

## 5. ANOTHER ONE

The package is in a brown envelope. I open it up. It's a CD. I put it in my computer. It contains a single file. It just seems gibberish. Someone else can make sense of it.

I should go back to Atlanta. I've got what I came here for. But I have to take a plane from Reno to Denver. I drive to Reno and leave the car at the airport.

In Denver, I am supposed to wait for a client.

"Does this have something to do with the package?"

"Not at all. I thought that you were briefed before you left."

I am talking to a new superior. He is assuming too much.

"I was never even told you about Denver. Now you're acting as if I know."

"Someone should have talked to you before you left."

"Do you want me to send the information in the package?"

"We'll deal with it when you get back. There's no hurry for it."

No hurry. They need to make up their minds. One minute I'm going to lose my job if they don't get it from me. The next they're totally nonchalant. These people are vultures sucking at my rotting corpse. I hate this job.

I feel as if it's a good time to continue my writing. I feel inspired. My time with Aaron has taught me so much. I need to take advantage of the lesson.

Jenny's help has been invaluable. She help me find the package. I took the disk from Aaron and headed for Denver.

"I want to meet you in Denver."

"I couldn't have done this without your help. But I'm married. I told you that."

"What about the things that we did together?"

"Sometimes, things happen when you're away from home. You have to understand that."

"I really don't understand. And I don't want to deal with it like this. But there's little that I can do."

"I'm glad that you can see it from my point of view."

"Why did you sleep with me? Did you just want me to help you?"

"I thought that you helped me because you wanted to. And you're irresistible. I loved being with you."

"Is that all that you can say? That seems pretty pathetic."

"I wish that I could blame it on someone. Aaron. Ariel. I'm just a loser. I think that's why things are fucking up with Ariel. If she just knew the half of it."

08 FF 0F 04 08 0F 01 01 FF

NAME = MAIDEN NAME

I look at the file again. I work to makes sense of these details. The bank account, the documