Don't let's bullshit each other, okay? That makes for bad business. Partners should be honest with each other, yes? So let's just say you don't bullshit me and I don't bullshit you. See what I'm saying?"

"I...I don't know what you want."

He continued walking around the room slowly before stopping abruptly in front of the dresser.

"Where'd you kill him? Over here?"

He pointed to the exact spot on the dresser where the body had been. He wiped his palm across the top of the dresser and inspected it.

"Nice and neat. No dust. Just been cleaned recently I would think. So maybe there was some blood on it or something. From when you stabbed him, yes? And then maybe he staggered. And fell down...right...here!"

As he said this, he pointed to the place on the rug where the body had been lying. He looked closer and grinned at what he saw.

"Look. There's even some blood left. You tried to get it out but it's still there. Maybe you can't see it from where you are. Come here and have a better look."

She did not look.

"And I'll bet there's no trace of his visit on any of your vidcams. Am I right? You erased all that. Am I right? Smart move. So maybe we stop playing games now?"

"Are you going to arrest me?" she demanded.

"Could be. Could be not."

"You can't prove anything. You're just saying all this. I mean how do you know anyone was here?"

He sat down on the dresser and crossed his legs again. A bulky man, this seemed to take a bit of an effort yet he was soothed by the result. He looked up and his voice took on an ethereal lilt, like someone describing a vision in the wilderness.

"Let's say I'm following Mr. Karkas that night. Let's say I seen him leave his building up on 96th Street. All dressed up he is too. He seems upset, angry like. Then I seen him walk down here. And where does he come but right into this building. He stops at the buzzers downstairs but he don't press one. Then comes some lady leaving the building. She opens the door to go out and in he walks. Stomps in you could say. Guess he wanted to surprise you. Did he surprise you, Red?"

"I don't know who you mean."

Her comment brought him out of his reverie and he glared at her for waking him up.

"Sure you do. Because I was out on the street and I seen activity up here. In this apartment. I seen shadows at the front window. Movement. So I go and look on the buzzers. And what do I see? The name Conner. Apt 2F. You."

"Look," she said, "I don't know who you think you saw..."

"I don't *think* nothing, Red," he snapped, turning dark. "I know. Because I waited. And a coupla hours later what do I see? I see three people come down the stairs. You, and another man, and poor Mr. Karkas in the middle. The two are carrying the one. Now why, I say to myself, are these two carrying Mr. Karkas? What's the matter with him? Is he sick? Drunk?"

"He drank too much."

"That's what I thought too. And maybe I was willing to leave it at that. But then I'm watching the news and there's Mr. Karkas onscreen. Not because he supports the new mayor or is giving money to the poor or nothing. But because the man is dead. So I think back. I think back to you and your boyfriend helping him down the steps and into that red car of yours. And a light goes off in my head. A soft glowing light. And this light, it says to me...you know what? It says those two people must have killed Mr. Karkas."

"You can't prove anything like that."

"Sure I can. I can prove he came here. And I can prove when he left. I can prove what he wore and everything. You'd be amazed at what I can prove."

"So he was here. Okay, so what? I didn't kill him. He went home drunk. That's all."

"Come on, Red, don't lie. I hate it when you lie to me. See, I went over to Karkas' house after and I waited for him. And you know what? He didn't never get there. Why? Because your boyfriend never brought him back. No, I can pretty well prove that you and your boyfriend killed poor Mr. Karkas. That much I can pretty well prove."

"What do you want? You want money? Is that what you want?"

"Could be. How much? How much money?"

"A thousand. I'll give you a thousand bucks if you leave us alone."

He stood up from the dresser where he had been sprawling casually and loomed over her. He took her chin in his burly hand and held her face to the light. He seemed to be deciding whether to kiss it or smack it. Then he smiled again.

"You ain't even close. You know I'm talking about a lot more money than that."

"How much? Maybe I can get it."

"Maybe we can work something out," he said, looking her over like a farmer judging a used cow. "A trade kind of thing."

"Okay," she said softly, putting her hand on his and letting her fingernails rest on his knuckles. A seductive look crept into her eyes for a fleeting moment before he pushed her back by the chin.

"Could be," he said coldly. "We'll talk about that later. For now I'm only interested in the thing."

"What thing?"

"The object."

"What object? What are you talking about?"

He turned around quickly, stepped back a step, then smacked her across the cheek. The crack echoed in the room.

"Don't be cute," he shouted. "I'm ready to slam your ass through the fucking wall. And then turn you over to the cops for murder. That's what I'm ready to do. So don't play games with me. Now I'll ask you nice and sweet. Where is it?"

"I don't know what you mean."

He smacked her again in the other direction, to even things out. Her red hair flared like a fire in the wind. Then he knelt down next to her, close enough to feel the heat.

"Where is it, Red?" he asked gently.

"Please. I don't know..."

He went to slam her again but stopped when she flinched at the windup.

"All right," he said backing off. "Okay. I'm a reasonable man. You need time to consider the situation. To think things through. Maybe call your boyfriend. Get his opinion. I understand."

He rubbed his hand as though the blows had hurt him too. And his eyes turned soft on her, like a psycho playing at sympathy. Victoria meanwhile did a clever impression of a toothache patient as she reassured the InSens that there was nothing at all wrong.

"I'll give you until tomorrow night. At ten o'clock. Just like tonight. That'll be our special time. I'll come back and you give me the object. Or maybe you pay me off for what it's worth. But we both know one thousand is a joke. This thing ain't even worth one *hundred* thousand...we're talking in the range of *six* biggies here. So let's not pull any more of this bullshit together. Okay?"

She had only the vaguest idea about what he was saying, but she shook her head anyway, hoping that it would placate him. And it did.

"Maybe we'll do a little business. I'll get what I'm after and you'll get to live the rest of your life. That sounds fair, don't it? Don't it, Red?"

She cringed as an answer.

Also shaken, but for his own reasons, Aldo was at that moment lying in his Neuroliner and letting the ferromagnets seek out and destroy the corpuscles of tension throughout his body. The Morpheus Symphony was playing on the holophonic. The Neuroliner was not just a comforting chair, of course, but one more portal to the Flux. With just the right settings it could send you off on a nice little brain break. Lying there, rubbed and cuddled by the machine, he began to drift into a pleasant stupor. Let it enfold you, he thought, this tender tech, this electromagnetic. Slip into its warm embrace and nestle there. Deep in the folds of the bytes pulsing, deep down where the photons glow, that infinite pocket of motion, of history, of all things known. There was god in there if you needed it and wisdom and the truths of time and space. It was all there, every speck from one big bang to the next, eternity, the huntun, the endless cycles of things and words and images, all there like an onion waiting to be peeled. He sat there, ions massaged, immersed and even cradled, letting the music bathe him, drifting without data,

not knowing, not thinking, just being. And all the while, the other world, the outerworld, whirled and twirled through its iterations, unknown and uncomprehended, that world that included everything there was, and of course by implication, Aldo and his giddy fidgetings as well. No matter, no mind. In the end it was all just information, churning and returning, in the long deep dream of...

Hello?

Suddenly the apartment was ending the session, lowering the magnetic field, and indicating a call. Victoria Conner—the cyclotonic she took having finally deadened the pain in her neck—was online and refusing to give up. Aldo shook himself, shut the device off, and took the call on the digiwall.

"It's Victoria," she said, not waiting for him to recognize her.

"I thought we had a deal," he gasped.

"We did but now things have changed."

"I thought you understood. We cannot have any connection until this whole thing blows over. It's too dangerous. Everything electronic is recorded on the Net. Traceable. Like this call, for instance? I thought you understood that."

"Will you shut up and listen. It's already dangerous."

"Has something happened?"

"A man came here tonight."

"I meant something new."

"He came about Karkas."

"A cop? A cop came?"

"He said he was a cop but I don't know."

"Did he question you?"

"In a way," she said, rubbing the queries he had impressed on her jaw.

For the first time Aldo noticed that her cheek was swollen, but he did not register it. "Did you tell him anything? Did you mention me? Did they arrest you?"

"Will you shut up and listen? It's got nothing to do with that."

"What then?"

"He wants something."

"What does he want? A bribe? Is that what he wants?"

"Something else."

"What?"

"Something Gordy came to get that night."

"Who the hell is Gordy?"

"Gordon Karkas."

The booming headache he had had before the Neuroliner session returned in full boom.

"That's just great!" Aldo said. "First you didn't know him. Then you didn't know his name. Then you had no idea why he came there. And now it's Gordy! What's next...a bunch of little Gordys in preschool?"

"Will you please just stop and listen? This concerns you too. The guy wants something Gordy gave me to hold onto. If I don't give it to him he's going to come back and kill me. Or worse."

"What's worse than that?"

"Turn us both over to the police."

"Both? How does he know about me? *You told him about me!*"

"I didn't say anything. He saw us together that night. All of us. He says he was following Gordy, I don't know why. He says he saw us take him out of the building that night. He knows all about it, Aldo. Everything."

"Christ," Aldo said, looking at the console of the Neuroliner and wondering if the machine could be set on fatal. "Why me?"

"Why you what?"

"Why me this?"

"Is that all you ever think about?"

"Yes," he hissed. "I have a morbid interest in my own welfare."

"Well what are we going to do?"

"If you give him this thing that he wants, then he'll leave you alone and leave us out of it? Is that the idea?"

"That's what he says."

"Then give it to him."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't have it anymore."

"Okay then...who does?"

"Damn! I didn't want to get more involved in this," she groaned. "You said it would be all right. You promised. But it's getting worse all the time."

"Forget that. Just give him what he wants."

"I don't have it."

"Can you get it back?"

"I hope so."

"Who has it?"

"You."

"Who the hell is Hugh?" Aldo snapped. He was not quite ready to hear what she was saying.

"You have the thing."

“Me??”

“It’s that thing you hit him with,” Victoria explained. “The metal box.”

“*What??*”

“The metal box that you cracked over his skull. The one you took out of my apartment.”

“That’s what he wants? What the hell is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You keep saying that. Does that mean you don’t know or you won’t say?”

“Listen to me, Aldo. You’ve got to believe me. I don’t know this guy and I don’t know what the box is or why he wants it. But he wants it. Bad.”

“Believe you? That’s a joke. You haven’t exactly been playing the Pope with me here, have you?”

“I have to protect myself. Don’t you see? I’m all alone and it’s a dangerous world. A girl has got to be careful. Men take advantage.”

“You said that old Gordy gave you the box. Why?”

“He didn’t exactly give it to me.”

“Oh boy...here comes a story.”

“He had it delivered here by messenger one day with a note saying that I should hold onto it for him. It didn’t seem important. It’s just a stupid box. I wasn’t hiding it. I kept it out on the dresser. You saw.”

“And that’s why he came that night? To get the box back?”

“I don’t know. I think so.”

“And the double cross that he was so furious about? That was about the box too? It was all about the box?”

“Stop pounding me. I told you, I don’t get any of this. I didn’t know what the box was. I would have given it back to him if he only gave me a chance. All I know is, this guy is coming back tomorrow night for it. And if you don’t help me, I’m going to tell him where *you* live and let *you* deal with him. And Aldo, let me say this one thing. About this man? This man is not a nice man.”

CHAPTER 7



THE DOUBLE CROSS

What makes you think God is telling the truth?

Aldo had read that in an ad somewhere and instantly forgotten it. Until now, when it opened like an onscreen window in his mind, a gaping window in the locked room of his imagination. How indeed was it possible to know what the truth was, from God on down? The big truth, the daily truth, the whole truth and nothing but. Was the truth to be found in the facts, in the law, the word, the thing, the story? Was it relative, absolute, contingent, variable, eternal? These were the kinds of questions Aldo had trained himself never to raise. He did not doubt. In place of questions, he had his lists. He had solved the basic dilemma of uncertainty, which even rules the electrons, by a sleight of hand, by putting things first and then second and then third and calling this clarity.

Similarly, the whole notion of treachery—the idea that someone might manipulate the truth for a purpose—was more confounding to him than the Hyperstring Theory of matter. It was not that he did not know it existed. Of course he did; he was not a fool. Quite the opposite. He fought long and hard to ignore it. Through a concentrated effort he had made a flat life for himself with no underbelly, no depressions. He was devoted to the tidy surface devoid of wrinkles, loops, or shadows. By design, everything he confronted was there to be seen, every choice listed, made, and crossed off. No levels, nothing hidden, no ambiguities. An artifice so complete that after a long while it even convinced him that this was the way of the world.

But by Friday morning, a mere four days after the murder, he had achieved what might be considered a breakthrough of Cartesian proportions. Total unmitigated doubt. More than doubt even, he was wallowing in mistrust. From God on down. Nothing was what it seemed to be any more. Nothing was simple. Everything seemed shot through with duplicity and lies...the box, Victoria, Adder. And most unsettling of all, even his own character.

Impelled by this new sense of suspicion, he took the object out of his desk drawer and peeled back the paper that covered it. It was a basic dark box all right, not much to look at. Even less vivid than boxes he had seen in the Flux. Yet there was also something mesmerizing about it. The fact, for instance, that it was an actual thing rather than an image of. He could hold it. It was an object with weight and presence; so different from the virtual world with all its digital incorporeality. This was a thing with a history, a place in time, a physical being. Not just a pattern of bits in a grand computer razzle. That alone made it fascinating. It was a relic, remnant of a lost solidity.

With due respect, he picked it up and held it in his hand. It was heavy...the precise mass needed to bash someone into oblivion. It was a perfect cube that his fingers could just manage to wrap around. It was made of an old metal like iron or lead, dense and dumb. The surface was alternately shiny from wear, pitted with age, and scratched. A slender seam ran around the four edges of one face, perhaps the box could open there. There were worn-down numbers printed irregularly on all six sides...66, 4, 9, 23. Rivets randomly placed around the surface might have held it together. And although it was solid, he could hear a faint rattling inside. The top surface of the box had an intricate raised design in a cross pattern that might have worked as a miniscule maze for ants.

Born into the age of virtuality, Aldo did not quite know what to make of such an object and knew that he needed help. So it was back to the desktop where he brought up a directory of Ganesh employees and shouted to Cleo, "there's an editor who works on Odds&Ends named Quentin Wooley. Can you find out what apartment he works in?"

"Number 546," she said, consulting a different listing.

"I'll be right back," Aldo said, taking the box and dashing past her.

"Why don't you call him?"

"It's busy," he said, rather than explaining that a call would be recorded on the Net and could be used by prosecutors.

"What about the weekly stats?" Cleo shouted after him. "It's Friday. The controller expects you to zap them in twenty minutes."

"Tell him something. Better yet, you finish them," he shouted and bolted out the door.

Quentin Wooley was a pumpkin of a man with a squashy face and bushy eyebrows, whose office was a time capsule passing for a workspace. While most people had shelves with things on them, Wooley's office had become a museum to the lost objects of the past. It was crammed to bursting with bric-a-brac, junk. An early telephone, a weathervane in the shape of a ship, a glass doorknob, a Lay Or Bust poultry feed sign, an axe, a leather bucket, a porcelain cow pitcher, a baseball glove, and even Wooley himself, were all settling into a dignified rusting there.

"Wooley?" Aldo said as he walked in. "I'm Aldo Weeks from traffic."

"You mean Stop&Go? I don't drive," Wooley said.

"No, I'm the traffic manager for Ganesh. I'm in the building."

"Ah yes, Aldo Weeks. Nice to finally meet you in the sweat," Wooley said, his brows bouncing.

"I hate to barge in," Aldo said, "but I've got a question only you can answer. You're an antiques expert aren't you?"

"That's a very broad field, Mr. Weeks. We tend to specialize. My area, so to speak, is 19th century Americana. Ancient technology, early materials, farmiana."

Aldo went dim.

"Farm collectibles...like hex signs, for example," he explained, pointing to an intensely patterned round medallion on the wall over his shoulder. "Meant to ward off the devil during the harvest season. The devil doesn't like bright colors, you see."

"Good to know," he brightened.

"You're not interested in Polk by any chance?"

"Pig in a poke?" Aldo asked, putting two and two together and getting zero.

"President Polk," Wooley explained. "I have just come across an authentic 1848 land grant signed by Polk himself. It's on an actual POP, a real piece of paper. It's got the Presidential seal too. I'll bet you don't see much paper in your line of work. Would you like to feel it?"

"At the moment, I'm only interested in this," Aldo said and carefully placed the wrapped box down on Wooley's desk. "What do you make of it?"

Wooley looked at it and smiled into his chin, more impressed by the paper wrapping the thing than the thing in itself. He started to pull back the covering, stopped to get Aldo's approval, got it and continued. Without touching the box, he spied it from every angle, sniffed it, then changed the room illumination to get

a brighter focus. He took out a large magnifying glass, itself a relic of another time when you could not change the size of things at will, giving Aldo a detailed view of his cornea while he inspected the box.

"Very very very interesting what you have here," he said.

"Is it?"

"Isn't it?"

"I'm sure it is," Aldo said, "very interesting. But what exactly is it?"

"It is a box," Wooley summed.

"What kind of box?"

"Metal, I should say. May I lift it?"

"Be my guest."

Eyebrows like parentheses to bracket his curiosity, Wooley picked up the box in both hands. He laughed at how heavy it was, then turned it and carefully inspected all six sides. At one point he noticed the rattling sound, toyed with that for a few moments, then put it back on the desk.

"Well that most certainly is a very nice box you have there, Mr. Weeks. Very sturdy. You don't see too many boxes around these days. And certainly not from the Second War period. I mean, most folks have nothing much to put in them."

"Could it be valuable?"

"I'm sure it could be. Why not?"

"Not why not...why? What do you think would make a box like this valuable?"

"Value is a tricky business, Mr. Weeks. Most anything is valuable if someone values it enough, if you see what I mean. Value comes from the desire to possess. In the 1630's there was a tulip craze in Holland. The price for a single tulip went through the roof and they were sold and resold like precious gems. Tulips of course are free for the growing, but that didn't matter. That is the nature of value. It's all in the wanting."

"But why would anyone want to possess this particular box?"

"Are you thinking of buying it?"

"Someone has offered to buy it from me."

"I see. And how did you get it, if I may ask?"

"Heirloom. Been in the family for generations. So you see, I can't figure out why anyone else would want it."

"Oh I would never waste time on that particular question, Mr. Weeks. The reasons are endless. Maybe he has eight of them and just has to have nine, like baseball cards. Or maybe only one was ever made, like a painting. Or maybe it is one of the few left, like a personal computer. Maybe he dreams about it, like a

statue of Venus. Or maybe someone famous once owned it. Or it could be an important piece of the past, like the first Hula Hoop that just sold at auction for two million dollars. Can you imagine paying that much money for an empty circle? Do you see what I'm getting at?"

"Yes I see where you're going," Aldo said. "But unfortunately it's getting me nowhere. Let me ask you this...is it a new thing or an antique thing?"

"Most certainly antique. Anything made between 1800 and 2000 is considered an antique. After 2000 it is called a collectible. Before 1800, an ancient relic. Maybe this person wants it because it is simply an eyelick."

"What's that?"

"The opposite of an eyesore. Maybe this individual who wants to buy it from you just likes the way it looks. No better reason than that. All you need is one who feels that way and you've got a sale; two people who feel that way and you've got a bidding war. And then there's this rattle," he said and shook the box near his ear. "Perhaps the box is just a box and what is valuable is inside of it."

"Do you think I should bust it open?"

"Oh I wouldn't do that, because if the value turns out to be the box itself, you would destroy it. May I ask what price is being offered for it?"

"A lot of money," Aldo said vaguely.

The eyebrows bounced in punctuation.

"I see," Wooley said. "In that case, might I suggest that you leave it with me. Perhaps I can find out about it. Check a few resources. Have some people look at it."

"To tell you the truth, this is kind of a secret project. Let's keep it quiet for now," Aldo said and got up to leave. "I'll get back to you."

"Sorry I couldn't be of more help. But outside of the obvious interest as a possible relic of the Second War, it's hard to say what its value might be."

Aldo was halfway to the door with the box in his hand when the second mention of that phrase finally took hold.

"That's the second time you said that," Aldo said, turning back to Wooley. "About a war. What war?"

"The Second World War. You know, mid-20th century, the Allies, Churchill, Germany, and Japan and all that? I'm saying that the buyer may simply be a World War II buff."

"Why do you say that?"

"It's a common enough interest. Not my cup of tea, of course. But it is rather rare to find actual objects from that era anymore, and that makes them more valuable. Especially in the case of this particular kind of thing. You'd be amazed."

"I'm sure I would be. What particular kind of thing?"

"Nazi memorabilia. I didn't want to say anything...um...too indelicate, you understand, since it's an heirloom."

But Aldo's slack jaw and limp eyes said that he did not understand at all.

"Surely you know that your ancestor has—acquired shall we say—a piece of Nazi history here," Wooley explained. "There are quite a lot of people who still collect it...some for historical reasons. Some for sentimental ones. Helmets or medals, daggers, even uniforms. Anything with a swastika on it like that."

"Like what?"

"Like your little box there."

Aldo took the box out again and unfolded the paper. "What swastika?"

"There," Quentin said, pointing to the pattern on top of the box. It's a bit disguised because of the complexity of the design. Perhaps on purpose. You see? It's a kind of cross, a double cross actually. But it is clearly a swastika made of a double row of lines," he said and traced the ghost of the famous pattern in the air just above the design. "You really didn't know?"

Aldo followed the raised lines with his own finger. It was indeed a swastika, that familiar cross of lines with the ends bent at right angles. He had not noticed it before, because the double rows confused the image. It was not a common sign anymore but he certainly recognized it once he saw it. He was back in the elevator studying it carefully, when he became aware that someone else was watching him. This was an odd sensation considering that he was alone there. But the elevator suddenly stopped between floors and Aldo looked up to see that an image of someone had appeared on the rear digiwall instead of the usual advertisement.

"Whatchew got there? Chinese food?" Loren Adder said, his lips nibbling.

Aldo quickly covered the box. "What the hell are you doing, Adder? I thought you guys only did this kind of thing during emergencies."

"Yeah, that's true. But I got more leeway now that I'm working with the police. You know, the building is reporting that you've been changing your behavior patterns of recent. Going out of the office more often. You wanna comment?"

"Work. And why is it any of the building's business—or yours for that matter—how often I leave my office?"

"The building is progged to report on movement, especially anything unusual like new patterns. That's the beauty of the system. All I do is read the reports and follow up. So I'm following up...what are you visiting Mr. Wooley for?"

"None of your damn business. Are you tracking me or something?"

"Maybe."

"Why?"

"To tell you that they figured out what the weapon was."

"Did they?" Aldo said, trying some fumbly legerdemain on the murder weapon itself.

"Well, they know it was a blunt object and that he was hit over the head with it. And that it left a kind of cross pattern on the skin, near the left temple."

"A cross pattern?" Aldo asked. He had not noticed any cross pattern on the skin, and he had an intimate knowledge of that wound.

"Are you getting a psychic message about it?" Adder asked, stepping back to give Aldo's brainwaves space to come in.

"That's pretty concrete evidence. I mean, using a weapon that would leave a pattern. How stupid could the murderer be? Don't you think he would have seen it and done something about it?"

"Erle says he wouldn't. He says that the tissue was still swollen from the blow at the time of the murder. Then later on, the swelling goes down. They're running a program now that can examine the bruise and maybe recreate what the object that caused it might have looked like. I'll ask Erle tonight when I see him. He's taking me up to Karkas' apartment to check out shit. Hey, you wanna come along? I could arrange it."

"No thanks, just release the elevator. I'm busy."

"Come on. I can keep you here all day until you give up."

"Let the elevator go, Adder."

"Come with me. It would be kind of like returning to the scene of the crime."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean with your mind powers and all."

"No."

"I seen where psychics go back to the scene of the crime or to the victim's home or something and they touch the things that the victim touched and get all kinds of clue shit. Whadaya say?"

"I've had enough clue shit for one day."

The elevator suddenly jolted and began to move again as Adder gave in and dissolved into an ad for a new psychomorphic bug spray called Enditall that convinces roaches that life is not worth living.

"All right, where is it?" Victoria Conner demanded, even before sitting down.

Aldo had been waiting for her at a small table by the front window of the restaurant. He had picked the restaurant and the table by design...nothing near the Urbana, a crowded place, and in full view of lots of other people just in case she

was being followed. And she was. But only by male admirers like the three men who had changed course to appreciate her as she walked in. And with good reason; she looked stunning again. The red hair and a black cape were billowing. And when she sat down, shimmering black legs slipped out under a tight short skirt. She let the cape drop over the back of the chair and shook her head. Curls of her hair danced around the impossible colors of her plasma earrings. Thinking everything through carefully, and writing out all his options, Aldo had now developed a plan of action and this had a calming effect on him, even enough to revive his fantasy of flirtation.

"Where is it?" she asked again, all business. "Do you have it?"

"Hmmm?" he muttered, all smarmy. He was watching her lips instead of the words they were making.

"Is this a gag?" she demanded, looking under the table for it and finding nothing. "You don't have it?"

"Not with me."

"Why not? What are you up to?"

"I've been thinking."

"Are you trying to screw around with me?"

It was amazing how chilly her warm black eyes could turn.

"Let's talk about this," Aldo said, refocusing on the plan at hand.

"That worries me."

"I'll tell you what I've been thinking. I have a plan about it. If you still want the box back when I'm done explaining it, we can get it from my office."

"Where's that?"

"In the Urbana. I live there but I also work there. It's a home office."

"You work at home?" she asked dubiously.

"Just like you," Aldo said.

He did not mean to insult her, but he did and silence followed. To make up for it and to ease back into the discussion, he got up the nerve to ask her a question that had been on his mind right from the start.

"Why me?" he asked.

"You say that a lot."

"I mean that night," he said. "Of all the men in the bar, why me?"

"You looked like you wanted company."

"I didn't though."

"You may not think you did, but you did."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know men. Especially ones in relationships. I know the deal backwards and forwards. You love your wife, lover, girlfriend, whatever. You have a lot in common, you get along pretty well. All that stuff. But you have this burning inside. For romance maybe. Or sensuality. Or kinky sex. It flares up every time you see a good leg or a cut of cleavage. It's like a fire in the groin and commitment only smolders it. It doesn't mean anything really; it's not evil, not a sin. But it *is* there and you can't ignore it. It burns. I could see the glow in your eyes. Believe me, I know all about it. I'm an expert. You might say I'm a kind of freelance firefighter."

Her eyes went up a degree and she ordered an ice tea. Aldo ordered one too, to cool himself down.

"This guy who wants the box," he said, trying to get himself back on track. "What's his name?"

"I told you. He said his name was Detective Green."

"You didn't tell me he was a detective!"

"That's what he said. Anyway, what's the difference? Detective or not, he still wants the box. And we want to give it to him. Don't we?"

"I'm not sure."

"Why not?"

"How do we know he won't turn us in after we've given him the box?"

"I thought of that too. He sure knows a lot."

"He knows a lot? What did you tell him?"

"I told him nothing."

"So how does he know a lot?"

"I told you. He was following Gordy."

"Following Gordy," Aldo repeated, trying to follow the crux of that in his crooked thoughts. But he was not by nature a crook and it seemed to lead exactly nowhere. "Why was he doing that?"

"For the box, I guess."

"But why?"

"Look Aldo, all I know is that he wants it. Very much. Once we give it to him, he's got no reason to turn us in. He'll get what he wants and it will all be over with."

"It's more complicated than that now. The police know things too. They might know soon what the murder weapon was."

"Okay," she said, stiffening. "Now why don't you tell me how the fuck it is that *you* know what the police know?"

The eyes were nitro cold now and her voice was stinging. Diners on either side of them focused ears in their direction.

"You talked to them, didn't you!" she said. "I knew it! You told them! How else could they know?"

She looked at the man at the next table, at the one waiting for a table, at the one on the street, then back at Aldo and easily decided they were all in cahoots. All men everywhere.

"This is a set up," she said.

She grabbed her cape and was out the door before she could say double cross. Aldo flashed his card at the register and ran out in pursuit, finally catching up with her at the entrance to the subway a block away.

"Stop running," he said, grabbing her by the arm. "This is stupid."

"Let me go," she said, pulling away.

He obeyed and put his hands in his pockets as a sign of truce.

"Then let me explain," he said.

"The truth or more bullshit?"

"Don't tell me about bullshit, lady. You've done nothing but shovel it since day one."

"I have to protect myself."

"I want out of this as much as you do."

"That's impossible," she said.

But she did stop running and that gave Aldo time to gather his thoughts.

"There's a guy in my building who is involved in the case. He's a security guard named Adder and he knows the detective working on the Karkas case. That's how I know about the police. Karkas owned the building so this guy Adder is obsessed with the idea that someone who lives in the building killed him."

"That's not an obsession. It's a damn brainstorm."

Knowing on some level that they needed each other more than they wished, they began to calm down and walk up Broadway together. Casually like shoppers. But Victoria still kept at a safe kicking distance.

"How do I know you're being straight with me?" she asked.

"Because if I told the police anything, they'd be here right now instead of me. I wouldn't be talking to you if I didn't have to be. We are still in the middle of this thing."

He looked up at one of the vidcams and resisted the urge to wave.

"The cops know about *me*?" she asked.

"No."

"What then?"

"All they know is that Karkas was killed in Manhattan and that someone drove the body across the bridge and dumped it in New Jersey. They probably know the make of the car."

"Shit. And the box?"

"Not yet. They know that he was hit with a blunt object with a pattern on it. But they *are* snooping around his apartment and if they do find out that Karkas had some relationship with you they might connect you with his murder. Would there be anything there they could use?"

"How the hell should I know? I've never been to his apartment."

"What about the box? Could they find something out about that?"

She shook her head no.

"That's why we can't risk giving it to someone else," he said. "We might have to get rid of it."

"Oh Green's going to love that. You don't know him. He does not do well with complications."

"What did he tell you about the box?"

"He wants it is all."

"What's so important about it to him?"

"I told you. He didn't say. He's not the chattiest guy on earth. What do you think it is?"

"I don't know yet."

Aldo thought about mentioning the swastika but decided against it. For all he knew they were all—all of them, Karkas and Green and Wooley and her—part of some Neonazi plot that he had stumbled into. He was beginning to learn that deception was not a weakness as he had always thought. It was a tactic. A talent even.

"Adder never said anything to me about any Detective Green," Aldo continued as Victoria stopped to examine herself in a store window. A clerk on the other side blew her a kiss. "He never mentioned that Karkas was being followed by the cops."

"Maybe he left that part out." She blew a kiss back.

"No, he's much too dumb to leave anything out. I don't think this Detective Green is really a cop."

"Me either."

"So who is he?"

"My guess? Just your average psychopath with a passionate interest in metal boxes. Must be very common in certain circles."

"He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"He gave me a free sample. Which is exactly why, despite everything you said, we have to give the box to him."

"Which is exactly why we *can't* give it to him."

"And how do you figure that?"

"Just think about it. He needs us right now. Once he's got the box, there is no reason for him to protect us. He could easily turn us in. But as long as we've got the box, we have what he wants. And that gives us something to bargain with."

"Remind me of that when we're sharing a nice cozy little drawer together in the morgue."

"I need more time," Aldo said. "Another day or two to find out what it is."

"What is there to find out?"

"I'm not sure yet. But maybe it's stolen. Or worth something. There are more angles to this than we know. And the more we know, the more we have to bargain with. Information is power. Maybe there is a way to trade your Detective Green for the box. Or get rid of both of them at the same time. We have to know what it's all about."

"You're living in simland, pal. You don't know what you're dealing with. This guy is not normal. Not some guy you can sit down and have a nice negotiation with. He's a hood. A Eurothug. He'll eat you fucking alive. Both of us."

He knew she was right, but in the end logic overcame the fear. And the ultimate logic of the situation was that as long as he had the box, he had some measure of control. Without it, chance came into play. And chance was another of Aldo's mortal enemies.

"How did you leave it with him?" Aldo finally asked.

"He's coming over tonight to pick it up."

"You'll have to stall him for a while. That'll give me time to find out more about it."

"I can't stall. He's crazy. This is the kind of guy who plays with knives. You don't know him."

"How much did he say it was worth?"

"He said six biggies...so what's that? 600,000?"

Aldo went asthmatic. "Dollars?" he gasped.

"No, toothpicks."

"I didn't realize we were talking about that kind of money," he said, trying to get the air back into his lungs. "That's a lot of money."

"Welcome to reality."

"Well does he want the box or the money?"

"Money I guess. Wouldn't you?"

"Then tell him we know someone who wants to buy the box. Tell him we'll sell it and give him...say...four hundred thousand for it."

"Four hundred? But he's expecting more than that."

"I know. But this way he'll get the money and won't have to go out and sell the box. That makes it much easier for him. He'll go for that. Trust me, I know about finances."

"But why offer a lower amount."

"It's a stalling tactic. To slow things down. Get him to stop and think."

"I don't know. This is getting way too complicated."

"Tell him we'll need a few days to pull the deal together. Early next week."

"What if he agrees? We can't get that kind of money. Can we?"

"We can always tell him the buyer pulled out, then give him the box like he wants us to."

"This is crazy. Suppose he doesn't like your plan? Suppose he gets upset? Suppose he decides to deal with it by slicing me into thin strips?"

Victoria stopped at a parked limousine and sat on the fender, rubbing both her knees slowly as if to say goodbye to them. Aldo sat down next to her and tried to turn his own panic into conviction. It was not easy.

"Then I'll come," he suggested. "I'll be there when he comes over. I'll hide in the bedroom. If it goes bad, I'll be there."

"You'll protect me?" she said almost on the verge of tears. Tears of laughter.

"I *have* had practice," he answered. "Besides, he won't kill us both because then he won't get the box *or* the money."

"This is not my life," she reflected, taking off her left shoe and giving her sole a consoling squeeze.

At ten o'clock Friday night, Aldo was again sitting in the darkened bedroom of Victoria's apartment, this time clutching an iron exercise bar. Through the slit of light at the edge of the door he could see Victoria in the living room, smoking and waiting. He practiced a few deadly swings with the bar, saw the silliness of it, and tossed it onto the bed. How he longed to be back in his own apartment inputting numbers into a cozy spreadsheet. Then at five after ten, Victoria's card signaled and a sudden drain of the blood in her face told Aldo that the man had called instead of coming. Aldo walked over to her but stayed on the far side of the card so as not to be seen on camera, and listened in.

"Aren't you coming over?" she asked.

"Could be."

"What's the matter?"

"I get the feeling you don't trust me, Red."

"I'm waiting for you. Like you said."

"Yes but alone?"

"Yes, I'm alone," she said. There was a long silence. "Hello?"

"Do you have the box?"

"That's what I want to talk to you about."

"Talk you said? You don't talk until I talk. And I got nothing to talk about."

Aldo had, of course, made a list on his own card to help her through the conversation. And at this critical juncture he held it up for Victoria to see, pointing to the first item on the list.

"We want to make you an offer for the box," she said, sounding exactly like someone reading word for word.

"You trying to fuck me? Because if you are, I'll come over there all right and I'll kick your fucking ass through the wall. And his too."

Aldo pointed again, and again she recited.

"We want to make you an offer for it."

"An offer for your ass? Could be. It's a nice fucking ass."

"For the box. My boyfriend found someone who is interested in buying it."

"What is this, some kind of routine?"

"We'll give you the box if that's what you want. But then you'd have to sell it to get the money. This way, if you let *us* sell it, we can just give you the money. It's easier that way."

"It's easier is it? And just what exactly is in that for you?"

"You agree to leave us alone."

"So I get the money, someone else gets the box, and you and your boyfriend get away with murder. It just don't sound right, Red."

"What do you sap?" she asked, misreading the next entry on Aldo's list.

"You have it?" the man asked. "Do you have the box there?"

"It's not here. It's in a safe place."

"At your boyfriend's house?"

"Somewhere else. So what do you *say*?" she said, reading more carefully the second time.

"This is fucked up," he said. "Maybe."

"You said you were a businessman. Well we don't want trouble. We want things easy. We can sell it and give you four hundred thousand for it."

"Four hundred thousand? What kind of bullshit crapass jerkoff is this? You trying to rip me off, Red?"

Even through the tiny sound of the card they could both detect a feint bemusement in his voice.

"That was before a lot of things happened," she said.

"You're a sharp chick, I'll grant you that. But don't think I'm so dumb because I ain't. I know what you two are up to. You can't get the kind of price Karkas could wangle plus now you want to skim a little off the top. Offer me a low price and make a profit for yourselves. So tell me, what's this buyer really paying? What's your end?"

"It's not like that at all."

"Looks like we're gonna have to renegotiate. Mr. Karkas being croaked and all. And of course, this little commission of yours. Tell you what. I might be willing to accept a figure of...say...two million to save me all the trouble of wangling a deal myself. That's a nice round number."

This new number caught them both completely off guard. But Aldo realized that ending this round of the game they were playing was more important than winning it. Victoria, hating to be taken advantage of, was about to haggle. But a sharp nudge from Aldo brought her back to her senses.

"Okay," she said reluctantly. "We'll try. But it will take some time to fix the deal."

"That ain't my problem. You want in on the deal, you gotta take your share of risk."

"Four days. Until next Tuesday," she said, reading the last item on Aldo's list.

"We'll see."

"Is it a deal?"

"Why the hell not. I'm in no hurry. Say, Red, now that we're partners and all, tell me this...what the hell is in the box anyway?"

"Don't be funny."

"Is it nuclear drugs or something?"

"In that little box?" she asked.

"So it's little, is it? It's a little box. How little?"

"You mean you've never seen the box?"

"I thought maybe drugs but not if the box is small like you say. Or plates for funny bills but hardly no one uses money no more. Maybe some industrial stuff, like luminesce. But I dunno. If it's little, maybe a key to a warehouse or some such thing. What the fuck is in it that's so important?"

"You don't know?"

"Hey, don't gimme that fucking tone. What I know is that box is worth money to me. I have an investment in it. And I'm going to realize a profit or

somebody's going to end up dead dead dead. I sure hope it ain't you, Red. You're a special kind of woman. I could go for you."

"How can we get in touch with you when we get the money?"

"Don't worry. I'll get in touch with you. Maybe I stop by Monday night. At our usual time. What kind of wine you like, Red?"

CHAPTER 8



NAPOLEON'S PENIS

Aldo was walking out the front door to his office on another of his secret missions Monday morning when he ran smack into Loren Adder coming in with great haste. Newtonian laws took over and they both recoiled in equal degrees.

"You look like crappola, Weeks," Adder said instead of hello.

"Thanks," Aldo said, in lieu of fuck you.

Aldo had spent the entire weekend holed up in the apartment making more lists, but now they centered on the box that was in the middle of the mystery. What it might be, who could know about it, how much it might be worth. What to do with it...drop it in the river, sell it at auction, turn it over to the police. Bash *himself* in the head with it and end his misery.

"Just coming to see you," Adder said with a disturbing grin. "I thought you might want to have a look at something."

Adder was jiggling a brown bag he was carrying which Aldo wanted to look into and wanted to ignore in equal parts. For a moment they stood at an impasse in the threshold.

"I've got to go somewhere," Aldo said, trying to push past him. "Come back in an hour and show it to me."

"No can do, amigo," Adder said, his arm straight out like a cop. "I'm on duty. Anyways it'll only take a second and I'm sure you are gonna wanna see this."

Oddly, the apartment and the office were both beginning to feel terribly cramped and even more so with other people in them. Aldo was reluctant to go

back in, which was most unusual for a man who had always thought of his front door as the gateway to hell. Still, he knew that he could not afford to pass on any new evidence of his guilt and so he turned around and led Adder inside.

"All right," Aldo said. "Just wait here with Cleo for a second. I have to do something."

While Adder tortured Cleo in the outer room, Aldo went into his office where the box was still sitting on his desktop in its paper wrapping. Before hiding it in his drawer, he brought the scanner up to the top of the workspace and placed the box down on it. A glowing light illuminated his face as the tapscreen sucked the image from the lid of the box.

"Cleo, can I see you for a minute?" he said when it was finished. She came in with a disgusted look on her face. "Shut the door."

"What is *that* doing here again?" she asked, indicating Adder in the other room. "It's like some kind of weird alien infestation."

"Working on the Karkas case."

"He is? Then you'd better be careful."

"About what?"

"About getting too friendly with him. That could be very dangerous."

"Why?"

"It just could be. A bad precedent. Like giving dungballs the vote."

"Don't worry about him. Would you please just do me a favor? I stored this image under my daily documents," he said, pointing to the window with the swastika pattern in it. "Could you zap it over to the editor of Sturm&Drang. That's our war collectibles webalog. Ask him what it means."

Adder, meanwhile, began pounding on the closed door with his fist. "Hey what's going on in there? Open up!" he bellowed.

"What do you mean what it means?" Cleo asked.

"I'm not sure. Ask him if he has ever seen it before. If it looks familiar."

"Open up in there," Adder yelled. "This here is the vice squad!"

"Okay?" Aldo asked Cleo. "But don't do it while anyone else can see it or overhear you. Especially our friend in there."

"Why Sturm&Drang?" she asked, studying the design. "It looks like an insect farm. Why not Creep&Crawl?"

"It's a swastika," Aldo replied. "Didn't you see that?"

"Oh sure," she said, tracing the symbol with a pink nail.

"Hey!" Adder shouted, "break it up in there you two. No screwin' in the office!"

Aldo opened the door for Cleo to leave. "Come in already," he said to Adder.

"Whoa! That was fast. How was it for you, Cleo? Was it good enough?"

"Ugh," she said deep into his face as she walked by.

"Hey, that ain't my fault. You just been screwing the wrong guy, that's all."

"Will you sit down and shut up," Aldo said, offering the visitor's chair to Adder and wishing it was the kind that plugged in. "This is an office. I work here."

"Just funnin'ya, Weeks. I didn't mean to put down your manhood or nothing."

"What do you want to show me?"

"Oh yeah," Adder said, plunging his snoot into his brown bag. "What do you make of this?"

He pulled something out of the bag and threw it on Aldo's desk. At first it appeared to be a dead animal but then it just lay there like an old hat. And on closer inspection, it *was* an old hat. But not just any old hat. This was a brown fedora with a feather in the band. Aldo knew it instantly. It was the exact hat that Aldo had placed on Karkas' head to cover his pallor as he and Victoria carried him to the car that night. In sympathy with the deceased, Aldo turned white too. And he quickly announced to the room to adjust the lighting to cover the change in his tone.

"A hat," he said flatly.

"Get anything from it?"

"What am I supposed to get?"

"I seen where psychics get messages and shit by holding the evidence in their hands. Go on, touch it. Rub it. See if anything comes."

"I told you that's all crap," Aldo said, flipping the hat back into Adder's lap.

"You may think so. But I don't. I told Erle about you."

"What about me?"

"About your ESP. He says we need all the help we can get, so what the fuck. But he also said I should keep an eye on you. Just in case you yourself turn out to be a suspect. Can you imagine? You—Aldo Weeks—murdering Gordon Hardin Karkas?"

"Why not?" Aldo said, slightly wounded.

"Come on, Aldo. We both know you ain't got the nerve. Killing takes guts and balls and shit. I can just see it. Maybe you could tidy him to death," he said and broke into gasps of laughter, his mouth a cave where nasty little things dwelled.

"Where did you find that hat? In the garbage?"

"On the street. See, I was up in Karkas' apartment last night with Erle and this other detective..."

"What's *his* name??"

"Who Erle? His name's Erle."

"I mean the other detective. Is his name Green?"

"There you go again with the hunches."

"Is it? Is the other detective's name Detective Green?"

"Nah, some crazy name with too many damn letters in it. But maybe you *sense* that green figures in this case. Green? Maybe the car was green."

"Forget it! What about Karkas' apartment?"

"Oh yeah, well we were looking around and talking to Karkas' aide and all. She didn't know nothing and we couldn't get anything off the apartment on account of Karkas had some fancy encryption firewall."

"You can encode your own apartment? I didn't know you could do that."

"You couldn't, he could. You can do anything with enough dough. But it doesn't matter because they'll break into it eventually. Anyways the building says that he went out that night in a hurry and walked south, which the Grid confirms. Lost him around 89th Street, but the building figures that he didn't go much further than that or he would have hailed a taxi. He always took taxis when he went out. So that puts his destination somewhere around say 86th to 90th Street and somewhere between Broadway and Riverside."

"That's ridiculous. It's all just guessing."

"You're right. But it's *good* guessing. It narrows down my field of operation real nice. See, I ain't as stupid as I look."

"You couldn't possibly be."

"Correct. So what did I do? I decided to have a look see. Erle thought it was a waste of time but I did it anyways. For hours and hours I walked up and down the area. Up and down and up and down, then—boom!—what do I find on 89th Street? This hat."

"Incredible," Aldo said.

It really was incredible. And in that one moment, Aldo realized that he agreed with Einstein that God did not play dice with the world. The universe could not possibly be governed by chance as the quantum crowd said. There had to be law, and order, and determinism, and God and an ultimate truth. There simply had to be. Because no one—and surely not a speck like Loren Adder—no one could *possibly* be this lucky.

"Yup," Adder concurred.

"This is insane. People drop things all the time. That hat could belong to anybody."

"That's what I thought. I mean there's a lot of shit in the street. But then I looked carefully at it. Go on, take a look yourself. Take a good look," he said and pointed to a spot on the left side of the inner headband. There was a dark red stain. "See that stain there? It looks an awful lot like blood, don't it?"

"That could be anything."

"But could be blood too. Hypothesis. You see what I'm saying? And on the same side as the blow on Karkas' head. Now that's a fucking coincidence."

"Maybe."

"Maybe fucking definitely."

"Okay, Loren. Let's say you're right. So Karkas wore a hat, so what?"

"Ah but here's where your thinking comes into play, see. Because he didn't. This here is my point. I went back and looked at the file of him leaving the building and he wasn't wearing no hat. That means that if the hat figures in, someone must have put it on him. Maybe to hide the blow to the head. Maybe it fell off when he was chucked into the car. Maybe I found the one block in this whole fucking city on which Mr. Karkas was killed. What do you say to that?"

"I say bullshit."

"Yep. That's just what I said at first. But then I started thinking, making assumptions. Connecting things," he said, snapping his fingers back and forth rapidly to simulate the cortical activity. "I started to look around that block for the car. A car with blood on the back seat maybe or some such thing."

"No, you'd never find it. There are hundreds of red cars on the West Side."

"I knew it! I knew you would come up with something!"

Adder jumped up, grinning like the perfectly irritating dweeb that he was. Aldo knew why, but it was too late for him to bite his own tongue.

"You said *red*. You did it, Weeks! You got vibes from the hat and you psyched out that the car in question was red."

"Sit down and stop it. You told me before that the guy on the bridge remembered a red car," Aldo said.

Unfortunately, he could no longer recall if that was true or not. The facts, the lies, the leads and misleads, and the lists were all getting jumbled together into one big pounding headache.

"Didn't!" Adder said gleefully. "Erle don't know the color of the car. The guy on the bridge remembered a Shanghai is all. So maybe I should start looking around the neighborhood for a red Shanghai tonight."

He started bopping his fingers again. Aldo said nothing. He was so annoyed with himself for the slip that his will refused to discuss the matter with his voice-box.

"Not red," Aldo finally barked. "You didn't hear what I said. I said rented. A rented car."

"You said red."

"Rented."

"You sure?"

"I definitely get that feeling," Aldo said, taking the hat back and rubbing it between his fingers. He even closed his eyes to enhance the effect. "Yes, I *am* getting something. I can almost see it. It was a *rented* car. With one of those holograms in the window. And I don't think it was a Shanghai."

"Can you see which company?"

"Sorry," Aldo said, tossing the hat back again.

"Maybe I should check both of them out. Red and rented. Could be you got a party line or something."

"Did you find anything else at Karkas' apartment?" Aldo asked.

"Nothing much. Helluva place though. The penthouse takes up the whole top floor of the building. It's 40,000 square feet or something. Big damn fucking apartment for one guy. Home FourD system. Thirty rooms or whatever. You could see the bridge while you take a crap."

"Yes, but anything unusual?"

"Nah. No beer in the fridge though. I looked. Why? You getting something on the old psychic channel?" Adder asked, squinting.

Aldo closed his eyes again and tilted his head back to better zero in on the signal. "Yes, I'm getting a World War II feeling. Perhaps a collection of some kind. Like a shelf full of war mementos. Anything like that?"

"Nope. There *was* all this art stuff around that Karkas collected. Paintings and whatnot. And there was this elephant shit on some of the shelves."

"He collected that?"

"Statues and such showing a little fat man with an elephant's head. There were dozens of them. Hey, I gotta get going," he said and stuffed the hat back in the bag.

"Maybe you should let me hold onto that hat," Aldo suggested. "I might be able to come up with something."

"I don't know. It is evidence."

"You want to solve the case, don't you? You want my help, don't you?"

"All right, for now. But be careful with it. Don't lose it or nothing. I'm going back down to 89th Street tonight. Maybe I can find more stuff. Like other objects. Or someone who saw the creep that night. Wanna come with me?"

"No way. I never go down to 89th Street. There are too many murders down there."

Aldo escorted Adder to the elevator just to make sure that he was really leaving, then raced back to talk to Cleo, "Were you able to find out anything about the swastika?"

"I talked to Freddy about it. Boy, he sure knows all about 20th century German history. And I found out some very interesting things."

"Yes?"

"I made notes so you'd be proud of me," she said, calling up her notepad. "Let me see...oh yes. Hitler came to power in 1930 and formed the National Socialist German Worker's Party, which in German is...Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei."

"Yes?"

"Yes, so in German it's pronounced Nah-tzi-yon-ale. Get it? Nah-tzi. That's where the name Nazi comes from. I never knew that. Did you know that?"

"What about the swastika, Cleo? Did you ask him about the swastika?"

"Yes," she said, scrolling through her notes. "He said it's really an ancient symbol called the gammadion because it's made up of four capital gammas joined in the middle. Gamma was the third letter of the Greek alphabet. It was also called a fylfot. That's a secret emblem. The early Christians used it as a kind of disguised cross, to avoid persecution. The Nazis only adopted it in 1933. Hitler was the one who picked it out and designed it for use by the Third Reich. That's the version in the old movies...with the thick black arms and in a white circle against a red field. Hitler was an artist, he said, and designed a lot of stuff...uniforms, buildings, rallies. Had a hand in the Volkswagen, the first one, not the hydrogen of course."

"What about this particular one?" Aldo asked, pointing to the scan.

"Oh yes, about that one. That's not it."

"Not what?"

"That's not the German swastika."

"It isn't?"

"No. Freddy said that a lot of different cultures used the swastika before the Nazis. American Indian, Hindu, Chinese. Freddy said it's been a common religious symbol around the world for thousands of years because it shows balance and stability but also motion and change. Hitler kind of gave it some bad press."

“He’s sure that this one is not German?”

“Positive. Freddy said any idiot could see that.”

“I guess I’m not any idiot,” Aldo suggested, still puzzled.

“This one is backwards. See? It points counterclockwise. The arms point to the left,” she explained. “The German swastika is always clockwise with the arms opening to the right. What’s so important about this anyway?”

“Just a new little obsession of mine.”

“Crosses?”

“Yes. Crosses. Crosses of all kinds.”

The usual table at Lemurs on Monday had the usual Wallace Kale, Carla Marks, Gene Field, and a glum Aldo Weeks. The Karkas murder was the main topic of discussion at theirs, as at all the tables. But Aldo’s mind was not on their idle and gossipy chitchat. It was one full week after the *event* and, far from moving beyond it, he felt more mired in it than ever. Like a ray stuck at the singularity of a black hole, clawing and panting, and getting nowhere at the speed of light. This was not a pleasant feeling but the others mistook his scowl for mere indigestion.

“So what do you think the MacGuffin is?” Wallace Kale asked, trying to get Aldo’s mind off his stomach, where it was not in any case.

“I give up,” Aldo said, just to be cordial. “What is it?”

“No one knows,” Carla said.

“Is it a type of pastry?” Aldo asked.

“Haven’t you been listening, Aldo? Poor baby, do you want a snort of peppermint?”

“I’ll be all right,” he said. “Maybe.”

“A MacGuffin is an old term from detective stories,” Carla explained. “It means the blodgett. The thingum. The gizzmuss.”

“Huh?” Aldo confessed.

“A MacGuffin is a mystery object,” Wallace added. “It’s the thing everybody in an old mystery movie or a websim is chasing after. They use them in some of the FourD’s too. Like the Maltese Falcon, or the priceless stamp, or the block of iridium.”

“We’re sitting here trying to figure out what the MacGuffin is in our little drama.”

“In other words,” Carla said, “what exactly was Karkas killed for?”

“What makes you think he was killed *for* something?” Aldo asked.

"Everybody's killed for something," Gene said. "And Karkas probably had a lot of somethings worth killing for. He was rich as shit after all."

"Like what?" Aldo asked.

"Like Hitler's foreskin," Wallace suggested.

"Hitler?" Aldo gasped. "Why do you say that? Is there some kind of Nazi connection to all this?"

"No, it's just my own little plot device I came up with. I always thought Hitler's foreskin would make a really good MacGuffin," Wallace explained. "I'm surprised no one's ever used it in a novel or something."

"What are you talking about?" Carla Marks asked.

"I mean can you imagine the historical significance of finding out that Hitler was circumcised?"

"Was Hitler the one who started the Second War?" Gene Field asked. He was young and the news of the 20th century was as relevant to him as yesterday's sim-celeb. It was not unusual to find people who were a bit hazy on history in a world in which everything that happened was happening right now in Cyberia. Still, he was only three generations away from the event and the others, who were a bit older, took some time out to set him straight.

"In any case," Carla finally said when their history lecture was over, "the whole thing is dumb. I mean Hitler's foreskin. How would you know it was really his?"

"Same way you know about anything like that. Like the Shroud of Turin. You just know."

"How do you know the Shroud of Turin is real?"

"How should I know? I'm Jewish," Wallace said.

"That's why he knows about foreskins."

"The whole thing is absurd," Carla said. "A foreskin. It's a tiny little piece of skin. You know how big it is? Like this," and she held up a few molecules of air in the pinch of her fingers.

"Size doesn't matter," Wallace replied. "It's symbolic. Like Napoleon's penis."

Gene Field *had* heard of Napoleon but placed him at the turn of the 20th rather than the 19th century and had him in England rather than France. Cleverly he said nothing and waited as the others scrutinized his face, found nothing to correct, and returned to Wallace for an explanation.

"After Napoleon died," Wallace said, "they preserved his penis in a jar. This is true. I read this whole story onscreen. It was kept by his priest at first, then it passed through a bunch of other owners. It was finally auctioned off at a place called Christie's in the 1970s. By then it was all shriveled up and, according to

the catalog for the auction, looked like a small sea horse. But they still knew what it was and that it was his. They know these things. It's called provenance."

"Hitler's foreskin? Napoleon's penis? Exactly what have you been reading lately, Wallace? Wang&Weiner?"

"Nonsense," Carla insisted. "This has absolutely nothing to do with Hitler or Napoleon or anything like that. Believe me, if there is any MacGuffin in this case, it's from India."

"Why India?" Aldo asked.

"Because Karkas came back from a trip to India right before he was killed. He went there a lot. I say he got in trouble with some Sikhs over there and they put a contract out on him."

"How do you know he went to India? Nobody knew anything about Karkas."

"Lucinda over in Pack&Unpack used to order his plane tickets. She told me."

"How about you, Aldo? Any news about the investigation from Loren Adder?"

But Aldo's attention had strayed again, this time because he noticed someone at the far end of the restaurant. "Excuse me," he said, "there's someone I have to talk to."

Selena deMars sat quietly at a small table reading a thick book onscreen. Aldo could tell this by the way she was tapping the surface methodically to scroll through the pages. Selena was an imposing woman with caramel skin and penetrating eyes who worked as an editor for Being&Nothingness, a weblog that catered to philosophy fans. Arriving at her table, Aldo waved as though they were old buddies before sitting down across from her.

"Selena deMars," Aldo said amicably.

"Do I know you?" she asked, sounding grand, like the official spokesperson for herself.

"Aldo Weeks. Traffic manager for Ganesh. We met at the annual party. Good to see you again."

"Why is that?"

"I wanted to ask you something."

"I was reading actually."

"Just take a micro. Question...how good are you on symbols?"

"As good as the next person, I would imagine."

"What do you make of a double cross?"

"Double cross? It's a term from horseracing I think."

"Is it?"

"Yes, I believe that the phrase *double cross* was a racing term in England in the late 1800s. A cross was when a rider promised to lose a race. He was said to have crossed his owner. A double was another level of the trick. So in a double cross, the rider promised to lose but won anyway. He only pretended to cross the owner but he, in fact, double-crossed the swindler. You see?"

Aldo sat back to take a wider view of his striking companion, who would have been perfect if they remade the Icelandic myths with Thor as a black woman. She did not seem to be the type to know such things and Aldo doubled his chin with surprise.

"I'm a racing fan," she explained.

"I thought you were a philosopher," Aldo said.

"You would be surprised at how much philosophy there is in a horserace. And vice versa," she said and turned back to her book.

"I'm sorry," Aldo interrupted, "but I'm talking about a real double cross. Like this one." He pulled out his card, opened it up, and tapped into his documents to find the scan of the pattern from the top of the box. He tilted it towards deMars, who studied the image for a few moments, then unfolded a pair of flexi-glasses and examined the design more carefully, pursing her lips in concentration.

"You might call this a double cross I suppose," she said. "Yes. Each arm of the cross is made of a set of double lines. It's quite interesting. Very intricate."

"What do you make of it? What does it say to you?"

"That depends."

"You could say that about anything."

"Now *you* sound like a philosopher."

"What does it depend on?" Aldo asked.

"On the system you use to analyze it. The meaning of something isn't in the object itself, it is in our intention. Meaning resides in the system of thought that we use to give things meaning. You see?"

"I don't think so."

"Well take this cross you have here. To a Christian, a cross is a sign of crucifixion. Of martyrdom, of suffering and redemption. It refers to a particular story that elicits certain feelings. Infinite pain relieved by salvation, for instance. Among other things. But I think that a cross with bent arms like this one was used early on when the Christians were being persecuted. So in another sense, at a different time and place, it takes on a new story with new feelings. Secrecy. Deep faith hidden from the outside world. A bond between those who suffer. It is a different meaning, you see."

"In other words, different meanings to different people," Aldo concluded.

"Oh yes. There are very few truly universal symbols. To an American Indian, who had no knowledge of Christ, a cross like this would mean something different again. The balance of nature I would guess. Two forces—like earth and sky or sun and moon—that are joined at the center to achieve a balance. No suffering there, you see? It's actually more a sense of the cyclical nature of life."

"I see."

"Now to the Nazis, of course, this was the swastika. A symbol of power, of social unity, of militarism. Although I believe in the German version the arms always point to the right. Do you do see what I'm getting at?"

"That it could mean anything."

"Many things, at least. And we haven't even discussed a Jungian interpretation. That is, its resemblance to a wheel whose rim has been broken at regular intervals. To Jung that would stand as a symbol of incompleteness, of motion waiting to be resolved. You'd get a sense of suspension. A minor chord if you see what I mean. Oh yes, all symbols are quite rich with meaning and meaning is never an answer, it is always a quest."

"What about an Indian Indian from India."

"You would have to know a bit more than I do about their mythologies, their stories. And even if you did, there are dozens of ways to look at meaning. Dozens of approaches. Freud, Roland Barthes, Cassirer, Hakanamura. Not to mention denotation, connotation, semantic meaning. And then, of course, it may very well mean nothing at all. That is to say, it may only have aesthetic meaning. Like a decoration."

Aldo scratched his ear.

"Asking what something means sounds like a simple question," deMars said, "with a simple answer. Quite the opposite. It is one of the most profound questions in all of philosophy. It is the basis of the whole study of semiotics...thousands of books. But why do you ask about this? Is it important?"

"Maybe."

"You could say that about anything."

"Now *you* sound like the philosopher," Aldo said. "Thanks for your help."

"Any time," deMars said. "I always love taking a simple question and making it impossible to answer."

Back in the comfort of his cocoon, Aldo tried to sit quietly and think clearly, but confusion kept intruding. Certainty had given way to frenzy. Nothing was settled. Anarchy reigned. Perhaps he had been wrong all along; perhaps chaos was not the enemy to be controlled at all costs but the essence of life, to be embraced.

A grim thought, he thought, and it troubled him for most of the afternoon. But could it be the case nonetheless? The answer to that, as to all questions, was in the Library. Aldo might have called it up on his desk or his card or the wall or any other tapscreen into the Flux. But then anyone barging into the room would see him researching not managing. And worse, entering the Library onscreen would have placed it over there somewhere, squeezed onto a flat surface, distant and separate. Too much like ordinary life, which was no longer trustworthy enough to be reliable. No, the only way to capture the surety—the sheer believability—of real life was through a simulacrum. And so he slipped back into his apartment and put on his websim headset. In no time at all he was in the Flux, seated in a large dark chamber with thick oaken shelves, ornate chairs, piles of large leather-bound books, and tables covered with odds and ends, and papers and lenses and specimens and calipers.

His guide was sitting at one of those desks, painstakingly writing with a quill pen, the scratches echoing in the vast room. Most everyone entering the Library relied on one of the standard websim personas to guide them...Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking, Benjamin Franklin, Isaac Newton. More adventurous sorts could pick from a long list of more esoteric choices...Rene Descartes, Beulah Henry, Tsi-Hang, Niels Bohr, any of the Bacons. But with a little research and effort, and extra cost, you could create your very own guide, matched to your own personality, and this is just what Aldo did. He had recreated, as an onscreen search engine persona, one of his great private heroes. A man whose life seemed to Aldo to represent all that he aspired to. The Great Arranger, the ultimate master of the human humding. That was he, sitting in the corner, progged to appear to be at work until Aldo got his attention. This was Aldo's gateway to all the knowledge of the world...stern of face, clipped of speech, longhaired of wig, in the person of one Dr. Hans Sloane.

Hans Sloane lived during the 17th, the glorious century, when Aldo would surely have lived had anyone bothered to ask him. The age of reason, the beginning of modern science, of the Royal Society. An era of systematic thinking, the cataloguing of the world in all its wonder, the great botanical collections, and all those marvelous instruments...lenses for seeing, measures for grasping, timepieces for keeping track. An era when the organization of data—what they would have called knowledge—was the one true path to understanding.

Hans Sloane had been born in Ireland and trained in medicine in London. As the physician to Lord Albemarle in Jamaica, Sloane assembled a vast collection of specimens—plants and insects—meticulously preserved on brown paper or in alcohol. Discovering a bitter drink there that he believed to have therapeutic

value, Sloane came up with the idea of mixing it with milk to sweeten it. Back in England he made a fortune with his 'milk chocolate' business and other wise investments. He used this money to buy up all the great botanical collections, the dried gardens, and the cabinets of curiosities throughout Europe. Sloane spent the rest of his life organizing, compiling, and cataloguing this vast amassment such that, at his death, it became the basis for the establishment of the British Museum. Aldo at once felt calmer to be in the civilized company of his old friend, his compadre, his hero, once again. Even though the figure sitting before him was nothing more than a virman...a virtual man made of pretty dust.

"Dr. Sloane?" Aldo said, thereby initiating the program.

"Good morning, Aldo Weeks," Sloane said with the vague and hammy Irish accent Aldo had taken from old TV shows. "Might I be of some assistance to you?"

"Yes, I would like to know about chaos," Aldo said.

"Ah yes, Chaos...the great void of the ancient Greeks that existed before the world."

"Well no, I was actually thinking of chaos...the great fact of life."

"Oh you shouldn't need a primer on that. We all of us struggle with it throughout our brief adventure, Aldo Weeks."

Aldo had taken care to give his guide a wry wisdom, lest research on the Web become too dry. And he had progged Sloane with a habit of referring to himself as though he were a member of the human race, to make his research findings cozier.

"Tell me about chaos," he repeated.

"It is an ancient concept, going back certainly to 736 B.C.E. and appearing 123,874,467 times since then in the 567, 938,958,748 works of literature in 6,021 languages that..."

"Skip the stats, please, and just give me the narrative."

"...historically these instances tend to use the word chaos as an undesirable disordered quality. The dictionaries define chaos as turmoil, turbulence, primordial abyss..."

"Abridge all definitions, please."

"...or unwelcome randomness."

"Isn't that just what it is?" Aldo asked. That certainly was the way in which he always thought of it.

"In part. You see, chaos is a concept throughout the history of thought against which we measure our humanity," Sloane said. "We ask ourselves what is knowable about the world and what can never be known. We try to find a balance

between the mystery of chaos and the comfort of understanding. This balance changes through time."

"How can it change? Isn't chaos always bad?"

"It has not always been seen that way. It may also be thought of as the limits of our questioning and therefore a good thing."

"I don't understand that," Aldo said. He did not; the unknown, the unknowable, the unexpected, these were demons to be avoided at all costs. The only hope was in the opportunity for order and structure. He lived by that credo. He practiced it...listing towards heaven.

"Ask yourself this, Aldo Weeks..."

"Intimize, please."

"...my dear friend. Is human knowledge heading towards total comprehension and predictability or is the world always more complex than even our greatest possibility for understanding."

"Well, which is it?"

"That is a very simple question but the answer is quite convoluted. One would have to first establish the differences between the knowable, the guessable, the predictable, the explainable, the comprehensible, and so on. And whether one is speaking scientifically of entropy versus organization, or psychologically of confusion versus clarity, or theologically of determinism versus free will..."

"The upshot, please."

"...there have always been attempts to reach a complete understanding by those who seek to know. Whether by knowing the mind of the Almighty, or reading the pattern of the future, or writing the rules of celestial mechanics, or decoding the intricate laws of complexity. But these attempts are always challenged by those who see the limitations of such efforts. This is so because mystery and understanding are two warring spirits in the heart that will never be resolved as long as we are human."

"But I thought that the whole idea of science and technology was to try to reach a full understanding of the laws of the universe."

"That is certainly one of the motivating ideas, but the evolution of these approaches has not resolved the issue."

"Examples, please?"

"In science, we have such efforts as Chaos Theory which seeks to reveal the hidden structure of systems that exhibit apparently random, unpredictable behavior. Examples of these are fluid dynamics, electrical oscillations, chemical reactions, social patterns, immune systems, economic relationships, ecosystems, traffic flow, shifts in public opinion, cardiological arrhythmias, epidemics..."

"Limit to best example please."

"...of which weather is perhaps the best example."

"Whether?"

"For example, the famous Butterfly Effect. The idea here is that the flap of a butterfly's wing in Brazil sets off a tornado in Texas. This suggests that any attempt to predict the weather with true precision would fail unless it took into account all data, including all butterflies, with total accuracy. And is this ever possible?"

"Well is it?"

"That is precisely the question."

"It sounds too complex to be possible."

"Yet at the same time, we have the development of Complexity which studies the process of self-organization, the middle ground between equilibrium and chaos in which order may come out of disorder. And we have Catastrophe Theory which evaluates how chaotic systems bifurcate into coherence and stable dynamic structures. There is also Limit Theory which investigates the self-regulating aspects at the edge of deep chaos. Entropic Disequilibrium..."

"Limit to most relevant reference, please."

"...but with the application of ArtAn, that is to say artificial analysis, to these problems, a much broader and more complex range of phenomena can be studied and this new field has been referred to as Infinitism. This involves dynamic interacting systems in constant flux between order and disorder that are fully comprehensible but only through what may amount to omniscience."

"Great. In other words, God only knows what the heck is going on."

"That is a refreshing way of stating it, my friend."

"You said something about free will?"

"Ah yes, the theological question. Is the world a place in which every event is already set in motion like a movie that has already been filmed? Or is it open-ended and therefore unpredictable? Are we free to act and change the rules or only allowed to act according to them. Is it a world of being or becoming?"

"I give up."

"Please outline the conditions of your surrender."

"Sorry, I mean...there *is* no answer to this, correct?"

"If we lived without chaos there could be no creativity. If we lived without order, there would be no point."

"Okay so then there's no answer."

"Answers are so 20th century."

Even Aldo, who progged the avatar in the first place, was surprised by that quip. It seemed that his creation was getting more clever on his own the more he studied, and this made Aldo rather proud. But it was not helping him with the Karkas affair.

"Say someone kills someone else without meaning to," Aldo said. "Are you saying that he may not have had any choice?"

"Those who believe in a strict determinism would say so."

"Could that help his defense?"

"Before God?"

"In court."

"The court of law or of public opinion?"

"Well, let me put it this way. Could I...he...I mean this murderer...make the case that the universe or let's say God made him do it. That he had no choice."

"Not guilty by reason of fate?"

"By reason of God."

"Unfortunately my friend, this leads to another question to which there is no simple answer."

"Which is?"

"How does God interact with the world? The view that encompasses chaos suggests that God does not will the act of a murderer, for example, but he allows it to happen in a world which he has endowed with the ability to be itself. God does not make things happen, he observes them happening. In this view, the future is not there waiting for us to arrive; we make it as we go along."

"Which is right?"

"Whichever seems right. But what I think you mean is...which is true. And there is no single answer to that."

"It's all a big jumbled mess, if I get your drift here."

"Drift?"

"If I get your meaning here, you can't avoid chaos. It's just the way of the world."

"In part, yes. It is one half of a universal equation...chaos on one side, order on the other. We seek to find a balance."

To make the process of information retrieval a bit more palatable, Sloan was programmed to behave like an ordinary person. So when the conversation lagged, he went back to his work which was cataloging a collection of exotic insects. Aldo watched him for a few minutes as he tried to find another way to ask the question.

"In other words, please," he finally said.

"In other words, all of those are examples of the seesaw back and forth between the urge to know and the urge to know the limits of knowing. All are attempts to come to grips with the overwhelming bigness of the cosmos and the limitless information within it, which is too much to keep in mind, through reason on the one hand or a sense of awe on the other. We feel a yearning to understand, but perhaps only up to a point. In the long run, all these theories and counter-theories suggest that we can only know what is knowable and not one known thing more."

"Great, then my whole little micromanaged life has been a lie. I'm not really in control of anything, if what you say is true."

"That's one theory."

"Fine," he thought out loud. "But then how does all this impact on my murder?"

"You wish to understand the connection of these theories to your own murder?" Sloane asked.

Aldo blanched, thinking that his personal simulacrum was suddenly accusing him. But he quickly realized that he had inadvertently spoken his thoughts.

"Well...yes. I guess I do," he said.

"In what sense precisely?"

"Does this uncertainty affect murder investigations? Are they chaotic as well?"

"I think you might have to narrow your..."

"Put it this way. Do a set of clues always point back to a clear cause? Do the facts in an investigation always lead to a clear conviction?"

"You mean to a clear conclusion?"

"No...a conviction."

"There are many theories that suggest that convictions come before facts."

"I'm talking about a murder case. Do facts always lead to convictions?"

"I do not understand."

"I'd like you to do some research for me."

"I should be pleased to. Can you outline the key parameters?"

"Yes...murder convictions. Please scan all US murder cases in the last...say...100 years. And tell me what the significant evidence was that convicted the accused."

Sloan stared at him blankly as the information was assessed. "I would be happy to," he suddenly said as though jolted back into consciousness. "This may take a few moments."

"Yes, well I'll come back and get it later," Aldo said, removing the goggles and tumbling back into the year 2040 with a monster of a modern migraine.

C H A P T E R 9



RATS RAT

Continuing to neglect all the schedules, outlines, due dates, budgets, progress charts, time studies, and inventories that were due on an hourly basis, Aldo spent the rest of Monday slumped in his chair like an oaf waiting for an insight. Ruminating. Thoughts drifted through his cortex but they barely nudged the neurons. Yet from these joggles, new lists emerged, lists based in equal parts on hearsay, conjecture, overkill, and exhaustion. Among them, an entire subset of lists cataloguing all the possible reasons the box might be worth somewhere between \$600,000 and two million dollars. For example: stolen from the famous box collection at the Topkapi museum; created by Henri, the world famous boxmaker of Lyons; once owned by Yvgeny Tushanko, first cosmonaut to catch cold in space; fashioned from pure plutonium, to be melted down and used by terrorists.

Unless the box itself was unimportant and simply *contained* something of value. More lists. To wit: Hitler's foreskin, Napoleon's penis, Genghis Khan's right nut; and so on through an entire private parts subcategory. Or the missing Chilton sapphire, assuming that there was one and that it was missing; Reich Marshal Goering's crackpot plans for the invasion of Manhattan; a blob of superdense Soma; a quark-based microchip; a portal to another of the dimensions predicted by Hyperstring Theory; an alchemical formula for turning lint into gold.

Lists and more lists blithering into eternity, their themes getting more inane as the hours passed. Namely: people Aldo would have chosen to bump off had he been asked first; all Federal prisons on the East coast that had a death row; eight

ways to croak before your time, beginning with self-strangulation; all known synonyms for box; the seven dwarfs in alphabetical order; six subatomic particles beginning with the letter K. Five foolproof methods for falling asleep in times of stress, starting with idiotic lists...ZZZZZZZ.

“How would *you*, Aldo Weeks, like to be a murder suspect?”

The question jumped onto the foreground of his screen with all the subtlety of an order from the court. He had fallen asleep at his desk again and the announcement jolted him awake. It was in fact only the teaser in an ad for one of those interactive cruises during which vacationers solved a murder mystery on their way to the Caribbean. But it gave him a good conk on the conscience nonetheless. It would have been more disturbing had it not been just one in a blizzard of ads and probes and spam and scams that were coming in as a result of his recent activities on the Web. This was one of the faults of the global communications network; everything you did online was fodder for the evildoers...not the hackers and virus designers, who were mere annoyances, but the marketers. Besides offering access to the whole wide world, desktops were now a dumping ground for everyone selling anything—which was everyone—to everyone else. In Aldo’s case, there were now commercials for old *film noir* movies, offers from funeral homes, free trials of mystery webgames, ads for home bioprint kits, kinky porn flirtations, and dozens of other bizarre uplinks all trying to turn his concerns into a sales pitch. Personalized software was supposed to prevent much of this. Known as fortressing software—or fortware—it normally sorted all his input into varying levels of security and created appropriate guards against outside access. But Aldo was lately so caught up in his frenzy of lists and plans and data that he was not taking the standard precautions. His drastic change in behavior patterns confused the computer about what went where. It occurred to him that he had to be more careful about keeping his private parts private, but actually *doing* that was another matter. It would have taken energy and focus, which he could not seem to muster. And in the end he was hoping that the whole episode would resolve itself before he needed to list one more thing to do on his Things To Do About Things To Do list.

A far worse problem than all the junk, however, was the fact that he was too preoccupied with the event at hand to spend time buying anything. That could be truly dangerous. Murder may have been a serious business, but buying was downright solemn. Buying was no longer a matter of personal taste but of federal statute; shopping had become the new allegiance and consumer ratings the new measure of civic duty. A sudden drop in purchases would surely send his own low

rating plunging even further. Maybe even low enough to risk contact from the computers of the Department of Consumer Affairs to find out what was wrong. Then a phone call, an interview, an audit, mandatory counseling. And unlike the cops, the feds of the DCA could look at all records, all datastreams, back to the beginning, maybe even to the birth of hominids on the African savannahs.

Knowing that he had to purchase something fast to fend off these threats, Aldo ordered a pair of morphing wine glasses, even though he did not need any, and a new subsonic tooth cleaner, knowing he would never use it. Then, quick as a tap tap tap, he returned to his murder lists. Like all efforts at data management, his inquiries in this area led to one clear thing at least...more data. Each thing that he looked into—each fact, each facet—became a gateway into another universe of facts and facets. This was an aspect of the well-known Law of the Blob...the more you threw things at the Blob to kill it, the bigger it grew. In other words, the more you tried to simplify information the more information you generated. It was a familiar paradox that all data managers like Aldo had to deal with. This was tough enough regarding his work for Ganesh, but now that he was also probing into criminality, it threatened to become fatal. In simply trying to fast-dance the hangman, Aldo had already looked into the structure of evidence, the nature of facts, the chemistry of tannin, the degradation of the body post mortem, the semiotics of symbols, the meaning of chaos...all these and many more had turned into an unending embedment of information. Worlds within worlds within worlds.

To be helpful with his normal work, Aldo's computer was progged to generate three-dimensional data graphs of information. These were virtual geometric shapes that could be explored like a sculpture to improve one's overall grasp of any set of facts. This was useful while trying to keep all the records of, say, running a vast web company in order. He could picture deadlines, for example, as mountains in a digital desert and see quickly that the nearer ones loomed sooner but that the taller ones were more important. But now a new kind of shape emerged on his desktop, one that he had never seen before. It was a complex multifaceted geoform with a central hub—which represented the dead man—and a dizzying array of lines connecting this to other points of information. The points represented all the other bits and ideas and words that he had generated during his inquiries...blood, apples, box, red, and all the rest. The whole entity looked like a majestic connect-the-dots game with no numbers and the stars of the Milky Way as points. Like the stars themselves, it all seemed endless, expanding, overwhelming. And without a trace of oxygen.

This shape, turning gently in 2space on his desktop, made one thing quite clear...his simple little act of self-defense had exploded into a cosmos of hopelessly confusing particulars. Just like the real cosmos but minus a deity to unify it. In one way, what he saw comforted him in its complexity; it gave him hope that he might disappear into it and never be pinpointed. But as he studied the graph he also knew, in the way that only a graph can make clear, that he had spent every single moment after the event fouling things up. Disordering. Bibbling around in the world of things like...a high-speed bibble. He should have sat down in a chair and not moved. That would have been smart. But instead he came and went and tried and did. And worst of all, touched things, a million things, and left a million fingerprints! Fingerprints everywhere. Why oh why had he not wiped off every surface he touched like they did in all the stories? And why did he now add another star to the galaxy of data by calling up Huang Franck, editor of Cues&Clues, a kind of police gazette for armchair detectives? Why? Because he was Aldo Weeks, data maven and infowonk, nitpicker extraordinaire, and not some sharp killer in a snappy story.

"Hello there Huang," Aldo said as brightly as a dull killer could say it.

"Ah, Aldo! I guess you finally got into the bathroom okay."

"What bathroom okay?"

"You know, the other day at the gym?"

"Oh that. Just some toilet jitter. Listen, Huang, I wanted to ask you something."

"About toilets? I don't know much about them. Maybe try Heads&Tails."

"Not about toilets. About fingerprints."

"Good, that's much more in my domain. Fingerprints. Okay then, shoot."

"Let's say someone murders someone."

"Like you kill Karkas."

"What??"

"No, I mean like as a practical example."

"Forget that. Just say the police find a body somewhere."

"Okay, a body. Got it."

"What do they do? Do they immediately start to dust for fingerprints?"

"No, they immediately try to wake the person up."

"Person's dead. Then what?"

"They try to determine the time of death."

"How do they do that?"

"Lots of ways. Body temp charting, rigor mortis progression, cell decay rates, MRI dissonance, and of course the famous maggot rule."

"Maggot?"

"Very simple but very accurate...the length of the largest maggot plus two tells the number of days the body's been dead."

"Uck."

"Not uck at all. Insects are very important in dead body cases. It's called Forensic Entomology. You see, your human body here is just basically insect food and it decays at a fairly standard rate. Let's say you end up killed one day, okay? Right away you got your flies all over the place, within minutes usually. Bzz bzz bzz they start breaking down the tissue. Then ants come in with their pincers and corrosive spit and everything and they start sucking up the blood and mucus and stuff. Then you get your gnats maybe. And then the maggots start. You get a shitload of maggots in a dead body; they just *looove* flesh and tissue. Then your wasps come and lay their eggs in the maggots..."

"Okay Huang, I get the picture."

"...and then carrion beetles come and eat the leftover skin and hair and stuff and the maggots and the muscles, everything. It's a real flesh orgy and by this point the whole thing smells like the devil's asshole. Which of course your scavengers love, so now you get your animals coming in with all their ticks and parasites and so forth. And everybody feasts until they're bloated as hell. I mean by now the whole thing is just a pulpy mess of fibers and bugs and bones..."

"Okay okay...let's move on."

"*Finally* you've got your domestic beetles, real scrappers those are. They chew up the last morsels. Plus of course you've got to keep in mind that your bacteria is rotting the hell out of this nasty soup of offal the whole time. I mean I'm talking about a goopy gooey mess of slimerotten...hello? Aldo? Are you still there?"

He was still there in body, but in spirit he was puking his guts up in some imaginary ditch. Bending over to facilitate the process, he had disappeared from view. "What...what about fingerprints," he said, back in vidcam range but green and unwell.

"Oh, you mean assuming they find it before the body has decomposed? Well, yes, they could look for prints. But they don't find any."

"They don't?" Aldo asked, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

"Nah. Fingerprints suck."

"They do?"

"Put it this way...after DNA, fingerprints are probably the greatest invention in law enforcement history. Unique to each person, deposited by touch and all that. Right?"

"Right."

“Wrong. Fingerprints are pretty much baloney. They love them in crime tales but they’re terrible in real life. And that’s even *with* the new pattern recognition software that can instantly analyze the arches, loops, and whorls. Fingerprints really only get used in less than 3% of cases, even when they can use latent print holophonic enhancement.”

“Why is that?”

“Because prints are so delicate. For one thing, they don’t usually imprint on coarse fabrics or many of the new smart textiles, so they’re useless on most clothes. They actually don’t stick well to skin or any oily surface. They’re worst of all on an older man like Karkas with his wrinkly hide, let’s say...”

“Why say Karkas?”

“Well, I mean they *are* looking for his murderer right? That’s the buzz on the chatnet. But nailing him with fingerprints? Forget it. I mean even when they *can* get prints, there’ll be hundreds of them at the scene. There’ll be this mess of overlapping, smeary little fragments, very hard to make out, let alone match to anything. Despite what all the talking heads online say, fingerprints make lousy evidence.”

“That’s a relief,” Aldo said, relieved.

“Yup, as soon as I hear that a case is based on fingerprints, I take bets on acquittal. Want to join in? I’m running a little lottery on whether or not they’ll find Karkas’ assassin.”

“No thanks. I’d have an advantage.”

“Yeah me too. I know too much. See the problem with most cases is not that there aren’t enough clues. It’s the opposite. Most killers are idiots and leave too many clues. Detectives don’t know how to narrow it all down. There’s just too much damn information to collate. Modern life, right?”

“That’s for sure.”

“You know what most murder cases are based on...successful ones I mean? And it’s not fingerprints.”

“What then?”

“Informants. Frankly, you can take all this forensic AI and CSI bullshit and shove it. It’s all fiction. In reality, most cases are based on informants. Snitches. Rats rat out people to get out of jail and that’s why prosecutors have jobs. Pure and simple.”

So much for fingerprints, Aldo thought. A happy point that he duly noted and annotated. It was a small victory for the defense, and one that he might have basked in had he not suddenly been confronted by a ravishing sight. There as the

dim light of the office flickered in the glow of the windows dancing all over his desktop, Kyla had miraculously appeared. His fiancé was standing, deliciously, startlingly, and totally nude on the other side of the desk. Aldo was so shaken by her appearance that he completely forgot what he was doing and let his hands fall onto the desk, thereby further disordering the data on it. In truth, Kyla was still 2,462 miles away in California but somehow her call had automatically popped up on the digiwall full-size, full-color, full-frontal. She had taken off her clothes and propped her card on some surface far enough away to capture the image of her entire body. He was caught so off guard that it took him several seconds to realize that she was calling not visiting. There was a clinical word for this kind of confusion—iconophrenitis—the inability to tell an image of a thing from the real thing. Naturally this was a common problem in 2040; coping with it had sparked a small healthcare industry. And like most disorders, the whole world had it, but only people with disposable income suffered from it.

“Holy moly,” Aldo muttered. She was posing like a pin-up and Aldo was instantly dopey and enthralled. While she was not the perfect form of the female form, she was the most naked one at the moment and knew very well that Aldo only needed a peek to get the picture.

“Do I have your attention now?” she asked, but her tone was annoyed rather than seductive.

“You sure do,” he said, trying to flatter her.

“Because apparently this is the only way I can seem to get through to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You promised to call me every day and you have not. I left two messages and you did not answer either of them. And you are acting as weird as a boson and not telling me what is going on.”

“I did tell you...it’s been crazy here...”

“Please Aldo, give me some credit. There is no ‘crazy here’ in your little world of lists and schedules. You must have read that somewhere. Something is going on...with you, I mean...and you are not including me. You are not talking to me and that means you are excluding me.”

By now she was starting to get dressed and not in an alluring way, more like someone in a fitting room who had wasted too much time trying on too small dresses.

“I don’t mean crazy in the crazy sense...” he began as part of a complex apology he had not even worked out yet.

“We’ve been through all this before,” she interrupted. “Love means commitment and commitment means communication and all that? I can accept that you

are a compulsive maniac. I can even deal with all of your control issues. But I cannot have a relationship through osmosis, Aldo. I need actual interaction.”

Along with her image, her tone had now gone from stark to cloaked and Aldo felt bad for the pain he was obviously causing her. “Okay Kyla, here is what’s really happening...I secretly went out to a bar and picked up this gorgeous woman who was a kind of call girl I think and hoping to get laid I went back to her apartment but before we could do anything someone barged in and tried to kill me but luckily I managed to bash his head in first and drag him out to New Jersey where I dumped his dead body into this...” but of course that did not seem like the way to go. Instead, he simply slumped visibly in his chair and tried to exude some combination of sympathy and frustration that would go beyond mere osmosis.

“What the hell is going on?” she pleaded.

“Something *is* going on. Something’s happened,” he said and braced himself for a healthy confession. “Something happened...something that has...completely screwed up my intranet. It’s hard to explain; I don’t even understand it. But it has thrown everything into total chaos.”

“A cyberworm?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. And you know me. Like you said, with my control issues and everything. It’s driving me nuts. Scaring me actually. I can’t stand not being in control of my life, you know that. I’m sorry if I have seemed distant but this is very serious. It could affect my whole...job. Not to mention my sanity.”

Some of this was even true but his answer was criminally opaque. Then again, as a newly certified rake and felon and murderer, lying to his fiancé seemed like barely a misdemeanor.

“Well...I’m sorry to hear that,” she said, “but at least now I know what’s happening. Do you think you will be able to get it fixed?”

“I don’t know. I’m trying. Believe me.”

“I know some good dewormers. Do you want me to call them?”

“No, we’ve got people here. You’ve just got to give me some time, that’s all.”

“Well then, I’ll let you get back to it. But Aldo, please, I know I can’t help you with this kind of stuff, but I need to know what’s happening. I need to know how you’re feeling, what you’re thinking. Okay?”

And then the usual chitter, love babble, byebyes and he was alone again in his muddle.

For the first time possibly ever, the office seemed terribly small and tight, like a trap. Images with their illusion of depth had so taken over the architecture of flat walls that it was easy to forget that one lived and worked inside a box. But

this fact now slammed Aldo with the full force of claustrophobia. He grabbed his jacket and made like a comet for the outer door, only to be slowed to a standstill by the gravity of Cleo's gaze.

"What?" he snapped.

"What what?" she snapped back.

"You're looking at me."

"Because you're looking at me."

"No. You're looking at me like you look when you want to say something. So say it."

"I am saying it."

"What are you saying?"

"What I'm saying."

"I am going out now to get some fresh air," he intoned. "Now before you say it, I know I never go out for fresh air. I know I always stay indoors and organize everything. Nonetheless, I have decided to go out for some fresh air now. That is what I have decided to do. Does that break some kind of law written somewhere?"

"No, fresh air is good," she said and refocused on her desktop.

Aldo paused, but either guilt or fear or doubt or some other unhealthy psychic state would not let him leave.

"Were you listening in on that call?" he finally said. He knew that the holophonics made it impossible for her to hear Kyla's voice, but there were other ways for her to eavesdrop if she wanted to.

"What call?" she said almost too innocently for his taste.

"Sometimes I think you have a little too much access to my desktop, Cleo. Which, by the way, pertains only to the work we do for Ganesh, not to my private datastream. You *do* know that don't you?"

"Hmmm?" she said, half listening, half tapping.

"I mean it's bad enough that my public communications are available to every kook with a product to sell, but I certainly hope I can trust..."

"Where do you want me to put these inventory outputs from the retail subnets? Are they current or pending files? Or do they just go into the general database?"

"General, but linked. So let's just be clear about what you look at and what you don't look at. Especially now that my fortware seems to be all haywire."

"And the schedules for all the site listing updates? I mean there are over a thousand files here. Do I have to frag each of them or can I bunchcode them?"

"Bunch. I mean things are getting very...scattered...and I need you to focus on...you know...the things you need to focus on."

"Okay. I'll take care of all that. And the 4317s?"

"Filter them. Cleo, just figure it all out. I'm going outside. I mean, I am glad that everyone under the sun thinks that they know me so well and that I'm so painfully predictable but..."

"Aldo! Relax! Go for a walk. Have a blast. Calm yourself. We'll get this all under control, don't worry. At least you won't have to worry about the fingerprints."

"Excuse me?" he jumped and thought that he noticed her cringe, but perhaps it was only a twitch or a twinge or tic.

"What?" she said.

"Not worry about...what?"

"Oh...uh...I said not worry about the finer points. You know, of all the schedules. I'll take care of them. Why? What did you think I said?"

But by this point life's greatest mystery to Aldo was no longer death or politics or sex, but what he thought about anything.

"I don't know," he said and exited gracelessly.

In his thirty-four years, Aldo had never felt the urge to go outside, get fresh air, or wander off the Grid. Like most people his age, he had been born into the Net and knew *that* to be his world, always present, always total, forever slippery between things and the images of them. But now, catapulted by his growing sense that this very Net was ensnaring him, he found himself on the street, wandering across West End Avenue, ambling through Riverside Park, and strolling down to the banks of the Hudson River. All along the way, he could sense that pencil thin vidcams were watching his every move and reporting these to the central servers run by the police department, the state authority, federal law enforcement...who knew, maybe even the UN, Interpol, the keepers of galactic order.

But standing on the promenade at the edge of the park and looking out over the generous waters of the Hudson, he could fool himself into believing that he was free. There was nothing like water to calm the nerves. Even though it was a weekday, the promenade was filled with people. Everything was in motion up and down the lane...bikers, runners, rollerbladers, UniBoarders, kiteskaters, scuttlers, and all manner of wheeling every whichway. Including the newest toy called a skimmer, a round flat disk with thousands of superslick oily bearings on the underside that seemed to skim over concrete in any direction like a magic bathmat. Meanwhile fishermen, sun sitters, boat sighters, resters, lollers and other sta-

tionary types sat on the benches or leaned on the railing and took in the sun. Tugboats, sailboats, Waverunners, kayakers, and barges made their way with and against the current.

To Aldo, all sunk into his self-imposed sea of data, there was something comforting about this deliberate movement, the regularity of it. All these people moving handsomely this way and that, navigating the complexity, as the river, untouched by thought and theory, flowed endlessly past the promenade, the boat basin, the piers, the ferry ports on its way into New York harbor and out to the sea which forgives everything.

Maybe, Aldo thought, there was a way to move through your life with ease, to live with your mistakes, to feel time passing without regret, to wait for the future with patience. Some kid kicked a ball into the water and cried about it. And Aldo thought...sure, but maybe not too.

Further along the walkway, there was a burst of activity at the railing. A crowd seemed to be gathering there to watch something in the water at the riverside. Like a magnet it began to draw people to it, including Aldo. A bunch of kids on skimmers seemed to slide to it from every direction like the iron filings in a lab demo. By the time he reached the scene, Aldo had to maneuver his way through the crowd to see what was happening.

A fisherman had snared something on his line and was tugging it in while a park ranger down below on the rocks tried to grab the thing with a metal pole. Through the murky waters, Aldo could just make out a dark green fishtail frozen by the river. But it was impossibly large, with a fin more than two feet wide. It rolled slowly in the current and bent the fishing pole almost in half as the fisherman pulled. When it was closer, about twenty feet away, Aldo could make out the whole length of the tail and that this catch was at least four feet long, putting it in the legendary realm of river catches. All the onlookers were mesmerized by the size of it and speculation about its identity ran wild...a prehistoric coelacanth trapped in the estuary of the Hudson, a mythic dragon eel from the strange high waters of Canada, the mother of all catfish.

Yet the truth, as it emerged, was even stranger than these. For in the next few moments, the park ranger was able to secure the fin with his pole and pull it even closer. Now Aldo and all the others could see the exact spot on its body where the green scales stopped and the pink skin began. The skin ran smooth and shiny from the waist up over rib bones. As it turned in the water, two delicate hands came into view. They were pressed up against the chest to demurely cover lovely round breasts. And now it was at the shore and the park ranger stared at it dumbfounded and the crowd was stone silent because the soft female face with its red

lips and alluring eyes was bobbing up and down, peeking through the surface of the water, its cascade of yellow hair mingled with river debris.

Met with that which is unknown, we are free to be pure again, to revert to our unprotected selves. And thus there was a sense of tenderness in the air as the mermaid—frozen, delicate, serene—bobbed gently at the rocks. Of course it was only a relic from some ship or an old ferry restaurant that sank, churned up from the riverbed by one of the tour boats. Just a fancy carving, a piece of sculpture that had floated in. But that only meant that it was new again and could inspire all sorts of fresh thoughts...admiration in the ones for whom it represented a lost craft, sadness in those who saw mortality in it, amusement to the comic turn of mind, sadness for anyone who knew loss.

Given that this was New York, the city at the corner of tough and kind, which would warm and break and mend your heart a thousand times between subway stops, where the homeless paid rent and the rich went hungry, New York, city of dark light and bright shadow, and given that these were New Yorkers who always knew what they wanted and where they were going, now bending over the railing to see what they could see, you would have expected razzes or jeers or even Bronx cheers. But there were none. The crowd was as silent as mourners waiting for a prayer. It was after all, only one single year after The Tragedy and the ash had barely settled, the cries undead, the terror lingering. The pictures still seared in the mind. And here was a frozen mermaid—real or not, it did not matter—offered up by the river as a kind of tribute to belief itself, to possibility. Listening carefully, one might even have heard the holding back, the pause between breaths, the silence of expectation as a kind of blessing of the memory in its talent for rebirth.

As he turned to go, Aldo bumped smack into one of the cops that had now arrived on the scene. They exchanged identical looks as though they had just recoiled off the surface of the same mirror. Aldo had no idea what the cop was thinking but he was thinking that this could have been the very one who had stopped him on the night of the event. It was hard to say exactly since all New York City cops looked the same...burly thirty-something white guys with mustaches. Defensively, Aldo started to play up his own nondescript countenance but quickly gave up.

"They found a mermaid," Aldo said, testing.

"Yeah," the cop said.

"Not a real one, I mean," Aldo said, smiling.

"Yeah," he replied.

"At least I don't think it is. But then again, who knows?" Aldo said, even trying out a guilty face to see what effect that had.

"Yeah?"

"I mean, you never what's going to happen in this city."

"Yeah."

"Well, if someone knocked off the mermaid, I sure hope you catch the monster," Aldo said, stupid with bravado. The cop was not recognizing him.

"Yeah."

"Yup," Aldo concurred, walking away rather brazenly.

Such was the pathetic state of his guilt that he considered this pointless conversation to be some kind of happy omen.

CHAPTER 10



A BALL IN A MAZE

“Hello Red,” the man said softly when Victoria opened the door. She mustered a weak attempt to slam the door closed but his strong arm easily stopped it. A grim look came over his face at first but this soon and smoothly became a grin instead.

“You shouldn’t ought to do that, Red. I’m here as a token of friendship.”

Too shaky to make a fuss, she let go of the door and let him walk in. That pleased him and he sauntered into her apartment as though he owned the place. And her.

“What do you want?” she asked gently. “I don’t have the money yet. I told you we needed some time.”

“Money,” he grumbled. “That’s the trouble with things as they are. All anyone thinks about is money. That’s not the whole thing. There’s more to it than that.”

He took off his jacket, folded it, and draped it neatly over the arm of a chair. He was dressed like a Hollywood hood from a cheapo websim with pleated pants, a black shirt with tan suspenders, and a dark tie. He was even wearing a pinky ring.

“You got anything to drink maybe? Some cycloscotch or bourbon?”

As she went to fix the drink she could feel the press of his eyes on her. She tried to disguise her body by slouching around her breasts and controlling the rolling of her hips. But in spite of that—and the loose drape of her robe—he still saw her naked underneath and loved the image. The air was dense between them.

"Nice place you got here, Red," he said as he walked around the room. He moved slowly, as though he were stalking something. These were careful moves, poised and dangerous. Silent. "You got a real swell lifestyle."

"Are you a decorator or a cop?" she said, handing him the drink and retreating to a safe distance as he sat on the back of the couch.

"You scared of me, Red? You oughtn't be. Sure, I bust people up now and again. But that's only if they cross me. Deep down inside, you know what I am?"

Something came to mind but she chose not to express it.

"Deep down I'm a lover, that's what I am. I like soft things."

He reached out and snagged the bottom corner of her robe. It was smart silk that adjusted its weave to the heat being radiated by skin. Victoria suddenly felt snared inside of it as he reeled in his catch. She fought it for a moment before giving in. When he had her firmly within hugging distance, he very slowly caressed her bare leg from instep to ankle to shin to knee to thigh to hip, all under the silky material as it tightened up.

"What do you want from me?" she asked, pushing his hand and pulling away.

He scowled and slammed a grip on her wrist, yanking her forward.

"Don't give me that bullshit. We both know what you are. So don't play the high and mighty. I don't want to have to take it the hard way. But I will."

Seeing that a struggle was doomed, she found a familiar cave inside her feelings and hid there.

"You're a businessman you said. Well so am I," she said coldly. "I get paid for what I do. Well paid. You want me? Then you'll have to do better than scaring the shit out of me. Or all you'll get is dead meat."

"I understand," he said, palming a slick of hair back into the crest on top of his head. But he still did not let go with his other hand. "How much?"

"Five thousand," she said. "In cash, up front."

"Five, huh? You ain't cheap."

"I'm worth it."

Her defiance seemed to drain his energy for a moment and he released her. He paused to think about the proposition, then shook his head and laughed about it.

"I don't want it like that, Red. That I can get anytime. But you're different from all them others. You're no hustler. But you get under my skin, kind of. What I want is for us to be friends."

"Then don't come barging into my apartment like this," she said angrily. But she saw too late that she had overplayed her hand.

"Don't fucking tell me don't," he erupted, jutting. "I been nice to you so far. I ain't hurt you. Right? But you fuck with me and I'll kick your fucking teeth out. You understand me?"

He was close, a dark inquisitor over her, daring the wrong answer.

"Please," she pleaded.

"Alright then. Now let's begin this again. And no bullshit this time. I'm a wiseguy, sure. But I got a good head. You are a Saturday night rental. But you're smart and you're slick as all fucking hell. We could make good partners."

As he said the last word, an ethereal fog seemed to roll into his mind and he took it for a ride. His voice imploded as he sat down again and seemed to broadcast through an angelic gauze.

"Partners. You and me. I seen it clear as day. You make a deal with the one who wants to buy the box. You tell him I'll deliver it. Tell him to have the money and meet me somewheres private. Then I go to the location. I see him before me. We shake hands. Real civil like. Then I take the money. But I keep the box too. I give him a good bust-up to keep his stinking mouth shut. If he balks, I slit his throat. No money, no box. Such is life. Then we split the cash and sell the box all over again to some other dope. Happy as peas." His tone went normal. "How does that sound?"

"I'll have to ask Aldo."

"Aldo?" he laughed. "That's the boyfriend? Al-doh? That's a fucking dick-ass name if you ask me."

"He has the box. I'll have to ask him first."

"I'm getting good and sick of this Aldo. First off, he'll think whatever the fuck I tell him to think. And second, maybe me and Aldo should have a chat about our future together. You know what they say about three?"

"How do you know this box is so valuable?"

She sat down on the back of the couch next to him when she said this, her robe opening slightly to reveal her flawless thigh. This gave a hint of intimacy that relaxed him. She did not cover it up.

"It's obvious ain't it?" he said, putting the drink down and letting her rub his shoulder.

"Not to me."

"And Aldo neither, right? Didn't you two gangsters open it?"

"We couldn't."

"So what's it made of, this box? Wood?"

"It's metal."

"Metal," he said and mulled over the word as though it had more syllables than it did. "And you said it's small like a jewelry box. Maybe there's a gem inside. Does it got a lock?"

"I don't even know if it really opens."

"I'd like to see this box."

"If you haven't seen it, then how do you know what it's worth?"

"I got ways."

"From Gordy Karkas? You knew him?"

"I knew him all right. Only just he didn't know me."

"I don't get it," she said, retracting her hand, but he quickly reached out and put it back on his shoulder.

"I bought a tap," he said. "A gridtap."

"A tap on his calls?"

"Gridtap is everything in and out. But the calls alone are crap. People can say any fucking thing during a call and it don't mean shit. This gridtap thing takes down everything...calls, online access, downloads, text messages, you name it. It was the text messages that done it. See our Mr. Karkas didn't like to say much; maybe he didn't trust calls. So he handled important stuff by writing."

"I thought all that was encoded. That's what they always tell us."

He heard her disbelief as admiration. That pleased him and he loosened up, even putting his feet up on the coffee table.

"They tell us whatever the fuck they need to tell us to get us to go along with everything. Sure it's encoded but there's guys in Romania who can hack anything they got in the system."

"And they can just get into all his communications?"

"It ain't that simple, Red. This thing took work," he said, turning proud as a peacock and posing. "First I got a list of the richest people in the city. I figured to buy a tap on one of them and just see what I came up with. But the trouble is there's thousands of billionaires in this town and loads of trillionaires too and gridtaps are expensive. So for a while I wasn't sure who to do until I read about Karkas. In one of his own weblogs too. High&Mighty or some such fucking thing. It said how he was loaded and plenty strange and that he hardly ever went out. Which to me meant that he probably used the Web a lot for his work. It also said he bought stuff...art, jewelry, like that. So I picked him for the tap. Cost me plenty too...twenty grand for four days. But I figured I'd find something I could use. To rip him off maybe."

"You're a burglar too?"

“You ain’t listening to me, Red. I’m a businessman. And anyway, you can’t break into a place like his. The building’s too fucking alert. No, I just figured that in the course of four days, he’d write something that I could use. For blackmail even. And I was right. He wrote text messages all the time, for everything. You wouldn’t believe all the crap I had to read through. But I finally got something.”

“You read through everything he sent by text message for four days?” she asked. This time she *was* impressed. Not because the idea was so novel but because she did not think that her guest could actually read.

“Sent and received. The boys that set up the tap zapped copies over to me. Wanna see?”

He went to his jacket and took out his card then said a word in some foreign language to activate it. When it had opened, he called up his file on Karkas, but instead of tilting it towards her, he zapped the file to her so she could examine it more easily on her own card while he read from his. Sharing a file in that way had become a subtle sign of courtesy...and trust.

“You gotta read between the lines and all,” he explained. “But them ones marked with a dot are about the box.”

Victoria read from the entries he indicated. Just as he said, they seemed to be written messages back and forth between Karkas and someone else, neatly displayed onscreen, like a play. The ones sent by Karkas were in blue; the other man’s were red.

#421374 11:01AM 13148667018

To: GH Karkas

Re: Current purchase

The seller is now asking a slightly higher price, due to increases in shipping and other costs. His most respectful offer is for 6,000,000. I feel that this is still a quite reasonable price and may I suggest that you accept it.
Kindly,

Bandas

#421375 11:06AM 16913246333

To: Bandas Hardwar

Re: Current Purchase

Decent! It's highway robbery. He's trying to rip me off because I'm here and the box is there. Tell him four or forget it.

Karkas

#421376 11:33AM 13148667018

To: GH Karkas

Re: Current Purchase

Please sir! It is a valuable box and one of a kind. I myself am hardly making my silly little commission on it. I pursue it only as a favor to you for all our business together. Please allow me to offer five for it. With gracious respect,

Bandas

#421377 11:36AM 16913246333

To: Bandas Hardwar

Re: Current Purchase

Bullshit! I want the box but I'm not going to kill myself for it. Tell that crook I'll give him four and a half for it. And that's final.

Karkas

"See, Red? I'm no dope," he said as she finished reading. "This Bandas Hardware is probably a front. For a smuggling operation, I figure. The way I see it is whoever runs this hardware joint is representing someone else who is selling the box to Karkas. And he wants six fucking biggies for it."

Victoria counted the zeros twice before all six of them sunk in. It was now clear that she had misunderstood him the first time when he said six biggies. She had made a slight error in her estimation that came from a lifetime of thinking too small. Six biggies apparently, in the thuggery tongue, meant six *million*! Not the \$600,000 she had told Aldo. No wonder Aldo's offer of \$400,000 had fallen flat. On the other hand, in now thinking about taking only two million for it, Green proved that he was willing to negotiate. Perhaps he was not the dense brute she thought.

"Is this all there is?" she said, trying to cover her shock about how much money was actually involved.

"Nah, just the juice," he said, closing the card and pocketing it. "A couple of days later, this same guy sends a message saying the box is in the country. But Karkas sends back saying he won't come and get it himself. Instead he wants to send a messenger to pick up the box and take it to a safe location."

"And my house was the safe location?"

"You got it."

"But why me? I didn't know Karkas that well."

"That's why."

"I don't understand."

"You gotta think like the high and mighty here. Let's say Karkas didn't trust this guy. I mean Karkas didn't trust *nobody*. So maybe he thought the guy would rip him off or something. So instead of taking the box home, he had it delivered somewhere safe. And your place is perfect for that. Nobody knew he knew you, right? Nobody would think to look for it here."

"But how did *you* find out that Gordy had the box delivered to me?"

"How did I find out? I used my brain is how," he said, jerking his thick thumb in the general direction of his thicker skull. "I waited a day after the box was delivered, then I sent Karkas a message...a kind of ransom note let's call it. It said that if he wanted to see the box again, he'd have to pay for it. I figured that he'd think the one he gave it to—whoever it was—was double crossing him. And I knew old Karkas would be fucked up trying to get it back."

"But you didn't know that he had given it to me?"

"Not then. But after the ransom note, I figured he'd go and get the damn thing himself, he was so hot for the fucking box. So I waited outside his building to follow him. I didn't have to wait long. Sure enough, there he goes that very night after my note. Pissed as hell too. Decided to take care of it in person, just like I thought. So I followed him. Where? Right here...to your place. I wasn't

sure it meant anything at all until you and Aldo bumped him off. Then I knew that you had the box. And that you killed him for it.”

He suddenly found her stroking annoying and brushed her hand away.

“So you see, I put in a lot of damn work and twenty thousand bucks into this deal. And that’s the reason I’m in. You understand? And besides all that, there’s something we got between us, Red.”

“And what would that be?”

“Chemistry. That ain’t nothing to spit at neither. So what about it?”

“I still have to talk to Aldo.”

“Fuck Aldo.”

“I told you, he’s got the box. Without him you can’t do anything.”

“*We* can’t. I want you should get used to saying *we*, Red. I see you and me together for a long time to come.”

Victoria tried valiantly to twist her sneer into a smile.

“I think maybe I pay him a visit. Tell him the score. Lay it all out for him. Where does he live, this Aldo?”

“I don’t know.”

“I told you not to fuck with me.”

At this point in their relationship, he had only to twitch a muscle to make her jump. He picked a bicep this time and she dutifully spilled her drink on the rug.

“I swear I don’t,” she insisted.

“Okay then what’s his number?”

“I don’t know. He calls me.”

“He calls you! He calls you? Oh I see! So he ain’t a boyfriend then. He’s just a damn John. That’s right, ain’t it? Aldo ain’t nothing but one of your bar pickups. That’s wonderful news, Red. It means you ain’t got a real true boyfriend.”

Victoria fought off the sinking feeling in her stomach as he kicked off his shoes and put his feet up on the couch like he had just married into it.

“Baby,” he continued, “you can relax and take it easy. You got an official boyfriend now who’s going to look after you real good. That’s what you got. An official boyfriend. And his name is Jesse James Kraznek.”

Finally deep in uninterrupted REM sleep after days of tossing, Aldo was happily dreaming of a pillow. A soft and pliable pillow with a cool case. But as he moved his hand to nestle under it, his head slipped off his arm bone and went plunking down on the top of the desk. He opened his eyes to the dim room and realized that he had fallen asleep at his desk again and that it was morning again.

Which morning exactly he had no idea. No pillow, no bed. All he knew was that he was not alone...there was someone sitting in the visitor's chair watching him.

"Who the hell are you?" he shouted, pushing back from the desk and rolling into the rear wall causing the cyberpattern to shimmer from the impact.

"Please excuse me," the man said. "I didn't mean to startle you. You were asleep and I hate to disturb."

He was a little man. Neat as a cigarette. And wearing a bow tie. The digiwall behind him was showing a picture window and a lovely view of Central Park, against which he seemed too little and too neat.

"Then what the hell are you doing here?"

"I was waiting for you to awaken. I dislike disturbing people when they are asleep. Your secretary apparently has not arrived yet and I took the liberty of seating myself."

"How did you get in the front door?"

"It was open."

Aldo was stunned. Not only from hitting his head against the wall, but from the suggestion that he had actually forgotten to lock the front door to his own office. Or worse that the office had forgotten to lock itself. It was inexcusable if not impossible. This opened his entire world to all sorts of weirdness with its attendant weirdos. One of whom was already inside. He hastily accessed his apartment security system to run a check but even that seemed to have overslept.

"I've been working late, not keeping up on things," Aldo said to the man, but he was really apologizing to himself.

"So I see."

"What time is it?"

This was a rhetorical question in an era of instant information, yet the little man took him at his word and brought out a small watch on a fob.

"Seven thirty," he said and clicked the watchcase closed. His eyes were a tad off kilter, like brown tiddlywinks, that made it hard to see exactly where he was looking.

"Oh brother," Aldo said. He could suddenly taste his own mouth and longed for a cup of coffee. "Want a cup?" he asked, going over to the coffeemaker.

"I thank you, no. I have never developed a taste for it."

"So what's on your mind, Mister..."

"Hubble. Barton Hubble."

"What can I do for you?"

"The box, Mr. Weeks. May I see it?"

Through the corner of his eye, Aldo clearly saw the little man take out and point a small gun in his direction. The word derringer flashed through Aldo's mind, although he had never seen one. Still, he could feel the insult of the barrel pointed at him. Aldo braced himself, balanced the cup of hot coffee in his hand, then quickly splashed it in the direction of the weapon. Following the burning spurt to its mark he saw, a few seconds too late, that the gun was nothing but the little man's snap-on bow tie, which he had taken off for a re-adjustment.

"Gee, I'm terribly sorry," Aldo said, trying to pat the man dry. "It just jumped right out of my hand. Ever had that happen?"

Hubble was gasping for breath and his eyes went parrot as he fought to calm down.

"Perhaps I should return at a better time," he said.

"I wish you hadn't been wearing such a white shirt," Aldo said.

"I'll return at a better time," Hubble said and started to get up.

"You were saying something about the box?" Aldo said, shoving him back in the seat with too much force.

"A better time."

"The time is now," Aldo said, blocking Hubble's exit.

"Well yes I suppose it is."

"Where are you from exactly?"

"From Here&There."

"Don't play coy with me," Aldo bullied. "Who sent you, the police?"

"Police?" Hubble jumped. "There must be some mistake! Are the police somehow involved? I must have misunderstood..."

Again he got up to leave and once again Aldo used his weight advantage to shove him back in his place. Hubble bounced on impact.

"Have a seat," Aldo said, by way of explanation.

"You really must cease to manhandle me, sir," he said fixing his collar and squirming under the coffee stain. "I am not at all interested in stolen merchandise. If that is the case here then I shall be on my way. Quentin never mentioned anything like that. Not at all."

"Quentin Wooley sent you?"

"That is what I am trying to say. I work for Here&There, the travel webalog. Quentin told me about the box yesterday. Since I had not heard from you about my budget for this month, I thought I might stop by and speak to you about both items."

"Well why didn't you say so," Aldo said, slapping Hubble on the shoulder and sending a spray of coffee from his shirt. "Why all the cloak and dagger? The box? Sure. Of course you can see it."

Aldo returned to his side of the desk as Hubble exhaled, thankful to have a barrier between them. Aldo took the wrapped box out of the drawer and put it on the desk. As he turned back the paper and had the room refocus the light, the two men leaned in and huddled around it like safecrackers.

"It is lovely," Hubble said. "Have you opened it yet?"

"Does it open?"

Hubble eyed him suspiciously, saw that he was the brunt of a further joke, and smiled.

"You are a great practical joker, Mr. Weeks, that much I can see," he said, pulling the wet shirt fabric off his chest to help it dry.

"What I mean," Aldo said, "is that I don't know how it opens. I lost the instructions."

"Instructions indeed, Mr. Weeks. You fool with me too much."

"So how the hell *does* it open?" Aldo demanded.

With much strain, Hubble trained his roving eyes directly on Aldo as he assessed the man and his box.

"I believe that you do not know precisely what it is that you have here, sir," he finally said. "Am I correct?"

"But I have the feeling that you *do* know."

"Of course I do. When Quentin described it, I knew exactly what it was. He told me that you did not know, but I thought that was just a ploy."

"It's not a ploy, it's an heirloom."

"You inherited it?"

"You might say."

"Then you yourself are not a collector?"

"Just a victim."

"I see," Hubble said coyly. "Mr. Weeks, I would be quite anxious to have it, this little box of yours. Yes. Quite anxious to buy it from you."

"Let's back up a step or two, Hubble. Suppose you fill me in a bit first."

"Fill you in?"

"Now I might be interested in selling it. For the right price, of course. But I still don't know why this box is so valuable."

"Because it is rare, I imagine."

"One of a kind?"

"Certainly, as it is hand-crafted. Such things are increasingly rare in our time."

"Made of gold or something?"

"Some kind of lead probably."

"A rare hand-made lead box with a swastika on the lid," Aldo said conclusively. "I still don't get it."

"Oh yes, it is a swastika isn't it? I did not see that at first. How interesting."

"All right, Hubble," Aldo said, asking the room to turn on the overhead, creating a beam of light that he knew would hit Hubble directly on the head. "Enough of this pussyfooting around. This box is trying to destroy my life. I've had it. Right here, right now...what is it?"

"Why it is an Indian puzzle box, of course."

Aldo looked back at the box as though those words might have transformed it from an ordinary boxy box into some kind of gleaming hyperbox...floating, glowing, twinkling. Doing something! But it didn't. It just sat there as blocky as before. Square, metallic, dull, old.

"Forgive me, Mr. Weeks, but it seems that you truly do not know what you have here. Yet you *do* know that it is valuable to someone interested in such things? How is that so?"

"I have an offer for it already."

"I see. In that case, I hope you will let me bid for it as well."

"First I want you to tell me about Indian puzzle boxes."

"I had one when I was a child," Hubble said, easing into the sweet memory and the stiff chair at the same time. "My father brought it back from India. It was lost many years ago. I have always been trying to find a replacement but they are very hard to come by. Objects in general are increasingly rare in the world of the Flux, you see. Especially hand-made ones. And in addition, I heard that the village in which they were made, in the Bihar province, was destroyed during the Third War."

He paused in a moment of silence for the village, which Aldo too observed.

"Go on," Aldo said after a proper interval. "About the Bihar province."

"Yes, in Northern India. For hundreds of years craftsmen from that region were renowned for their metalwork. Even Marco Polo brought back samples of their lead and brass. Do you know that swords made there for Mogul warriors were so sharp they could slice a silk scarf in half in mid-air."

"Wow. But the box, Hubble. What about the box?"

"Yes, the box. It seems that in the 19th century these Indian craftsmen began to make lock puzzles. They were created for rich rajas who wanted to keep their palaces safe. They looked like ordinary padlocks but the key and keyhole were

useless. You really opened them by some other method. By tilting or turning them in a certain way. Or by pressing the rivets in a complicated sequence.”

Hubble illustrated the idea on the box itself but nothing happened and he returned to his story.

“Later,” he went on, “these craftsmen began to produce puzzle boxes like the one you have here. They were originally meant to hold gems or jewelry. Or even devotional objects from Hindu rituals.”

“I thought so,” Aldo said, searching his desktop screen for his list of priceless objects the box might contain.

“I heard that at the beginning of the Third War these boxes were used to send secret information by Indian runners. If they were killed by the enemy, the secret of opening the box died with the messenger.”

“Military secrets,” Aldo repeated as he found the list and added that to the bottom of it.

“But, of course, myths abound regarding these little boxes. Just as you would expect from a country as culturally rich as India. I heard a tale once that would curl your hair, Mr. Weeks, it truly would. It was about a box like this one. It seems that a rich prince found one of his palace guests, an Englishman, bedding the prince’s wife. Hoping to appear more modern in his ways, he gave in to his wife’s pleas for mercy and instead of beheading the foreigner on the spot, as the law permitted, he forced him to drink a toast to the prince’s virility. Then he imprisoned the poor Englishman along with a puzzle box. Before leaving him alone in his cell, however, the prince explained that the toast had been poisoned and that the only known antidote was inside of the puzzle box. Frantically the Englishman struggled with the box—day and night—without getting any sleep as the poison slowly worked its way through his body. Four days later, with his last gasp before dying, he found the solution and the box opened. Inside was a note. It explained that the poison was spread by muscular action. The antidote was to ignore the box and simply lie down and get a good night’s sleep! But, of course, it was too late for that.”

Hubble smiled wanly and tweaked his bow tie in punctuation. Aldo, however, saw himself in the Englishman and squirmed.

“That’s quite a tale, isn’t it?” Hubble asked.

“So what you’re saying is that the box itself is not what is valuable. It’s what is inside of it,” Aldo mused, trying a little x-ray vision on it that died at the surface.

“I suppose that is true. The one I had as a boy did have a treasure inside. And only I could get to it. But that, of course, is the unique pleasure of the puzzle box.”

"What kind of treasure?"

"A boy's treasure. Just a gold dollar from my grandfather. Now lost with the box, sadly."

"All very interesting, Hubble. But let's get down to the basic question here. How do you open the damn thing?"

"As you can see, there is no keyhole or obvious means of opening it. There are various rivets and bumps but those, I suspect, are false."

"Don't you know?"

"I'm only going by the one I had as a child. This one may be different. May I hold it?"

"Be my guest."

Hubble lifted the box like a puppy and held it in his tiny hands. The sheer pleasure of the contact spread to his face and the frail jingling inside brought a nod of insight.

"Yes," he said, "I believe it is the same as mine."

"Great. What next?"

"If I am correct, inside the walls of this box there is a small steel ball. It runs in a maze that goes around five sides of the box. The sixth side is the drawer which opens. It is a matter of setting the box down on its sides in some sequence so that the ball falls through successive legs of the maze, one by one. When the ball reaches the last point, it drops into a cavity and there it releases a pin holding the drawer and the drawer pops open. Mine required twenty-three moves to open it."

As he spoke, he began to illustrate the theory by placing the box deliberately on its base, then on one side, then the other, then the base again, then the lid. He seemed like an interior decorator caught in a ritual of indecision. And it led nowhere.

"How did you know the right sequence for your own box?" Aldo asked.

"My box came with a poem," Hubble said. "Not written down. The seller recited it to my father and he to me. It went something like this...*dark shores of far-off lands, winds that kiss on silent sands*. And so on. Each side of my box had a number on it. The number of letters in each word of the poem told you which side of the box to set it on. *Dark* with four letters meant side four, *shores* referred to side six, *of* meant side two, *far-off* went back to side six."

He started to perform the sequence on the box in hand but stopped when the memory of the poem dwindled to nothing.

"But this box is different," he said.

"The numbers on the sides are random," Aldo said.

"Yes. And in any case, we don't know what the poem is or even if that is the trick. And to top it off, this box has already been turned many times. There is no telling where in the maze the ball rests."

"So how do we open it?"

"Trial and error, I imagine."

"That could take months."

"Decades. Or more. May I know what your other buyer is offering?"

"You're still interested?"

"Certainly."

"Without knowing what's inside?"

"Of course."

"What if you can never open it?"

"That is of little consequence to me."

Aldo looked keenly at him, trying to see the real Hubble behind the prim facade. But it was no use. There was nothing more sinister there than the clip-on bow tie, the narrow lapel, the prissy lips, the twin knees. Although after what Aldo had been through in the past week, all that, in its own way, seemed sinister enough.

"You're leaving something out, Hubble."

"Not at all."

"Why would you want a box that you could not open?"

"Objects, as I said, are becoming increasingly rare."

"But you might not ever be able to open it."

"We live in an age of solutions, Mr. Weeks, only asking questions that we know we can answer. A world in which everything is revealed because we only concern ourselves with the knowable. The triumph of information, I guess. But I have a different sensibility. A more romantic one if I may say so. I enjoy a mystery and to me, the best mystery is the one that remains unanswered. That is the appeal of these boxes."

"In other words, you just won't say," Aldo nodded knowingly.

There had to be more to it than that. Aldo had a hunch about Hubble, but he decided not to confront him about it, at least not yet. For the moment, it was best to play along with him instead.

"May I know what the buyer is offering?" Hubble asked again.

Aldo thought about the price Victoria's phony detective now expected—two million—and quickly decided it was not enough. He adjusted the figure for the cost of one death, one cover-up, a lost week of sanity, and his own commission. Plus a fee for leaving the mystery of the box unsolved. He held up three fingers.

Hubble looked at Aldo twice. Both times with puzzlement. He started to say something each time but stopped, as though preventing himself from saying too much.

"Something wrong?" Aldo asked.

"You are again making a practical joke, yes?"

"You don't like that price?"

"It seems a bit...how shall I say...off."

"Sorry," Aldo said, thinking Hubble meant it was too high. "That's exactly what the other buyer offered."

"Permit me then, to make a counter offer of, shall we say, three and a half?" The speed with which Hubble upped the price brought a quizzical look to Aldo's face. "How about four then?" Hubble said, reading him completely wrong.

Dollar signs rolled into Aldo's eyeballs, taking the place of common sense. Four million bucks? He tried to make the gasp that came out of his mouth sound like an ordinary cough, and the raised brows a spasm.

"A fair offer, Hubble," he said, teetering on the brink of giddiness. "Of course, I'll have to get back to you."

"Naturally," Hubble said and patted the box goodbye.

Hubble had to jump off the chair slightly to get up. He shook Aldo's hand with his fingertips. And his walk out the door had the pinched quality of a high-colonic patient. Not the sort of man to throw around millions of dollars, Aldo thought. But that only proved to him that his hunch about Hubble was right. The little man had to be working for someone else, someone who knew precisely what was inside the box. And the value of it as well. Someone who knew Karkas too. Someone as rich and ruthless as he had been. Secretive. Obsessed. Powerful. And a lot more dangerous than this absurd Hubble character.

And no doubt a bit taller as well.

CHAPTER 11



EIGHT HUNDRED THOUSAND

A black muzzle appeared at the edge of the door, at the approximate height of the average man's heart. It lingered there for a moment, just long enough for Aldo to make out the borehole and the sight. And to see for sure that it was not a bow tie this time. As it slowly advanced into the room, the bullet chamber, trigger, and hammer came into view. That proved to him that it was also not a flute. The hand gripping the pistol was followed by a blue sleeve and, many seconds later, by the face of Loren Adder. His hat was down over his eyes.

Aldo, thinking slowly, put both hands under the desk. He briefly thought of tipping the desk up into the lawman and making his getaway. But that was just another movie cliché since Adder was too far away and the desk was not a desk, it was a computer terminal bolted to the floor. There was no need for that kind of stunt anyway; everyone knew that Adder's gun was never loaded. No sane boss would have trusted him with bullets.

"You're under arrest," Adder said.

"On what charge?" Aldo demanded.

"Sleeping in the office."

"Come again?"

"Cleo said you have been sleeping at your desk. That's very unhealthy. All the fluids pile up in your ass. You'll get this real big ugly fat lumpy ass like my aunt."

"Will you put that thing away," Aldo said, wiping his forehead of a hot flash. Adder twirled the weapon on his finger artlessly before holstering it.

"Where is Cleo?" Aldo asked.

"She stepped out. I told her you were waiting for me. She can't bear to be in the same room as me."

"Tell me about it."

"I think the broad's in love with me."

"Did you find the owner of the hat?"

"Still looking. I did try to find that red car of yours, but so far no luck. Plus I ran a check on all the Ganesh people here at the Urbana. But no one seems to drive a Shanghai."

"Rented I said."

"No leads there either. Actually, we're in a kind of limbo right now. But don't worry, I'm still investigating the neighborhood. And the building is still collating."

"What do the police think?"

"They think I'm nuts. But Erle says to keep an eye on you."

"Me. Ha. Me?"

"He thinks you know too much for your own good. I keep telling him a jerk like you could never pull this off. No offense."

"You might be right," Aldo admitted.

"Erle's just frustrated at this point in time. The car ain't led him anywheres and it takes time to get all this data out of Cyberia. And that piece of board from the dumpster, just like the body, was all slimed up. Dead ends all around. So's the ransom note so far. Nothing. Zip."

"What ransom note? You never said anything about that."

"The ransom note."

"You never mentioned one."

"Didn't I?"

"No."

Adder hooked his thumbs into his belt and stood motionless, like a cowpoke waiting lazily to poke a cow. Aldo waited too, but the explanation was not forthcoming. It had not occurred to Aldo that Loren Adder might know something and not tell. That would have taken a strategy and, by association, an intelligence. But as he sat there watching the dimwit smirk, Aldo reminded himself that he had to be careful. Lesser fools than Adder had stumbled onto greater truths.

"If you really want the benefit of my psychic powers," Aldo said, "then you'd better tell me everything. You never know what might trigger an insight."

"Shouldn't you already know about it?"

"Why should I?"

"The brainwaves and all."

"I'll give it a shot," Aldo said. He took the hat that Adder had found on the street out of his top drawer, then closed his eyes and fondled it slowly. "I *am* getting something actually. Wait a minute...I'm getting...the feeling of a carton. No, wait. Not a carton. Smaller. It's a box. Some kind of box."

"Holy shit!" Adder said, sitting down. "Anything else?"

"There's a lot of money involved too. Maybe it's an expensive box." He put the hat down and rubbed his temples melodramatically. "I'm sorry, that's all. Quite a strain."

"That's fucking amazing."

"Now what about the ransom note?"

"We found it on Karkas' computer net. It was a text message and it was about a box like you said. The note said that if Karkas ever wanted to see it again he was going to have to pay for it. It didn't say who it was from or the amount or nothing. But Karkas was rich, so they had to be sticking him for a bundle. Can you come up with anything else about it? I'd be forever grateful."

"I'll keep working on it," Aldo said.

"What kind of box could it be?" Adder asked, looming over the desk.

"These things take time, Loren."

"Come on, Aldo, we're at a dead end here. Obviously someone wanted this box enough to kill Karkas for it. Maybe you should make a list. That's something you do," Adder said, and to emphasize the point, he randomly tapped on Aldo's desktop and rearranged some of the windows. And as fate is a prankster, which of Aldo's files should pop to the top but one of his very own murder lists.

"Hey, see what I mean," Adder said, reading the words upside down. "Wipe off biotraces, replace mirror, dispose of body. Hey, what the hell kind of list is this?"

An ordinary gulp got stuck and quickly became a lump in Aldo's throat as he realized that in his descent into disorder, the list he had made on the night of the murder had somehow gotten mixed up with all the other lists on the desk and was now displayed like a billboard on top.

"It's nothing!!" he shouted, banging away at the windows to erase it.

"Dispose of body?" Adder said again. "That don't sound too kosher to me, Weeks. What are you up to?"

"What do you think?" Aldo said, trying not to appear guilty as charged. "Dispose of body...hah! It's for the mortuary webalog, you absolute jerk."

"The say what?"

"It's for Dead&Buried, the mortuary zine we run. That's one of the publications I manage. These are all management lists, all of them. For my work."

"Wipe off biotraces?"

"Of the deceased. It's what they do in funeral homes. I'm real busy here."

"Oh," Adder said, but the circle formed by his lips was uneven, warped by doubt. "Well, we'll let the building decide what all that data crap means. I'm going by instinct here. Killer instinct."

Luckily, a shout in the outer office gave Aldo a chance to interrupt their discussion. Cleo had returned to her chair and spilled soup onto her tapscreen. No big deal since the liquid aluminum surface was completely wetproof, but thanks to an ancestral memory of the harm done by spillage throughout human history, she was frantically mopping it up and Aldo ran in to help her.

"You're still here?" she said, noticing Adder standing in the doorway. She pulled her skirt down kneeward. "I came back too soon. I knew the karma was bad."

"That ain't no reason to dump it on yourself," Adder suggested.

"Mr. Adder was just leaving," Aldo insisted.

"Yeah right. See you both later," Adder said.

"Not until I'm inoculated please," Cleo suggested.

"You know, I ain't such a bad guy once you get to know me," Adder said with a yellow grin as he swaggered to the door. "I kind of grow on you."

"So does vaginal fungus but that doesn't mean I have to cultivate it."

But the three words in there that were beyond his working vocabulary fooled him into thinking he had just been complimented.

Like a stone on the head of a dozing lizard, it suddenly hit Aldo that Loren Adder was not his biggest worry. Sure he might be able to bumble his way to the truth. Adder had his cousin Erle's evidence and theories coming in, his own half-baked ideas, and whatever clues he stumbled onto by the dumb luck of the dumb. Could he build all this into a case against the accused? Possibly. But Aldo saw now that there was a worse problem than that. Adder also had access to all the information that was constantly being amassed and analyzed by the Urbana, the building itself.

The Urbana was run by a computer system devoted to logging and analyzing the lives of people. It recorded everything and studied patterns...of movement, of habit, of bodily functions. It communicated with other networks and made judgments. The ArtAn network of the building could come up with premises based

on streams of data. It could not deduce exactly, but it could conclude. Its IQ was somewhere between Inspector Maigret and a vacuum cleaner. Maybe it was developing a story about Karkas that maybe included Aldo...and maybe not. Who could tell? In any case, the building was getting smarter every day about what happened. At some point, the Urbana itself might make the connections and tell Adder about them.

Yet far from panicking about this, an interesting insight bloomed. Perhaps this could be used, Aldo thought, to his own advantage. If there was a way to probe this database and find out what was known, he might be able to stay one step ahead. The idea was not so far-fetched. Data management, after all, was Aldo's domain. It was even beginning to sound downright titillating.

This was the line of reasoning that led Aldo Weeks, who had never broken a law in his life, to accelerate his career in crime. Yes he had murdered, covered up, lied and dodged...but that was all amateur fumbling. Now, for the first time, he set out to consciously break the law. He set out to find someone, some felon, who could hack into the Urbana's ArtAn system. To his own amazement, it took a mere fifteen minutes to find such a person. After logging on to a generic website, he was contacted almost immediately through an anonymous text message. The individual in question would not appear onscreen, not give a personal number, and would only give his name as Kepler. The information, Aldo was told, was a snap to come by, would cost plenty, and would be handed over in person the following day at a secret location to be disclosed at noon. Aldo was adding this to his various lists, checking his old ones to make sure he had not forgotten anything, and generally getting mired in details when Cleo suddenly spoke up.

"Lose something?" she said.

He had not noticed her and jumped.

"What is it about me?" Aldo groused. "Why does everyone have this overwhelming urge to barge in?"

"I wasn't barging. I was standing here. And for a long time too. You're so preoccupied the last few days that you don't notice things."

"And don't let that idiot come in here unannounced any more. Everybody must get announced."

"Technically, I'm not really your secretary, you know. I'm your assistant. I am supposed to be learning traffic, not running interference," Cleo said, but she was upset by the look on his face and dropped the topic. "Anyway, Adder said you were expecting him."

"I wasn't. I never am."

"Face it, Aldo, you're a nervous wreck. A mess. And since you won't tell me exactly what is going on, I can't help you."

"Nothing's going on."

"Are you looking for the weekly functionality analysis?"

"Is it lost?"

"Everything's all screwed up."

"You're telling me."

"There are currently sixteen weblogs waiting for their budgets. Aren't any of them ready? They also need the stats over at Blood&Guts pronto. And you haven't zapped the preliminary board report over to the main office."

"Shit."

"On top of which, you've got a visitor."

"What visitor?"

"I don't know. She's downstairs at security. They're waiting for you to call down there and clear her to come up."

"She? She who?"

"I haven't the vaguest idea. How could I possibly know since you no longer tell me anything about *anything*?"

"What does she look like?"

"Trouble. Might this woman have something to do with our current melt-down?"

"No," Aldo snarled. "Just finish whatever you can on your own and I'll check everything over later. And tell them to send her up."

A message from the Library told Aldo that his research was ready, but he put it on hold as he prepared for the next invasion of his privacy.

"This is a nice office," Victoria said spilling in and flowing into the chair.

Her hair blazed under a wide black hat. The brim cast a shadow across her plum eyes, ringed with a spray of chocolate lash. The succulent mouth was drawn in luscious apricot. She sat down and crossed killer legs. Aldo felt as though he had suddenly stepped into an ad for genetically enhanced fruit.

"Holy," Aldo said, losing all poise, and from somewhere in the rational brain came, "but you shouldn't be here."

"We've got problems," she said.

"New ones or the same old ones?" he asked, closing the door to Cleo's workspace.

"Jesse has plans. He thinks he has everything all figured out and maybe he does. But I'm afraid of him, Aldo. I never know what he'll do next."

"Have I wandered into the wrong mystery or am I supposed to know someone named Jesse?"

"The guy who was following Karkas."

"Detective Green?"

"That was just a name."

She slipped out of her coat and adjusted the strap on one of her shoes. The view up her legs sent Aldo's train of thought careening towards the X-rated section. But since that was precisely what got him into trouble in the first place, he fought hard to get it back on track.

"So his name is Jesse now?"

"Jesse James Kraznek. He must be from one of those countries over there."

"Okay. And what does Jesse James Kraznek want from us?" Aldo asked.

"The money. He wants the money. He's in it for the money. Now what do we do?"

"I might have found a buyer."

"You mean a real buyer?"

"I think so. But the price has changed."

"How much will he pay for it?"

"Maybe three," he said.

To be conservative, he had lowered Hubble's offer of four. He did this without thinking. Or maybe he was thinking about his own take, now that he was a full-fledged criminal mastermind. In any case, to impress her, he mentioned the new amount casually, as though it meant little to him. Like any novice lacking experience, he was getting cocky with his meager new skill at duplicity.

"It's up to three million now?"

"I think so," he said, rubbing his hands together to spread the sweat.

A coy smile turned her into a lasercolor holomotion Mona Lisa.

"I got an idea," she said, wriggling in the seat.

"I do too," Aldo said, but his involved vegetable oil and passion spray.

"This guy you found will give us three million for the box, right? But Jesse's only expecting two now. So I was thinking," and here she licked her lips, "maybe we could pull a quick one."

"A quickie?" Aldo asked, having gone hormonally deaf.

"A deal," she said. "We do a deal."

"I thought you said this Jesse person was so dangerous. I thought you wanted to get out of this as easily as possible."

"I do Aldo. But we can. We can do it all. We can give Jesse more or less what he wants. A million and a half say. That should satisfy him. It's more than noth-

ing and a lot more than the \$400,000 you originally told him. Then you and I can split the rest. That's three-quarters of a million each. Honey, I've got to think of myself. My line of work does not exactly have a pension plan."

"Insanity," Aldo offered.

"Security," she countered.

"I've got a better idea. We sell the box to the buyer who wants to buy it, then we take the money and give the money to Jesse. Simple."

"Not so simple. Jesse won't go for it."

"What do you mean he won't? It's more than he's asking for!"

"Um...well actually...he wants the box too," she said. She was not quite ready to explain Jesse's plan to screw everyone and get everything.

"I thought you just said he wasn't interested in the box."

"He isn't. But he wants it anyway."

"Why?"

"He wants us to give him the box so he can meet with the buyer and make the trade himself. He wants to handle the whole thing himself."

"That's even better. That's perfect in fact. Then we can stay out of the whole affair."

"But Aldo," she said leaning forward and throwing a ripe pair of breasts into the deal, "why couldn't we do this? Why couldn't we get half the money up front? A million and a half. We can split that, then let Jesse trade the box for the rest of it. That's fair."

"Oh sure, that sounds swell. And what if he finds out? And what if he is somewhat perturbed by the idea that we swindled him out of the other half?"

"Why don't you let me handle Jesse," she said.

"Is that so? I didn't realize that you and Jesse were on handling terms?"

"I can handle him."

"I thought you said he was so tough."

"He is and he isn't. He's just a wiseguy. But under all that chrome, the motor still runs on sperm. Just like every guy."

"Haven't you left something out?"

"Like what?"

"The ransom note."

"How do you know about that?"

"So *you* know about it too."

"How do *you* know about it?"

"From the police. How do *you* know about it?"

"The police again! They tell you an awful lot, don't they?"

"They tell me more than *you* do."

"Don't look at me like that, Aldo. I didn't send any ransom note. Aren't you ever going to trust me?"

"If you didn't send the ransom note to Karkas, then who did?"

"Jesse sent it."

"All by himself? You didn't happen to help him with the spelling by any chance."

"Me? Are you nuts? I told you, I never even met him before last week. What do you think? You think I'm the genius behind this whole thing? You think I wanted Karkas killed?"

He had not really thought that but now that he was thinking it, it seemed eminently thinkable.

"Jesse only told me about the ransom note yesterday," she continued. "I never heard about it before then."

"And you weren't going to tell me about it?"

"It didn't seem important," she said testily and drew a chilly curtain around her motives.

"Why don't you let me decide what's important enough for me to know?"

"Look, Jesse bugged Karkas' intranet," she said after a long pause. "That's how he heard about the box. He hired some Romanians or something that listened in on all his communications and zapped him copies of everything that Karkas sent and received on the Web."

"There are people who do that?"

"There are people who do anything."

"Why go to all that trouble?"

"He knew Karkas was filthy rich and he was hoping to intercept something important. Like some kind of business deal maybe. It's actually not a bad idea. I mean, he was right after all."

"Not a bad idea? It's disgusting. It's called data theft and our data is all we've got. And it sure is not worth a man's life!"

"That's not what he paid for. All he paid for was information that was out there to be had. And he got it too. *You're* the one who killed Karkas, remember? And you did it for free! So you can get off the pulpit."

Aldo sat down heavily, collapsing under the weight of her remark. Sloppy, thoughtless, greedy, lecherous. He really was beginning to hate the person he had become.

"And he showed you all this?" Aldo asked.

"Last night," she said.

"Last night?" he repeated. "Perfect. On what...a date?"

"I had no choice, Aldo. As long as I string him along, I'm in control of the situation. The moment I stop, he's got the upper hand. Don't you see that? It's a game with men and women. But this time it is a game I cannot afford to lose."

She took out her card, tapped into the messages that Jesse had shown her, and sent them to Aldo's desktop so they could both study them at the same time.

"Jesse says that these are text messages between Karkas and his dealer who works at a place called Bandas Hardware. He says they are negotiating about the box. I assume he's right."

"Yeah, that's Karkas' text ID all right."

Victoria leaned slightly back from Aldo to get a fuller view of him.

"How would you know what Karkas' text ID number is?"

Whether by oversight or outright deceit—he could not say anymore or was even sure whether he still knew the difference between them or not—he had left that part of the story out. But there was no way to avoid telling her now.

"I worked for him," he said as simply as possible.

She recoiled, actually tilting the chair backwards, then said, "you...you worked for Gordy Karkas?"

"He was my boss," Aldo said.

One more recoil put her back against the rear wall, which had just switched from a geometric pattern of triangles to a multi-window midday news summary. Against this, Victoria became one more face in the nattering montage. It was a small room, but the distance between them had just gotten greater than the measurement.

"I know what you're thinking," Aldo said. "But it's just a coincidence."

"Another coincidence?"

"Life is full of them."

"Life is full of set-ups too."

"It's not like that," Aldo said. "Don't look at me that way. I just happened to work for him, that's all. Everybody works for someone and I worked for him. That's all."

"And that fact didn't enter into beating him to death?"

"I didn't even know it was him."

"What are you talking about? You didn't know that you killed your own boss who also happened to live in the same building as you? How stupid do you think I am?"

"I had never seen him before."

That one went over like a brand new radioactive material that might destroy all of civilization...superdense horseshit.

"Karkas was very secretive," Aldo explained. "You must have seen the news."

"I stopped watching."

"Well he hardly ever left his penthouse. He only communicated by text to his employees and rarely to someone at my level. So I never knew what he looked like, hardly anyone knew."

"I see," she said. But she clearly did not and she fumbled with her coat as she tried hastily to put it on.

"They never talk about why the box is worth so much," Aldo said, still scanning the messages and just as hastily trying to change the subject.

"Did you find out?" she said coldly.

"It's not the box itself. So it's probably something inside of it."

"It opens? Why don't you open it then?"

"It's a trick box. I'm working on it."

"Does your buyer know what's inside?"

"I don't know."

"So maybe what's inside is worth even more than we think."

"We who?" Aldo said. "You and Jesse? You and me? Or all three?"

"You know what I mean."

"Do I?"

Fed up with his tone, Victoria turned abruptly towards the door. But the move to reach out and open it seemed to hurt, as though Aldo's suspicions had wounded her.

"By the way," Aldo said, "the police are looking for a red car in your neighborhood. You'd better hide it somewhere else for a while."

"So they know about that too now?"

"They suspect it."

"I wonder how."

"Just park it somewhere else. I'll talk to the buyer and set things up."

"Good," she said.

But it was a good that landed with a bad thud on the floor between them.

The hacker known as Kepler had insisted on meeting Aldo at a FourD running at the site of the old Whitney Museum on Madison Avenue. It was a public place so they could not be killed, with a lot going on so they could not be picked out, and filled with zapping so they could not be bugged. There would be no notes, no records of what was said. Aldo went to the second floor where the show

was in progress. He paid his admission, took his ticket, stepped through the brushed steel entrance doors, and walked right into another century.

On the other side of the door, his left shoe instantly set down onto an olden street. The street stretched from cobblestones directly underfoot all the way down a winding avenue between tightly packed wooden buildings. The lane ahead was lined with storefronts with ornately lettered signs, carts filled with food and trinkets, rain barrels. The place was as quaint as a tintype. The colors were warm and hazy. Even the sky above had a patina. The street was filled with people walking, talking, mulling about. Some were in period costumes; others looked like tourists who had gotten off at the wrong black hole.

The ticket he was holding said: A Victorian Mystery, Londontown, circa 1870, an August afternoon, based on the stories of Wilkie Collins.

Not knowing exactly whom he was meeting, Aldo wandered up the street, taking in the sounds and sights of old London. He peered in through the uneven glass of shop windows, stopped to pet a dusty horse, picked up a lost skeleton key but replaced it exactly where he found it just in case it mattered to someone. A woman in white rushed by dramatically. Stopping at an open wooden cart in front of a bookseller, he picked up a series of volumes to find that they were all identical copies of *The Dead Secret*. These were not real books but FourD sims of an old edition, hidebound and decaying, that had clearly been placed there as a clue in the game. They were simulacra like everything else on the street except the people. The buildings, the details, the surfaces...all computer projections that you could touch. The text in the books would change as the game clock advanced. Aldo opened one of these books but found it too difficult to turn the pages which felt like they were made of jellyfish; the writing on them was indistinct, hard to make out. That part of the technology obviously still needed some work.

A newsboy mentioned the theft of a yellow diamond called the Moonstone from the estate of one Rachel Verrinder. A London bobby strolled by and stopped to give Aldo a suspicious look. Aldo nodded in return, not knowing whether this was an actor in the FourD or just another player in costume. As he walked up the street a prostitute with raggy hair solicited him, a street urchin with a dirty face begged for food, a mysterious Indian offered him a secret letter containing the dying confession of Mrs. Treverton. People eyed him cautiously, wondering what he knew, what clues he might be willing to share or sell or trade. While all around him, in every direction, and up and down, from the furthest window at the far end of the avenue right up to the closest wrought iron railing on a nearby stoop, the illusion was complete. Like a dream in which each

inspected detail reveals more detail. Everywhere you looked, you were there in the past, in 19th century London, on that street, at that time. It was a thoroughly convincing simulation in all directions, including skinward.

The technology for FourD was only ten years old and was based on tonar science. Holophonic tonars had made it possible to have pinpoint sound that followed you around the room, so that people standing inches apart could hear different, equally vivid, sounds. But as it turned out, that was not their most interesting effect. A holophonic wave also had a force, an actual tactile impact that could be tweaked and teased by the imagineers. Nerve cells in the skin interpreted this fluctuating force as varying pressure and textures. Thus was born the new science of haptics—virtual touch—and it meant images that you could caress and feel. Touch was the fourth D in FourD. They could now construct a complete virtual environment in a single vast space with projection holovids that resisted pressure and had the substance of reality. Or at least something like it since the craft was still in its infancy. Animate objects did not work well at all and everything else in a FourD, like the books, felt slightly gooey or syrupy, as though the world were made of gel. This was not yet the holodeck of science fiction, but perhaps half way there...a halfadeck. And the scripts and storylines were still rather simple; a few clues, some puzzles to solve, a minimal plot. But it was still magical, to the same degree that another generation was riveted by a train arriving at a station and another one by a hand reaching out into the audience.

"Might I 'elp you gov'na?" said a scratchy voice from behind.

Aldo turned to find a chubby man in a pancake cap and coarse jacket, no doubt one of the actors populating the fake city and propelling the plot.

"What can you tell me about what's going on?" Aldo said just to be polite. It was considered rude to break the illusion of the game.

"That kinda query'll cost ya some tuppence."

"I don't have any tuppence," Aldo said, "but how about some comeuppance." He had been to enough of these to know that the writers always rewarded word-play, which they used as a substitute for true wit.

"Very cleva, gov'na. Now why dontchew buy me a pint and we'll 'ave a chat you an' me."

"Sorry, but I'm waiting for someone. Someone with some important information."

"Got lotsa information you moyt loyk. About a dead body maybe?"

"Dead body?" Aldo repeated.

"Oh yeah. A real carcass this one," the man said.

Suddenly the curtain between the outerworld and this one seemed terribly flimsy.

“Did you say...Karkas?”

“Kilt he was and tossed out with the trash.”

And with that Aldo followed the fellow into a nearby pub. They took a tiny table in the corner where Aldo felt the chair first to make sure it would hold him. Some chairs in the FourD were squishy holograms for visual effect only, but some were projected onto actual chairs that could actually hold a butt. You had to test first and the phrase ‘to touch the chair’ had come to mean to try out, test the waters, make sure something was viable first. Safely seated and with real pints of ale in real tankards before them, Aldo timidly asked, “you’re Kepler?”

“At yer service, gov.”

“Why didn’t you say so? And why did we have to meet here?”

“Security,” Kepler said, suddenly sounding very 2040 and entirely Bronx. “Can’t be too careful these days. You never know who’s watching...and listening and analyzing. There are two hundred and sixty different agencies out there collecting data on each of us and any one of them can throw your ass in jail for farting too loud. But these FourDs...they generate so much datawave that they are virtually bugproof. Oh yeah, it’s safe in here, at least electronically. But out in fat-world...we’re all fucked, man. It’s 1984 all over again. Big brother is watching and you’re guilty as charged.”

“Can we get on with this?” Aldo said uncomfortably.

“Okay,” Kepler said, taking out his card and holding it secretly under the table. Flashing a card would have been a true breach of the illusion that could even get you thrown out of the FourD. “Here’s what I found out. It seems like the police computers contacted the Urbana on Tuesday to download any relevant details about Karkas and his activities. This is all standard procedure, mind you, just machine chatter. In other words, before any IBH.”

“IBH?”

“Oh man, you really live in a sim don’t you. IBH means Intervention By Humans. 91% of all data exchange is just networks talking to networks.”

“So the police contacting the Urbana is...”

“Standard. It’s just the two computer networks trading files and analyzing the information.” Kepler scrolled through a number of screens on his card. “Yeah...blah blah blah...a lot of data transfer...blah blah blah...then you Aldo Weeks apparently pop up in connection with this.”

“I do?”

“Let’s see,” Kepler said, looking around furtively to make sure no one was watching him, then going back to the facts. “They know—and by *they* I mean the computers, who may or may not have reported this to their techies—that you left the building that same night that Karkas disappeared. They know this is odd because you rarely leave the building. They know you were caught on the Grid going down to Times Square, but then they kind of lose you for a while. Then you pop up later—I’ll spare you all the times which are down to the fucking second here—taking a taxi with a redheaded woman back up to 89th and West End Avenue. Then you both disappear, no vidcams in the area. That’s a dead zone, very smart of you to go there. But then you fuck up...you make a call to one Kyla Moore from your card at one o’clock and that pinpointed you at #308 West 89th Street.”

The damn call, he thought. He had forgotten about that. How many things were there like that, not on any of his lists. Little tiny moves that would look like a convincing dance of guilt at his trial.

A tall man in a waistcoat approached them and introduced himself as Sergeant Cuff of the London police. Did either of them know the whereabouts of Sir Percival Glyde? They did not. The detective pressed them for a few moments, then moved on. Even though Aldo knew that this was just an actor giving them a clue to one of the plotlines, he took the opportunity to feel persecuted.

“How do you know all this?” he asked, turning back to Kepler.

“Hey, I’m a hacker, man. This is what I do. I crack computer code. I bust into systems and see what I can see. To walk over rugged paths uphill, through thickets, is a feast and a pleasure to me.”

Aldo looked at him baffled, like a monkey in a mirror.

“That’s what Kepler said,” Kepler said.

“Oh?”

“You know, Johannes Kepler, my namesake. He who realized that the planets move in almost perfectly round ellipses not circles? Kepler, the discoverer of earthshine? The earth is brighter than the moon, you know?”

“Yes okay, that Kepler. The scientist.”

“My hero. You probe, you reason, you find out. For this you live.”

“I hate to be selfish here, but is there anything else about...me?”

“Okay,” Kepler sighed, sinking back to earth. “Let’s see...blah blah blah...then you’re back on the Grid walking home early in the morning, so you obviously spent the night out and this is also very unusual. You don’t get out much. And this is the very same night that Karkas disappears. And you were upset—very upset—when you got home too.”

"They know that? How do they know that? How could they possibly know that I was upset?"

"Um...heart rate, body temp, excess motion. All picked up by your apartment InSens. And the toilet registered a rise in cortisone which is too bad for you because it gets crapped out. It means a high level of anxiety."

"Shit."

"My point exactly."

"Is that it?"

"Oh no. It also says here that over the past few days you've been agitated, created a huge number of new files on your desktop, had six times the normal amount of incoming data, and have been leaving your office more than you normally do. Plus your fiancé is out of town all week. This is all very suspicious if you ask me."

"Motherfucker!" Aldo shouted loud enough to get some bad looks in return. That was not a common curse until the 20th century and some of the sticklers were annoyed.

"Lissen, my friend, it's much worse than you think," Kepler said. "Even without all this, and even without all your screw-ups to add to it, you would still be in deep crappola anyway."

"Why is that?"

"Your card."

"My card?"

"Sure. Every time you use it you're spotted."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you understand how the card works? It's part of the whole GCS. You know, the Global Communications System. The reason that you can use it for everything under the sun is that it is part of the network. But that also means they can track you with it. They know where you are every second that you carry it."

"They do that?"

"Oh man, you need a serious implant of what-the-fuck-is-going-on. Of course they do that."

"Why?"

"Mind control, man."

"Mind control," Aldo repeated clinically. "Like 1984."

"Oh man," Kepler said and collapsed backwards on his stool.

He looked at Aldo like a conspiracy theorist who thinks everyone else is a dupe. Which he was and did.

“What do you think?” Kepler asked, leaning in again for effect. “You think the powers that be give a shit about what you think, what you believe, who you vote for? They don’t care about all that. That’s not why they track us all the time. What they want to know—what this shit is all about—is what you *buy*. Your Consumer Profile plain and simple. This is about shopping man. Wake up!”

Aldo looked back at Kepler precisely like the dupe he thought he was, so Kepler tried again.

“Listen, you could boff little girls, kill your own boss, buy Elysia illegally on the Grid...and maybe some cop will think twice about it. But that’s just icing on the cake. The whole thing—the whole Global Network and all—is about buying stuff. Being a patriot and buying American. Keeping your damn Consumer Rating Index up. That’s why they keep all this data on us. All this stuff about our patterns and habits and whereabouts. It’s called Advanced Micro Demographics. Oh sure, they tell us it’s so we can communicate and all. That’s bullshit. What they do is they trade this data with every company trying to sell you something. Why the fuck do you think your toilet is wired? Because the government cares so much about the status of your goddamn bowels? No, man. So they can keep you hooked on ReguLax and ColonCork so that you can stop bullshitting around and focus, focus, focus on shopping!”

“Okay Kepler but what about...”

“Yeah, yeah right. Don’t okay Kepler me, okay? That’s what my old lady keeps doing. No one wants to know what’s going on. Just feed them all their little goodies and get everyone all hopped up on buying shit and not paying attention to any fucking thing that’s going on in the world. I mean don’t you think it’s weird that all they keep telling us is how bad drugs are and all they do is sell us drugs? Or that news is all newsfomercials now? Notice that? News is not about what’s going on anymore but what you have to buy to deal with what’s going on! I mean, wake the fuck up!”

Kepler was actually foaming at the mouth at this point, but Aldo was hoping this was a side effect of the brew they were drinking rather than the rant. The problem was that as paranoid as Kepler seemed, Aldo knew on some level that he was right.

“So the big question is...did you purchase anything in connection with the you-know-what?” Kepler asked.

“No, of course not,” Aldo said.

“Damn. That’s too bad.”

“Why? I was trying...”

"I know. You were trying to keep a low profile. Another big mistake. What you should have done is gone out and made a really big purchase. That might have cancelled out the murder, datawise."

"Stop using the word murder..."

"See, tracking everyone all the time is the price we pay for being connected. We really *are* living in 1984. Watched, surveilled, controlled, all of that. The difference is that Orwell thought it would be imposed on us by Big Brother to control our thoughts. He was wrong. He didn't realize that we would *choose* this in order to be able to get cheap sneakers. Choose it? Hey man, we goddamn *pay* for it!"

Listening to all this, it was hard for Aldo to tell precisely where Kepler's insight ended and his psychosis began. Still, one thing was clear. It suddenly hit Aldo that it really was possible to go swimming around in your own little finny life being watched, measured, evaluated, surveyed, recorded, and analyzed and somehow not at all *feel* it. In the exact way, he imagined, that a fish does not consider the water wet.

"Yeah, basically you're fucked," Kepler said, pocketing his card and knocking back the last of the ale. Then he got up, adjusted his cap and, in his imagination at least, returned to the simpler time of the FourD in progress all around. "If I were you, gov, I'd stay in this noyce lit'l old village and nevah go back outside again. That's what I'd do."

CHAPTER 12



THE CHAOS BOX

The check arrived early Wednesday morning by messenger at Aldo's office. Aldo had never actually seen a check, which was an artifact of a distant past. He had only heard about them from his father and therefore at first did not know quite what it was. After some study, he put the writing and the signature together to suss out that it was a check from Barton Hubble for the box. The date was written on it and that seemed right, and the words 'full payment' appeared at the bottom, which made sense. But the amount! That took Aldo a long time to understand. Like a medieval scholar, he studied the paper and the written numbers, held it every whichway trying to make sense of what he was seeing. Some stray motes of dust in the room light gave his effort a suitably musty air. But none of that helped explain the money and why it was so dreadfully wrong, so abridged, with such a serious zero deficiency. It was made out for four hundred dollars. Not million but *hundred!* Aldo hummed that word a few times, but could not transform it. There were no thousands anywhere to be seen, not a million in sight, no string of singing 0s. Not a comma in the vicinity.

Four hundred dollars.

Aldo suddenly understood why Hubble had chuckled at the idea of a down payment. And why he had sent the money even before getting delivery of the box itself. It all became clear. The box was not a priceless relic to him; he was not working for a rich mystery man; they were not engaged in tricky negotiations.

The box that Hubble wanted so much was a mere curio, almost a trinket, about the price of a ticket to the 160,000th performance of *The Producers*.

The whole thing had been a misunderstanding. Hundreds not millions. A simple enough mistake, Aldo thought, so amusingly simple. But it did raise a more serious question...a \$3,999,600 question, to be precise. Who was right about the value of the box? Hubble or Jesse? The hundredaire or the millionaire? The collector or the sociopath? Aldo went over the text messages that Victoria had shown him, hoping for an insight. It was obvious from them that the two men were haggling over the price of the box. But they, at least, were in the same ballpark, the one with seven figures in it. The amount was right there at the start...‘his most respectful offer is for 6,000,000.’ Was it all a hoax or just a mix-up, Aldo wondered? Or was it some sort of elaborate doubly double cross?

The answer perhaps was with the dealer with whom Karkas haggled for the box. But there was no listing for a Bandas Hardware anywhere in the city. Given Karkas’ fascination, Aldo ran a search and came up 60 businesses that specialized in artifacts from India. Perhaps his hunt could begin with one of these. Cleo seemed unusually busy as he left and barely looked up, not even bothering to make a crack about his newest venture outside.

The first dozen stores that he visited were too crowded to be of any help. In fact, he was bucking hordes of shoppers everywhere he went. Everyone was under scrutiny by the Department of Consumer Affairs to buy to keep America great. In order to keep up their ratings, most people purchased most things online; but going to stores to get something was still a national pastime. And the whole romance of looking and touching and holding and fondling and carrying...all that was still a big business. Only Aldo saw it as reckless endangerment. It actually surprised him to encounter so many people on the browse.

Nonetheless he pushed himself through these swarms of clutchers and graspers and eventually found his way to a small empty shop on Ninth Avenue and 38th Street. It had a sign in the window that said Hindustan Craftworks. And below that another smaller sign...Bandas Hardwar, owner. Hardwar! Aldo checked his card. That was indeed the word on the text messages. But it had nothing to do with a hardware store. Hardwar was a name not a place. Kraznek the thug had misread it and so had Victoria. And Aldo had picked it up from them...a letter-bug, an extra letter that you cannot get rid of in the same way that an idea in New York quickly becomes an *idear*.

The store owned by Bandas Hardwar was all a clutter with artifacts: engraved bowls from Madras, Dravidian embroidery, four-armed statues of Siva, sitars, stone relics from Jodhpur, miniature paintings of Brahma throwing the bull.

Every square inch was occupied by some piece of the made world. Behind a counter crammed with statuettes and knickknacks, Hardwar himself was sitting and blowing smoke from an ornate pipe. His face was loose and vain like a camel while the pipe, by contrast, had the stern face of a British viceroy carved on the bowl. It was hard to know which of the two faces to address.

"Mr. Hardwar? My name is Aldo Weeks," he said upon entering. Wrong, he thought. After eight days of assault by fate, the idea of self-defense had finally taken hold. "Aldeweicz," Aldo quickly corrected himself. "My name is Mr. Aldeweicz." And he tossed in a thick forename as an extra red herring. "Stanislaw Aldeweicz."

Without taking his eyes off the shifting news on a foreign chameleonic newspaper, the man shook Aldo's hand and blew a ring in the air. Aldo took out the box and placed it down on top of the counter in a small clearing between cups and cases. Harwar looked up at Aldo and down at the box, then stopped reading. As he slowly opened the wrapper, his eyes widened into coins.

"Ganesa," he exclaimed.

"Ganesa to you too," Aldo said politely.

"I see Mr. Karkas has sent you with my little box. But what can be the reason?"

"You sold him this box?"

Hardwar leaned in, giving the face carved on the end of his pipe a chance for close scrutiny of the swastika on the top of the cube. "Certainly this is my box. I am not likely to mistake it. It is a one-of-a-kind original. But what is the box doing sitting here in my shop now. Mr. Karkas would never part with it."

"He wouldn't, would he? And why is that?"

"But surely you know, if he has given it to you. Are you an associate of Mr. Karkas?"

"I've been closer to him than most anybody. Now what I'd like to know, Mr. Hardwar, is exactly what it is that makes this box so valuable?"

Hardwar's eyes squinched down to mere slits. "Is there a problem, sir?"

"You tell me," Aldo said.

"But he has bought the box. He knows very well its value. No one forced him to pay the amount he did. It was his own choice. That is the very nature of the free market system. Is it not?"

"What exactly was the amount he paid for it?"

"But surely you know how much was paid, if Mr. Karkas sent you."

"Four and a half million?" Aldo offered, figuring that he had gotten the price he demanded on the text message.

"Roughly. It was five, I think, at the end of the day."

"You don't happen to have some kind of bill of sale do you?"

"Certainly I do. But I zapped him a copy of it the very day he sent the messenger to pick it up. I am afraid I do not understand. What does he want? He desired this box and I obtained it for him. Why has he sent you here with it?"

Aldo submitted to an examination by the dual faces, like twin vidcams scanning in opposite directions.

"Karkas is dead," Aldo said bluntly.

Hardwar gasped, inhaled a lungful of smoke, then choked it out in short wheezes.

"And we think someone may have killed him for this little box of yours," Aldo added.

"Good Lord! But why should anyone want to do that?" Hardwar asked, putting the pipe down and clearing his throat into a filthy cloth.

"You tell me."

"How would I know something like that?"

"It's amazing what people know."

"I am an importer, sir, not a gangster."

"With the money you made on this little transaction, you could hire your own gangster."

"Not unless they work for the minimum wage, sir."

"Let's stop playing games," Aldo said. He yanked his card out of his pocket, opened it up, and fanned the smokescreen with it. When it had cleared, he called up the text messages. "It's all right here in bits and bytes. Is this your communication with Karkas or not?"

"I beg your pardon?" Hardwar said vaguely. "I am still a bit shocked. Has Mr. Karkas truly been murdered?"

"I personally guarantee it. Now is this a copy of your messages with him or not?"

"I think it very well is," he said, perusing the words onscreen.

"Bandas Hardwar," Aldo read, "that's you. And GH Karkas, that's Mr. Karkas. The box is the box. And the numbers are clear enough. Now I want to know why this box is worth around five million bucks?"

"Bucks? Bucks you say? But who was saying anything about bucks?"

"Listen to me, Mr. Hardwar. The police are investigating Karkas' death. They're looking for suspects. They don't know about you yet, but they could find out easily enough, if you get my meaning. Now I'll ask you again...why is this box worth five million bucks?"

“Again bucks.”

“Well?”

“But we were not speaking of bucks. Not at all. We were speaking here only of rupees,” he said, poking the screen with a gnarly finger.

“Come again?”

“Rupees, sir. Mr. Karkas had just returned from a trip to India. He saw this box there at one of the private galleries. When he returned, he called to ask me if I would purchase it for him on my monthly trip. I return to India each month to buy craft pieces for my shop. We had done some business before and so I agreed to this little venture.”

“But why didn’t Karkas buy the box himself when he was there?”

“I have no idea. Perhaps he thought that as a dealer I could get a better price or have fewer problems with customs. Imports are very tricky these days. I told him that I would purchase it for him and these messages you have here concern a negotiation for the price. But it is in rupees, not in dollars. The buyer was asking six million rupees.”

“And just what does that come to in...bucks?”

Hardwar took the pipe from his mouth, stared into the carved face for help with the calculation, then returned it to his lips when the amount was established.

“Approximately five thousand dollars. The rupee is trading rather poorly.”

“The box is worth five thousand dollars?” Aldo said in a tinny voice.

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Why don’t we try a clear manner of speaking?”

“Are you with the police?”

“Let’s just say that the police are following my efforts very closely.”

“I would appreciate it if you kept that record of our messages private in that case.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I am a trader, sir. I prefer to keep prices and their negotiations confidential. It is better for business. May I count on your cooperation in this?”

“I’ll do what I can, Hardwar, but only if you level with me.”

“All right then.”

“Good. So how about telling me what—and I mean exactly what—this little box is worth.”

“On the fair market? Approximately two and a half million rupees.”

“Which is?”

“Two thousand dollars.”

That, at least, explained one thing...Hubble's reaction. No wonder he had seemed surprised about the price and had been so anxious to seal the deal. The box was an absolute steal at only four hundred dollars.

"You see, these puzzle boxes are no longer produced," Hardwar explained. "They are the relics of a bygone era. Before the Web, before the computer even, before Pakistan or the difficulties with China and so forth. From a much simpler world when people were proud of their crafts and not their craftiness."

"If it's only worth two thousand dollars, how did the price to Karkas get up to five?"

"There are other costs, you see."

"Such as?"

"Import fees, documentation, and so forth."

"That's a lot of *and so forth*."

"In addition, there was another buyer bidding for it as well."

"Was his name Hubble? Barton Hubble?"

"It would be a breach of confidence for me to disclose a client's name who wishes to remain anonymous. Surely you can see that."

"It doesn't matter what I see, it's what the police see. See?"

"You leave me little choice."

"I know. Now who was the other buyer?"

"Well there I must admit that you have called my bluff. In truth, there was no one," Hardwar said, smiling loosely now like the camel that has eaten its master's hat. "It was a little game of mine. You see Mr. Karkas is quite a rich man and I knew that he would not miss the money, whereas a few thousand dollars would make quite a difference to one in my position."

"You invented a fake buyer to pump up the price of the box?"

"I am a poor shop owner. Struggling, sir, struggling to make ends meet. For the children." And he pointed to the framed picture of two mugging camelettes on the wall behind him. "Perhaps I took advantage of Mr. Karkas' obsession. Ganesa."

"Ganesa," Aldo echoed again. "Which obsession was that?"

"His obsession with Hindi artifacts. Ganesa."

"Ganesa."

"Yes. Ganesa."

"You keep saying that."

"But it was his obsession," he said, relighting the pipe and winking towards the box.

"Let's start from the beginning, Hardwar. And slowly."

"Mr. Karkas had a great interest in India and visited there many times. I believe that he found there what many Americans often do, answers to his questions. To spiritual questions. Everything here is so new, but India you see is quite ancient and this can be very intoxicating to foreigners. Have you ever been to India, sir?"

"It's on my list," Aldo fibbed, since travel was *never* on it. "Go on."

"Mr. Karkas visited the Hindu temple at Madura, a beautiful structure, and told me that he had a vision there. This is common, but mostly among Hindus. It is actually rather odd for a foreigner to have such an experience. Nonetheless, he said it was there that he saw his destiny."

"Death?"

"Web publishing. The Fluxbiz. The online company that he was destined to build. He felt that this was a divine message of sorts. A vision of a mandala of infinite information that came to him as he stood observing a statue of Ganesa."

"Ganesa is..."

"A Hindu god? The son of Siva and Parvati."

Aldo tapped into the search engine on his card and spoke the name 'Ganesa' like an incantation. Instantly a colorful painting appeared showing a short fat man with yellow skin, two extra arms, and an elephant's head. He turned it towards Hardwar.

"Yes, just so. This is Ganesa. He is known to us as the pathfinder. The god of journeys and of beginnings. As such he is also seen as the creator of obstacles and therefore must be placated before any undertaking. A prayer to Ganesa assures the success of any endeavor, as before one takes a journey for example. Or even before one begins a business venture. Ganesa bestows prosperity in trade or in travel. That is why Mr. Karkas used it as the name of his company."

"Ganesh Communications?"

"Ganesa, Ganesha, Ganesh. It is all the same."

"What has all this got to do with the box?"

"You see on the top of the box the symbol known as a swastika? In Sanskrit we call this a *svasti*. The svasti is the symbol of Ganesa. It is a cross which stands for a crossroads. Or two purposes encountering each other as in a business transaction. Since Ganesa is the god of ventures, the svasti is also the symbol of good fortune. Many businessmen in India have his image nearby."

"And you say Karkas was obsessed with it?"

"Over the years he bought many items pertaining to Ganesa. Whenever anything came in with such symbols on it, I called him. A statue of Ganesa, for example, or perhaps a reproduction of a miniature. Or an object like this one

with a svasti on it. He had quite an extensive collection. But I think this particular box tickled his fancy, so to say.”

“What’s particular about it?”

“It is called a *kozapetaka*. This is a Sanskrit word which means a box that contains a treasure. We also call it a chaos box.”

“Chaos?”

“The Chaos Box is an ancient story. I have heard the story told in Hungary, in Mongolia, in the Sudan. In China as a Taoist tale. But I believe it is really from India, which is older than any of these. Would you like to know it?”

“Yes, I would,” Aldo said.

With that, Hardwar took out another box—a wooden one—that had papers within it, actual POPs of different weights and colors. Hardwar then removed a piece of translucent parchment from this box and set it standing on its edge in a wooden base. Then he lit a candle and placed it behind this screen. Out of the box he took a handful of small intricately carved paper figures and placed these in their own wooden holders. When he positioned the tiny puppets between the candle and the screen, their shadows—dim and indistinct—appeared on the screen to form a shadow puppet play.

“The Goddess of Demons was angry at a priest named Argana,” Hardwar began, bringing those two figures, one with a long robe and the other with an ornate headdress, onto the tiny stage. “Angry because the priest had abandoned his practices in favor of the excitements of modern life. And so the Goddess instructed her pets—the Centipede and the Lizard and the Scorpion and the Red Snake—in a plan to kill the priest.”

As he delicately moved each of the players in and out of the candlelight, the flame flickered from frail eddies in the air. From his side of the screen, Aldo could barely make out the shapes of the puppets, yet it mesmerized him like a brand new kind of virtuality. In this age of high-CGI and vidsims and haptic holograms and tapscreen movies, this faint little paper puppet play struck Aldo as the most amazing illusion he had ever seen.

“One by one they would take human form and try to fulfill the Goddess’ demand. The Centipede would appear as an acrobat with poison sticks. The Lizard as a magician with a deadly sword. Scorpion as a temptress with a fatal kiss. Red Snake as a jester with a lethal flower. Surely one of them would succeed in killing the Priest Argana. But the Goddess cautioned them to avoid capture and imprisonment in the Chaos Box. The box had the power to contain all forms of evil and it was the source of Argana’s power.”

"These demons were tricksters but not smart. And one by one, Argana recognized them for who they were, and one by one he overcame them and put them into his Chaos Box, from which they could not escape. After a time, the Goddess came to him for the return of her pets. Argana was clever and knew that she might arrange all sorts of tribulations for him if he did not comply with her request, yet if he *did* comply worse dangers awaited him. But then he thought perhaps that he could save himself by negotiating. And so he offered to open the box, but only if she gave her word that the demons would not harm him or his family. Argana had a long clever list of conditions so that she would not be able to trick him and the Goddess listened to this and agreed to all of it. But when Argana opened the box she immediately set her demons on him. 'But you agreed to protect me!' he cried. 'Why have you done this?' And her answer was, 'Because I am a Goddess and you are nothing but a man.' Thus was chaos returned to the world, as it had to be."

Hardwar let go of the puppet and on the ghostly wall the tiny figure of the priest Argana collapsed silently onto the table.

"And so, like all good tales, there is a moral, a lesson here. Do you understand it?"

"Yes, I sure do," Aldo said. "Never open a damn chaos box!"

"No, my friend, I am afraid that I must disagree. In India we say that the point is...open it or do not open it. It does not matter. Either way, your fate is in the hands of the gods."

"Let me make sure I get this," Aldo said after a few new customers looked around the cramped store and left. "Karkas saw this box in India and asked you to go over and buy it for him. Then he paid five grand—five million rupees—for it. You paid two to the seller for its real value and kept three for yourself. Is that about it?"

"There were other costs, as I said. I kept roughly two."

"Not bad," Aldo said.

"What is the consequence if someone wants something badly enough? The box is only worth what it is worth to the one who wants it. No more and no less. Its value depends on that alone."

"Plus whatever might be inside of it."

"Is there something inside?"

"Isn't there?"

"How would I know? Only Mr. Karkas knew how to open it. And he did not choose to share that information with me."

"How do you know he knew how to open it?"

"He told me so. He said he had opened it in India."

"Did he say how?"

"No he did not. He never told me the solution to the puzzle. Do you think, perhaps, that he put something in it? Something of value?"

"What do you think?"

"Perhaps. It is certainly possible. What do you think?"

"I have no idea," Aldo said.

And here amid the clutter and the tall tales and the speculations, here at last was something direct and indisputable...an outright lie. Because by this time, Aldo had a very good idea and like all good ideas, it was good and simple. Just a matter of a little psychic looking. A matter of seeing the future as something that has already happened. From this rear view there was more to the box than a trip to India and a crooked dealer. And it surely held greater secrets than Ganesa and a crooked cross. Yes, Aldo thought, there was a much better explanation and he arrived at it with the full weight of his conviction. Obviously, Karkas had used the box to smuggle something into the country. That was the only explanation for all the fuss and flutter. It was the only reason he would have paid twice the price for it and not brought it back himself. But what that something inside of the box was, Aldo could not say. A gemstone, Napoleon's whatziss, a thinking Buckyball, fusion plans? Not a clue. He only knew that it was worth all this trouble to all the parties concerned and therefore was worth a lot. Of that he was certain. All that was left now was to find out what was inside. Once Aldo had that, he would have control of the situation again because *he* would have the secret no one else had, he would control the information. Not to mention a nice little nest egg for his retirement. And the truly amazing thing was that it did not seem like such a difficult thing to get. Only a small handful of twists and turns separated him from it.

Wednesday night, quite late.

The digiwall was showing sunset over Oahu, where he had never been, and the InSens was flooding the room with *eau de sable*. Aldo had convinced Kyla that everything was hunky-dory and he was now lying in bed, not sleeping and not not sleeping either. Just lying there, idling. The thinker with one thought. That thought should have been about the trail of clues, about his record on the Grid, about traces either biologic or psychologic of his activities. Or at the very least about a ball in a maze. But it was not any of that. It was late and a deeper

state of being was in play. All he had in mind was a satiny black strap falling across a pale, soft, freckled back.

He wanted to call her in the worst way. Not to discuss Karkas or Jesse or Adder. In fact, at this very moment, he wanted nothing more than to forget those things, to forget everything outside the magnetic field of fingertips on skin. But even this, so tender and so craved, was only an idle thought. The mind wandering through the warehouse of its desires. The part of him that knew it was wrong—dangerous even—to think such thoughts was still awake, and that left him in a state of suspension. Wanting to do something but not quite sure what. Only the call on his card shook him out of the stupor.

“What did you find out?” Victoria asked.

Her voice, husky from sleep or sex, did nothing to get him back on track.

“What are you wearing?” Aldo asked, trying to linger with good news for a moment.

“Not very much,” she said.

“We keep talking about all these deals all the time. But we haven’t exactly gotten our own deal off the ground. I’m still interested if you are.”

“Not now, Aldo, I’m getting nervous. I just want this thing to be over. Did you find anything out?”

“Some things,” he sighed.

“Yes? Tell me.”

“First of all, the whole box thing is a disaster. I tracked it down. The box itself is worth nothing. Maybe a couple of thousand dollars. Your *friend* got it all wrong.”

“He’s not my friend. And anyway that’s impossible. The messages said six million.”

“Yes, but the amount they were talking about was in rupees, not dollars.”

“Rubies?? Jesus, that’s even better. You know what rubies are worth?”

“I’m talking about Indian currency. I just spoke to an expert in these things. Believe me, the box is nothing.”

“I can’t tell Jesse that. He’ll take it out on me. He’s got a temper. Does the buyer you lined up know that it’s only worth a few thousand dollars?”

“Forget the buyer.”

“I thought you had a buyer.”

“That deal fell through. There’s no buyer anymore.”

“Oh no! Now what?”

"There's only one thing we can do. What I said from the start...give Jesse the box and that's the end of it. He doesn't know what it's worth anyway. Let him deal with it."

"This doesn't sound good."

"He started this whole thing with his idiotic gridtap. Let him work it out. The box is his problem."

"It's not that simple."

"Why not? We'll tell him the buyer pulled out and we'll give him the box. Done."

"What if he's suspicious?"

"Of what?"

"Of us."

"Why would he be suspicious of us?"

"Wouldn't you be? Knowing us, I mean. Are you absolutely sure it's only worth two thousand dollars?"

"The box itself is. I'm sure of that. What's inside of it is a different matter."

"Is there something inside? Please say yes."

"I don't know."

"You haven't opened it yet?"

"No. And until someone does, there is no way to know what it's worth. I've been thinking that Karkas must have put something in it while he was still in India. Something small that's worth a lot of money maybe. And he used the box to smuggle it out of the country."

"Are you sure?"

"No, but it makes sense. The box is a good hiding place. It couldn't be opened or probed, or even connected with him until it was in his possession. Why else would he have had someone else bring it into the country for him? Why go to all that trouble if he wasn't smuggling something? That's what I've been thinking. Then again, I'm exhausted."

"But what could it be?"

"I don't know. Jesse will have to..."

"Ho! I'm sick of waiting around like some fucking dog. Let's cut the bull," said a raspy voice from somewhere in the background. "Is the deal set up or is it ain't?"

"Who the hell is that?" Aldo asked, peering into the card to try to see the answer for himself.

"This is Jesse James Kraznek is who," the voice shouted. "I think it's time we get down to some serious shit, Aldo." He said the name the way a cheap crook would, mocking the vowels. "Tell me of the deal."

"Now you're tapping *my* calls too?" Aldo growled.

"No," Victoria said. "He just walked into the room."

"Now fuck up and listen," Jesse said, grabbing the card from Victoria and pushing her aside. In the floating window of Aldo's card, Jesse looked like a thumb with a greasy toupee. "She's with me."

"You kidnapped her!"

"This guy is a bigger asshole than I thought. Tell'm Red," he said and focused the vidcam on her for a moment.

"I'm fine Aldo. Don't worry about me. Jesse is here at my apartment."

Suddenly, the line between Victoria and Jesse seemed shorter and stronger than the long, thin, rubbery filament that connected Aldo to either of them. He felt alone in his clothes, in the room, in the building, the planet, the star system.

"I see," he said stiffly.

"Don't, Aldo," Victoria pleaded. "Let's just work this out."

"Do or don't, I don't give a fuck," Jesse said. "The point is this. I'm coming over to get the fucking money and the fucking box. I am getting good and sick of this bullshit. You got that?"

"But the buyer..."

"Don't but me, butterballs. I know all about you and who you are. Over there in your little home office in the Urbana on 96th and Broadway, owned by one Gordon Hardin Karkas who also owned Ganesh Communications, the company you happen to fucking work for. The very same Karkas you and this broad offed last week. So don't give me any reverb."

Great. Not only perfectly alone, now Aldo suddenly felt cut loose from all life-support and drifting through chilly space towards the rim, towards the first moments of creation.

"Swell," Aldo said. "That's perfect. Great. Thanks a lot, Victoria."

"Hey, she didn't say nothing to me about you," Jesse answered. "You forget there, Al-doh, that I am in the information business. Now tell me of the deal."

"There is no deal."

"What happened to the deal?"

"That deal is off."

"The deal is off? The deal ain't off unless I call it off."

"The buyer pulled out."

"So we make another deal."

"The buyer won't deal."

"He'll deal if I say so."

"He pulled out by dropping dead."

"The buyer dropped dead?"

"Yes."

"Yeah? So this buyer you suddenly found now is suddenly dead? You ain't by any chance trying to cross me up now that we're all buddy-buddies, are you Aldo?"

"I wouldn't think of it."

"I bet you wouldn't."

"I'm telling you, the buyer dropped dead. It's not his fault. It happens."

"We're sorry, Jesse," Victoria added, stepping next to him. Aldo could now see both their faces, squeezed as though for a family photo, on his screen.

"Don't hassle it, Red. People who die should be looked on with gratitude. Most people are better off for it. You two clowns should know that."

"What do we do now?" Victoria asked.

"We just give Jesse the box," Aldo said as buoyantly as he could muster. "He can find another buyer for it, I'm sure."

"Not so fast, loverboy. The deal ain't over."

"I told you."

"That was *that* deal. This is this."

"What do you want us to do?" Aldo pleaded. "You wanted the box from the start. This whole thing is about the box. Okay, so now you'll get it. And you can do whatever you were going to do with it in the first place."

"Things are different now."

"Nothing's different."

"Fuck up, Aldo, and pay attention. I'll tell you what's different and you'll suck on it. You understand me?" Jesse paused to let the burst of rage subside. He was now holding the card at arm's length and talking both into the vidcam to Aldo and leftwards to Victoria. "What's different is that I like having partners, I see that now. It provides a—what can I say?—a buffer. That's right a buffer. With partners I don't have to stick my neck out so much. Now the deal is the deal and this is the deal. So listen the fuck up. Aldo gives the box to me for safekeeping, then we all go around and find another buyer. When the time comes, just like before, you two can set things up and I'll handle the transfer. See? Everybody uses their talent and we all make out fine. That's the deal."

"Look Jesse..."

"Fuck look Jesse! That is the deal. Does everybody understand this? Now don't go and forget who's in charge here. I got some valuable information for the cops on you two."

That ended the debate once and for all.

"All right," Aldo said. "I'll give you the box."

"You'll give me nothing. I'll come and get it."

"Where?"

"Your apartment."

"You can't come up here."

"I'm gonna piss on this guy if he tells me one more time what I can and cannot do."

"Let's all meet here at my apartment," Victoria offered.

"What is this, a fucking tea party? I ain't jawboning with you two shitheads, I'm *telling* you. I'm coming up to your apartment tomorrow at noon to get the box. Understand Aldo?"

"All right."

"That's a good boy. You know, we three could make a good bunch of partners. You know, all for one and all that shit. Just like the three fucking stooges."

Time, as it had a habit of doing, was running out. Aldo spent most of that night placing the box on one side, then the other, then the top, bottom, top again and starting over. Then all over again. But without any strategy it seemed most like the biography of the lonely blockhead with his lone block. And of course, no solution came. Frustrated, he put the box down and got into his lists and mulled over them again, step by step and last to first.

There was a pattern on the dead man's head but no one knew about the box so far. There were tannin stains on his own clothes but they had not found his cleaners yet. He had lost Victoria's handkerchief but that had not been discovered so far. The aircan had been found but not tied to the car yet. There were vidcams on the bridge but they had been turned off. The repairman on the bridge had seen him, but not clearly. There were vidcams all the way to the bridge and back on the West Side, but they could not tie him to the car.

But but.

But there might have been biotraces left in the car but maybe not. But Adder was looking for a Shanghai but he had not found it. But he had found the hat but he had given it to Aldo. But that UniBoard cop had stopped him and might have tapped him into the Grid but he had not had the time. But he had clearly seen

both Aldo and Karkas but so what? But the nurse had seen all three of them but no one seemed to know about her.

But but but.

But there were a million clues, known and unknown, but Aldo was not a suspect yet. But Jesse James Kraznek should have been but was not. But he had ordered that gridtap and was following Karkas and probably had a criminal record. But there was no way to tie him to the murder. But what if the cops could catch Jesse with a copy of his tap or his ransom note? But what if he killed Aldo first? But could Victoria be trusted to go along with it.

But but but but...

And soon these buts ran together like the beats of a small light hammer. A dreamy hammer that he was now using as he assembled a fancy wooden display case. The case would be used to hold part of his vast collection of New World moths. They were lying so gently and perfectly on the waxed paper at the end of the workbench. When the case was done he would take them ever so carefully in his calipers and pin them to the cotton matting. Place their labels just so and have at least this one tiny corner of the world in order. Neat as a pin and free from chaos. Even fast asleep, he smiled at this thought. Smiled to be in his beloved past, untroubled, working on his collection, back in a time of magnificent particularities.

Yes, there was nothing like nothing to null that kind of mulling.

CHAPTER 13



THE OPENING

For the second time that week, Aldo awoke slumped at his desk, bent and achy, to find someone waiting for him. But this time it was a virtual someone...Hans Sloane, rather compressed and flattened, on the desktop. Because Aldo had ignored all the previous messages, the office decided to give priority to this call from the Library. It brought Sloane up in a small window, his body the size of a spoon and his workshop a tiny setting behind him. Aldo usually used his simset to do research, literally immersing himself in it, and it was unnerving to see his Greatness appear so teensy on the desk.

"I have the information y'requested, Mr. Weeks," Sloane said plainly, unfazed by his own shrunken state.

"Okay, tell me," Aldo said groggily.

Sloane began a long and bewildering series of analyses. He produced percentages and numbers and charts and graphs in three dimensions and neo-statistical x-point equations to explain his findings. Even in this rather reduced version, the great cataloguer could be something of a fussbudget. Aldo was in no mood for confusion and quickly asked for the upshot, forcing Sloane to abruptly switch gears.

"Basically I have evaluated 2,157,543 murder cases over the last century according to your delimitations."

"Good, great. What did you find out about convictions?"

"I found out that about 7% of these were prosecuted successfully based on a preponderance of incriminating factual evidence. The rest were all based on circumstantial data."

"What does that mean?"

"79% were based on confessions, 9% on jailhouse snitches, 4% on eyewitness identification, 1% on..."

"79% on confessions? That seems like an awful lot."

"...9% on jailhouse snitches, 4%..."

"Yes, yes. I got it. And the total is...?"

"93% based on circumstantial data."

"Am I understanding you?"

"I can only hope that you are, sir."

"Are you saying that 93% of all murder cases have nothing to do with proof?"

"Depends on how y' define proof."

"Nine out of ten murder convictions have nothing to do with clues and evidence and stuff like that?"

"My findings indicate that when parametric delimits are..."

"Please, please, *please*...informalize."

"Yes, y' can say that."

"Only 7% rely on evidence that is actually gathered by the police?"

"7.36% to be statistically precise."

"And the rest, almost all convictions, depend on hearsay and chatter and..."

"On what you would call secondary evidence."

"But why?"

"Do y' want me to initiate a new search?"

"No, I want you to guess."

"Ah, guess. I see. Well then perhaps this is the situation because there is not enough evidence t'do the trick in most cases."

"That can't be. It's impossible. We live in a world of evidence. Everything is tested and measured all the time. There's nothing but evidence."

"Well then perhaps there is *too much* evidence!"

That was it! Aldo thought. That was the answer. He knew that Sloane was relying on a language algorithm to answer the question in just that way. A simple flip of a logic gate. But he had hit on something anyway. A basic truth that Aldo knew from experience to be true. Law of the Blob again...the more data you generated to manage a problem, the more data there was to manage. The trick of his profession was to find ways to collapse information rather than expanding it.

But law enforcement was failing at this. What Sloane was suggesting was that there was so much data being generated all the time—and so much more data created to analyze the data—that it was all becoming pretty useless. Unusable was a better word. There was simply too much for anyone or any system to absorb and use. All the constant surveillance was canceling itself out.

The data—all those clues he left—did not point to Aldo Weeks. On the contrary, it hid him. The only way to find him inside of it would be to work the other way, to begin with the premise that he was the who whodunit and follow the trail to prove it. And if no one was doing that...

New rule. Aldo began to think of it humbly as the Weeks Conjecture. And it was this: the more clues you left, the *less* likely you were to get caught by the police.

Note to all future murderers...don't try to cover your tracks, bury them in evidence!

"But what about all the detective shows," Aldo asked, "and the movies and websims? What about Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot and Umberto Seven-pointsix and all that?"

"What about them?"

"Forensic labs, deductive reasoning, the trail of clues, crime doesn't pay?"

"I'd have to infer that all of that is story clichés, script conventions, and plot devices. It makes for well-structured fiction, which is a worthwhile endeavor to be sure. But that is entertainment and bears little relationship to reality."

"This is fantastic news."

"My survey suggests that most real murder cases depend on having a prime suspect by other means first, confessions or snitches, and then making any available evidence fit into a logical argument for guilt."

"Guilt first, then proof."

"Handsomely put, Mr. Weeks."

"So they find some jackass and get just enough dope on him to convince a jury so everyone can go home, is that it?"

"Kind of like a game of pin the trail on the donkey," Sloane said.

But of course being miniscule and flat, not to mention virtual, he could not take any pride in his own bad pun.

By the time the workday began, Aldo had developed an idea about how to proceed. It was not a clear idea precisely. In fact it was barely a plan and hardly a plot. More a kind of vague notion. The idea he had in mind was to create a hub.

In data management, a hub was a focus of information flow. A point that a bunch of other points pointed to. A box on the flow chart with a lot of arrows going to it.

What he needed in this case was a better murderer than himself. A better donkey. Someone who might take his place as the prime suspect. If Sloane was right, then it did not really matter who really killed Karkas, only who seemed likely to have done it. Then the laws of chaos and order would take over and solve the problem. The issue was how to refocus the data flow; the question was who to pin the trail on. And the answer to that, at least, was clear...Jesse James Kraznek.

Aldo went over this all the way down to the lobby and into Adder's cramped closet office on the ground floor. He took a deep breath before entering and did his best to look clairvoyant.

"What are you doing up so early?" Adder said, "what'd the wife kick you out or something?"

"I'm not married yet."

"Yeah, you are. You just don't know it."

"I've been thinking about the Karkas case, Loren, and I've had some thoughts about it. Do you want to hear them or not?"

"You mean some of your psychic shit?"

"Exactly."

"Go on," Adder said, rooting around in his locker for the tools of his security trade—gun and holster, stingstick, LCDlight.

"First of all, the murder was committed by a man," Aldo said in an eerie hush. "I feel that very strongly. This man killed Karkas for the box mentioned in that ransom note."

"Yeah okay, I've been reaching the same conclusion. Coffee?"

"No thanks," Aldo said, and he moved directly under the overhead light—an ancient incandescent under a dented metal hood—hoping that the harsh shadows would enhance the effect. "And I've been getting a J feeling about it too."

"A say what?"

"I mean the letter J. Very strong. I'm not sure what it means yet, but that's the sense I get. Shouldn't you be writing all this down?"

"Go on, I got a memory like a steel sieve."

"Maybe it's the man's name. Like John or James or..."

"You got this all from feeling up that old hat?"

"No. The hat doesn't figure. That hat you found has nothing to do with Karkas' death."

"Is that so? You're sure about that."

"Have all your other clues led anywhere? The rented car, the apple stains, the aircan, the man on the bridge."

"Not exactly."

"The bruise on Karkas' head?"

"Hey, you got a good memory."

"Well? Anything led anywhere?"

"Not yet. But that don't mean..."

"Because they won't. They're all off base, I feel."

"We'll see about that."

The peculiar tone in Adder's voice brought Aldo out of his bogus trance. He also noticed an unusual jaunt to Adder's movements as he tied his tie and adjusted his beret. The music coming from the locker sounded like Dean Martin before they synthed his voice, meaning it sounded phony.

"You're in a very good mood this morning," Aldo probed.

"I'm closing in."

"But you've got no leads."

"Don't I?"

"Do you?"

"I'll tell you what I've got," Adder said, unable to contain his glee any longer. "I've got my fingers on the creep's throat and I'm just about ready to squeeze the life out of him. I can pretty much see his eyes bulging like pingpong balls, his tongue jerking like an eel on a hook, and his last breath busting his lungs..."

"Unh!" Aldo grunted. He had twanged his neck muscle by stiffening.

"What are you so nervous about, Weeks? Relax. You're off the hook. We don't even need your help anymore. I've got everything under control now. We'll just see what my witness says."

"Witness?"

He stopped massaging his neck so as to better focus on the new chest pain induced by that word, which stuck him like the pin on a cop's badge.

"But I will tell her to pay special attention to the J's, like you said."

"You didn't say anything about a witness."

"Didn't I tell you?"

"No."

"I found one all right. She lives in the neighborhood, down near 89th Street. She's a nurse. She was coming home late that night and says she saw two people carrying Karkas to a car. I'm bringing her up here in a little while to have a look-see."

"At what?"

"People in the building."

"It isn't anyone in the building," Aldo intoned. "I'm sure of it."

"We'll see about that. You could be wrong, right? I mean it's pretty weird how it works anyway, this psychic shit. What do you do, contact a spirit or something? Maybe the spirit is an asshole."

Aldo began an explanation about the new science of psychic shit and how it relied on fluctuating plasma fields generated by the electromagnetic energy of the neurons and all that. It was a theory that made no sense at all but proved conclusively how desperate he was to convince Adder to believe him. It was all quite useless. The look he got back was dim, like what you get from talking Hegel to a horse.

"It just works," Aldo finally said.

"If you say so. We'll see. Anyways, I'm off to work," Adder said, heading out the door. But he stopped and turned. "Oh and make sure you're here around today. I want the witness to get a look at you too."

"Why me?"

"Just to be thorough," he said, "and maybe it'll trigger something."

Adder tapped his head and slammed the door behind him. The sound of the metal echoed densely, making the door seem much heavier and more massive than it really was.

By the time he got back upstairs, Aldo's two visitors were already in the lobby waiting to be admitted. He made some quick preparations to get things in order for his new plan of action. Then he signaled the front desk to let them in. Cleo admitted them but seemed too preoccupied with her own work to notice the tension in the air as they marched into Aldo's workspace.

"So this is the thing?" Jesse James Kraznek asked.

"This is it," Aldo said.

"That's it all right," Victoria said.

"So this is it," Jesse concluded.

They were gazing at the box sitting midway between them on Aldo's desk which, with the touchscreen surface turned off, was now nothing more than a very expensive and very big shiny gray pedestal on which the box sat like a relic.

"So this is the big fucking deal?" Jesse asked.

"There she is," Aldo said.

Moving in for a better view, Jesse looked like a lecher eyeing a girl scout in the park. He was shorter than Aldo had imagined, and younger. His face in person was not as brutal as it might have been, a prizefighter with a taste for poetry. Vic-

toria was standing in the corner, a curvy shadow behind the roving glow of light at the end of her cigarette, playing the classic great-looking dame. Which of course left Aldo, sitting behind his desk trying to appear cool and collected, to play the role of the cynical gumshoe. He even leaned back and put his foot up on a drawer for effect.

"Yes, this is it," he said coolly.

"Big fucking deal. I could stick my dick in a light socket and get a better deal than this."

"Go ahead. It's your deal, not mine," Aldo said.

"Ours, loverboy. Don't forget that," Jesse said and bent himself into a right angle to take in more details of the box. A strand of hair escaped from the crest and arched over the box like an antenna, but this did not seem to add anything. "Sure don't look like much."

"Ah...but it's what is inside that matters," Aldo said.

Jesse lifted the box and bounced it in his hand, but got no further news.

"Ain't heavy neither," he said and buckled his cheeks into a grin. For an instant, the pattern of grooves on the top caught his attention.

"It's a double cross," Aldo said.

"Oh yeah?" Jesse said. "You think I'm stupid? Nobody double crosses me."

"No, I mean the pattern on the box. It's a double cross. Like a swastika."

"Oh...yeah?"

"Yeah," Aldo said, drawing the pattern in the air.

"Oh, yeah," Jesse said, seeing it.

"Can we go now?" Victoria said.

"You nervous, babe? You got no cause to be. It's all worked out. We just gonna take the box and go back to your place. Ain't that right, Aldo?"

"Right."

"Funny kind of name. Al-doh. What does it mean?"

"It means let's go already," Victoria said and squashed the cigarette into the floor.

Slowly, so as to emphasize his authority, Jesse straightened up, neatened himself, tucked his tie, grinned at his partners in crime, and reached for the box.

"What a minute," Aldo said, "you can't just walk around with it like that. Someone will see it." He reached into his drawer and took a piece of paper from the pile—a very particular one he had placed on top—and wrapped it around the box. Then he took out the hat—Karkas' hat—and handed it to Victoria.

"What do you think you're doing?" Jesse said.

"It's her hat...it belongs to her."

"Fuck the hat. I mean what are *you* doing?"

"Nothing."

"That's what I thought. Get up."

"Why?"

"Because you're coming with us is why."

"What for? You've got the box."

"I got the box, I got the babe, and I got the deal. What I don't got is *you*."

"What do you need me for?"

"Security," he said, reaching into his low black boot and pulling out a small handgun.

"Oh God," Victoria said.

"God is dead, babe. Or ain't you heard."

"How'd you get in with that?" Aldo asked.

"It's ceramic which means it don't ping. But it does shoot. Now let's stop chatterbugging and get going."

"Where?" Aldo said, trying to recall the end of every old *film noir* movie he had ever seen.

"Out. What we're gonna do is like so. We're all three of us gonna get in the elevator and go downstairs and go out the building. All of us together, just like the chums we are. Once we're outside, we can go our separate ways. Fuck if I care."

"But why bother? You've got the box."

"Cause maybe Al-doh," Jesse grunted, "who is so smart with his dropped dead buyer and all, decides to call downstairs and warn the guards to stop me on my way out of the building."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you're basically a dickhead. You can't help it. Now get your butt out of the chair. Up and walking, Aldo."

"Don't you want to hide the gun in your pocket or something?" Aldo suggested largely because it seemed to be a B-movie kind of thing to do. "We won't get very far with you holding it like that."

"You think I'm stupid?" Jesse said. And he promptly hid the gun in his pocket.

On the way to the front door, Aldo noticed Cleo following their exit with puzzlement. She was about to say something when Aldo jumped in with the answer.

"I'm just going down for a cup of coffee with my friends here," Aldo said. "Yes, just three friends going for coffee. I'll be right back."

“He’ll be right back,” Jesse aped.

They proceeded to the elevators stiffly and three abreast so no one could sneak up on anyone else. Jesse was in the middle. Seeing Victoria’s worried face on the other side of the trio caused a strange tingling in Aldo’s gut. Not butterflies or ulcers but the jitter of *deja vu*. Himself on the left, a strange man in the middle, Victoria on the far side...he had seen it all before on the night of the murder. And the rerun made Aldo uneasy. So as they stepped into the empty elevator and stood at the rear wall facing the front, Aldo moved in between the others just to break the sensation.

The ride down to the lobby followed the well-established law of elevators...the more urgently you want to get there, the longer it takes. This one stopped at every single floor to let a flurry of people on and off. Finally, at the second floor a robust man who was leaving had to dance around two others who were waiting to get on. It was Loren Adder and an older lady.

“Up?” Adder asked as he escorted the woman into the car. She was squat and dowdy, wearing large black orthopedic shoes and thick morphic glasses.

“Down,” said the chorus inside.

“Fuck,” Adder said. “Pardon my Greek. We’ll go for the ride.”

As the doors closed, Adder turned around and in turning saw Aldo’s face in a crowd of faces that included other passengers in the elevator as well as the talking heads in the commercials playing on the rear wall screen. So he thought nothing of it and faced front again. The woman he was holding by the arm followed his movement and turned around as well, saw what he saw, including Aldo’s face in the crowd, also thought nothing of it. She turned back to the front too.

Aldo for his part only needed a brief glimpse to recognize her as the nurse who had seen them carrying out the body that night. But she had apparently not made the connection. Considering that she still might, Aldo took the hat that Victoria was holding in her hand—the Karkas hat with the feather in the band—and placed it on his head with the brim tilted down to hide his face. Jesse looked at him, shrugged, then faced front again. Victoria looked at him, at the hat, at Jesse, then front.

As the elevator doors opened onto the first floor, Adder and the nurse got out first. They stepped to the side to let people off and waited to take the elevator up again. At last, when Jesse and Aldo and Victoria stepped out, the nurse, with nothing else to do, looked directly at them. She looked at the man on the right, at the redheaded woman on the left, and at the man with the feathered hat covering his face in the middle. A teensy weensy synapse in her brain sparked. In the back,

where visual perceptions are made. Acetylcholine flooded the gap. The delicate ion balance between the two axons shifted. Electrons giggled through countless neural pathways all the way down to long-term memory where a very particular gestalt pattern was energized. It took a few more nanoseconds for that impulse to reach the awareness processor in the cortex, become a focus of intentionality, a subject of information, a mote of knowledge, and finally...a thought. Then it was on to the speech center, the language parser, and soon the vocal chords, tongue, and lips. By the time she was able to get the actual scream itself out, the three of them were halfway down the hall towards the front security desk.

"That's him!" she shouted. "That's the man!"

"Who?" Loren Adder said, bobbing and weaving like a pigeon.

"The man there. He's the one I saw!"

"You sure?" Adder shouted back, already starting to run after them.

The nurse jostled her glasses to cancel a glare and squinted into the distance. Then she went through the whole rigmarole again, but faster having practiced. "Yes, that's the man I saw on the street that night!"

"Hey you!" Adder shouted.

Aldo's heart began to beat in sync with the sound of Adder's footsteps coming after him down the hall. He was two beats away from both kinds of arrest—legal and cardiac—when Jesse suddenly broke rank. Jesse wheeled around just in time to wallop Adder as he reached them. The blow sent Adder stumbling into three bystanders who all collapsed in a heap. A woman dropped her briefcase, a man fainted. There were shouts. Someone went flying into the digiwall which shimmered in purple from the point of impact outwards. Adder got up and flew into Jesse. The impact knocked the box out of Jesse's hand and it went careening down the marble floor, lost its wrapper, and scuttled between a confusion of feet like a puck.

It hit the far wall and flipped over once.

Soon Jesse and Adder were in a desperate hand-to-hand struggle, a whirlwind of clenched fists and jutting knees. People waiting for the elevators were drawn into the melee, bodies yanked and shoved, a commotion that sent a shockwave through the crowd standing there. Someone bumped into someone else, who pushed a third, who made the nurse trip, who kicked the box into the potted plant.

And the box flipped over a second time.

When the cartoon fury had stopped spinning, Jesse's gun was drawn and so was Adder's. For a moment it seemed like there might be a good old-fashioned

high noon shootout in the lobby of the Urbana. In the very next moment, there was.

Loren Adder's whole life seemed to come into a happy focus in that moment. All those years of hoping and waiting. He dropped into the police stance he had learned in a websim, took aim at the holotarget of his dreams, and fired. Jesse dutifully went flying into one of the detectors in the lobby. There was an explosion of terror from the point of impact out to the far reaches of the crowd. To avoid the bullet, the blood, or even the sight, people dove to the ground. Others flattened themselves against the walls. And the box was kicked again. It bumped off a shoe, off the elevator door, slid to a corner, and flipped over a third time. Deep inside the box, a small steel ball obeyed the inexorable truths of gravity and circumstance; it dropped down a tiny shaft into a tiny recess. There it depressed a metal rod that, in turn, released a spring.

The drawer of the box popped open.

The bedlam in the lobby now compressed around the focal point of Jesse's body slumped against the digiwall, which was back to normal and inviting everyone to visit the near side of the Moon, where the earth always shines. The bystanders were recovering, getting their bearings, and pushing forward to see what had happened. Other guards were coming to the rescue. Even people in the street were starting to push their way in to see. Aldo ducked and bucked the onrush and found Loren Adder squatting over the body like a scavenger.

"Boy I really nailed him," Adder said.

"I always thought your gun was empty," Aldo said.

"It is now," he said, then asked the crowd to make room so the nurse could come closer.

"Are you sure that's the man?" Adder asked her. "I sure hope you're sure."

She looked at the face of the man lying on the floor, adjusted the prisms of her glasses, then looked directly at Aldo standing next to her and said, "I think so."

"You'd better be positive," Aldo said, kindly.

She looked again, saw a dead man who had been sacrificed for her suspicions, began to doubt her own certainty, but decided right then and there to shut the lid on things and save herself a whole hell of a lot of trouble.

"Yes. I'm positive," she said.

"Good," Adder said. "Stick around. We'll need you to make a statement when the cops get here."

The lobby was soon filled with blue uniforms and news teams and swatsuits by the time Aldo was able to elbow his way out of the pack of onlookers. He found

Victoria standing alone, shaking, simultaneously waiting for and avoiding an update.

"Is he...?" she asked.

"Oh yes. Very much so," he answered.

"Have you ever considered going into funeral work? You have a real knack for dead bodies."

"I'm hoping to overcome it. Too bad about Jesse. I guess."

"If you say so. But what if they start to really investigate this?"

"It won't matter."

"How do you know that?"

"There's enough evidence to suggest that Jesse killed Karkas. The witness just identified him in front of scores of people. They'll have the ransom note in Karkas' files which they can track back to Jesse."

"How can they do that?"

"He'll have his own digital copies. And anyway, just to be sure, that piece of paper that the box was wrapped in is a copy of Karkas' negotiations for the box. The late Jesse is now officially in possession of those."

"Will that work?"

"Believe me, I know data. It'll all add up much easier than trying to find someone else."

"You're sure?"

"According to the stats, I'm 93% positive."

"You know, Aldo, at first I thought you were a real pain in the ass. Just some weird control freak and all. But I'm starting to think that it might actually be a good thing. I may start organizing my own life."

"I'd be happy to help," Aldo said, trying to build on the good will.

"You've got my number," she said.

He watched her walk out the door, watched her calves flexing with each step, the muscles of her behind undulating under the skirt, the usual swoon. Like a songster watching the ocean, his head swayed with the rhythms of her hips as she went smoothly across the lobby, the only point of music in the noise. Then she stepped through the glare of the front entrance where she melted into liquid light. A fire flared within him but it was quickly doused by the tide of her departure. He knew that he would never call her.

"Aldo? Hello? Anyone home?" The voice was creeping in and he was suddenly aware that someone had been trying to get his attention. But when he whipped out his card, there was no call on it and he jumped when that someone poked him in the back.

"Cleo! What are you doing here?"

"I heard there was a commotion in the lobby. Did the redhead leave already? You'd better call her up pronto and tell her not to use the car anymore."

"The redhead," he repeated, thick as a brick.

"Yeah, the redhead. Victoria Conner. Tell her to leave the car where it is and forget about it."

"Forget about it," he said, not knowing why.

"Yes, because I had the ownership of her Shanghai changed."

"Her Shanghai," he said, not getting how she could even know about it.

Slowly, so that he could follow, Cleo explained what she had done and how and why.

"I had the ownership of her car, a Shanghai FCV, transferred from her over to this Kraznek guy. According to the Web, she sold it to him. He's now the owner of her car. As far as anyone knows, it's been his car for months. You see? So she can't go near the car anymore."

"The Kraznek guy," he said. None of this was getting through.

"Right. Isn't that smart?"

"It's *his* car," he repeated and wondered in his daze when Cleo had started working for the Motor Vehicle Bureau.

"See? It's perfect. It really ties the dead guy to the...you-know-what. And Kepler said the one thing no one ever questions is purchases. They're sacred. Aren't you proud of me?"

"The you-know-what," he echoed.

Maybe what she was saying did make sense in some parallel dimension, he thought, but in this one with its measly three, he had no idea why Cleo was talking about any of this.

"Right?" she asked, hoping for confirmation but only getting dimness back.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he finally managed.

"You forgot about that little detail. About the car. Eventually they could find it and it could always be traced back to her. So I had your friend Kepler hack into the Grid and transfer ownership of the car. So now she's off the hook. You too. No connection to the events of that night. But this Kraznek guy can be connected. Anyone in there...hell-oh?"

"Kepler," he said and could probably have continued to provide one-word repetitions all day but Cleo was getting fed up.

"Don't bother covering it up, Aldo. I know everything...or almost everything. You've gotten so screwed up with this that you probably forget that I have access to all the files on your desktop."

"I know that," he said, snapping out of it. "But you're only supposed to..."

"I know but I was worried about you. I knew you were in some kind of jam. So I tapped into your private files and kind of figured out what was going on."

"You did?"

"So there I was looking over all those lists you made trying to cover all this up and just getting more and more screwed up. And then I stopped and I said to myself...now what would Aldo do in a situation like this? Which is funny of course since you *were* in the situation. But anyway I asked myself how Aldo would neaten everything up. How would you tie up the loose ends? And then I thought that the car was a big fat loose end. It was the one thing that connected Victoria and you and Karkas."

"Yes, I guess that's true."

"And then I thought...what if it didn't belong to Victoria? Then there would be no way to connect her with the thing and that would protect you too. But if it *did* belong to Jesse James Kraznek, then he could have used it to dispose of the body. See?"

Had he worn glasses, Aldo would have taken them off, rubbed his eyes, cleaned the lenses, then put them back on again to get a clearer picture of things. But he didn't and he wasn't and he couldn't. "I'm afraid that I don't... quite...understand..."

"Look Aldo, you know how ever since you hired me you've been mooning after me and trying to catch me bending over and having all these adolescent sexual fantasies and all?"

"Well...I wouldn't..."

"In all that time, you know what I've been doing? I've been working. I've been doing my job."

"Naturally I...realize that..."

"And part of my job, a big part, is learning from you. Because I think the job we do is important. We don't just manage traffic, you know. What we do is to take massive terabytes of data coming in from all sources and organize it into controllable packets so that people who have no idea what's going on can do their jobs and actually feel a sense of accomplishment. You're the master of that and I'm trying to learn it from you."

"Thanks...but...I still don't..."

"So I just applied the same management skills you've been teaching me to your own personal lists. I know it may seem a little invasive but let's face it...you totally fucked up! You really needed help. So once I realized that you were in

trouble, I got into them and studied them and figured out what was going on pretty much and tried to tidy it all up. That was how I hit on the car gambit.”

“You...I...you...we...”

“Now when you get back upstairs I’ve got a real long list of tasks you have to wrap up by the end of the day or all hell will break loose. Plus you’ve got to call the redhead about the car. And also Kyla is expecting you to pick her up at the airport at seven tonight, which I am absolutely sure that you forgot about. Okay?”

She shrugged her shoulders and shifted her weight and waited for him to respond but he had nothing. She had changed right then and there. Transformed. He looked at her as he usually did but with a hint of melancholy this time thanks to the realization that she was no longer this cute young woman who could be the object of his affection. When he had not been watching she had become something much more significant than a sex object. She had become a colleague, one with a taste for the meticulous at that. Very rare. And he was not at all sure if that made her more or less desirable.

As the forces of complexity came into play, the crowd of people in the lobby moved and shifted unexpectedly. Cleo was pulled one way and Aldo pushed the other, and he could now see through the forest of legs. He noticed the box all the way down at the end of hall past the elevators, alone and neglected. Very smoothly so as not to attract attention, he walked over to the box and picked it up. The front end of it was extended now, like an open mouth. There was a small chamber inside lined with dark cloth. Aldo peered into this and felt around and found just what the law required. Not the law of luck or gravity, which are puny in the grand scheme of things. Not even the law of chaos, which trumps all others. But the great law, the one law, the law on which all of life depends...the law of irony. And based on that law, what Aldo found inside the box made perfect sense.

Absolutely nothing.

The box was completely empty. Nothing in there. Not a thing.

Zilch, nada, nil.

Had it all been for nothing then? Was nothing at the center of all that had happened, all the crosses and double crosses? At the center of fate even? Perhaps. So why then had Karkas gone to all the trouble—the secret purchase, the negotiations, the encounter at Victoria’s—for an empty box? In previous weeks the answer to that question would have been incomprehensible to the Aldo who lived by his adored order and stolid logic. But now that he understood how things *really* worked, how truly screwed up everything was, the answer was crystal clear.

Karkas had gone to the trouble simply because he wanted the box. He wanted it because he wanted it. And people would do anything to get what they wanted. Maybe the universe had a deep complex structure that was knowable through a grand calculation...but not if you threw human desire into the works. Then all bets were off and it was everyone for themselves. Long live chaos. There was a whole philosophy of existence in that brief idea, but Aldo was much too depleted to think about it.

The roof garden of the Urbana was as close to an island oasis as most city dwellers were likely to get. It was a three-acre Eden with lush Permalawn and perfect regened trees that could buck any climate. And because there were no other buildings to be seen in any direction, you could stand in the middle of it and get the sense that the garden was floating in a sea of air. The wide sky, the distant vista, the curve of the earth all around...just some of the reasons that Aldo never went there. It reminded him too much of the world outside the Grid, the messy world where chance made the decisions.

Still, with the lobby buzzing and his office yammering and the building all turvy, it was the only place he could think of to be alone. Once there, he walked to a line of low hedges that marked the edge of the roof and gazed out. On the other side of the bushes there was a sheer drop down and down to the street below. In his hand, he held the box that had caused all the trouble. He peered over the ledge and thought about tossing it, but given his recent karma he knew for sure that it would bean some unsuspecting bystander.

To the left he could see the Hudson River beginning down in New York Harbor. It swept past the Urbana and continued all the way up to the George Washington Bridge and beyond. He thought about going down to it, to the very spot where the mermaid was found, and simply and quietly dropping the box in. But maybe it would float.

As he considered all this, he ran his finger idly through the maze of the svasti. Then he recalled one of the stories he had read while doing his research. It was a story about Ganesa, the remover of obstacles, the god of wisdom and prudence, the scribe of the *Mahabharata*. It was one of dozens of tales that sought to explain how Ganesa came to have the head of an elephant. In this version, Shiva was approached by other gods and sages. They were concerned that there was no obstacle to the performance of bad deeds in the world. They wished Shiva to create a being that would oppose the commission of sins. Shiva pondered this request. Then he turned to his consort Parvati and a radiant youth of great beauty sprang forth from his gaze. But Parvati was jealous of her husband's new son and

she cursed him to be ugly and have a potbelly and an elephant's head. Shiva countered by proclaiming him Ganesa, the lord of success and failure. So that among the people of the world with their endless strivings and tryings, his son, despite his cursed appearance, would be always and forever invoked.

Thus do people go on with hope in spite of their bad deeds.

Aldo Weeks did not, of course, believe in any of this. He was not superstitious, not religious. He was no mythologist and least of all a seeker. He was a modern man, a technological man, a tapscreener and data manager. Man of his time and place in which all problems had solutions and all mysteries might be explained. Citizen of the world of computation. Nonetheless he closed the drawer of the box as carefully as he might refold the wings of a butterfly. And then he turned it end on end to lose the ball in the maze. He even whispered the name 'Ganesa' as he did this. And he thought that he might keep the box—this chaos box—closed with its secret intact and not tell anyone about it. Thought that perhaps in some illogical way this silent treasure of nothing at all could become an inspiration for him. Whatever that might mean.

Why not, he thought, it can't hurt.

In the elevator he held his card and checked his lists for what to do next. And now a new and unfamiliar urge swelled within him. Inspired by the chaos box perhaps, or just by the events of the past week. He thought of deleting it all. Yes, every bit of it. All the notes, the charts, the schedules, everything. He thought of starting all over again with a new Aldo. No restrictions, no lists. A life of impromptu escapades, of impulse and serendipity. Prayers to Ganesa for new ventures. A new life of cast your fate to the wind, of take a chance, of go with the flow. A life of seat of your pants, live for the moment, do or die exploration. Yes, he thought, that was the way to negotiate the disorder. By adventure not agenda. To boldly go! To live free or die! Yes, that was it!

And the first act of this new Aldo Weeks would be the most dynamic, most liberating of all. The most dramatic gesture he could imagine. He would immediately get rid of all lists.

Get Rid Of All Lists!

And he carefully put that down under Things To Do For Monday.

There are cameras at every turn, smart buildings that know all about you, virtual realities that overcome real ones. And there is instant access to all of it through a computer the size of a credit card.

The year is 2040 and constant monitoring is the price you pay for being connected. But can you get away with murder in such a world?

That is the problem facing data maven and control freak Aldo Weeks when a single lapse in judgment plunges him into unknown terrain. First there is a midnight tryst with an exotic redhead. Then a murderous duet with a madman. As he tries to outwit the vast net of information, he encounters a strange puzzle box at the center of the whole affair, a box of chaos that might just hold the key to how complexity rules the universe.

Alan Robbins is an award-winning writer, graphic artist, and teacher. He is the author of numerous mystery, puzzle, and humor books.

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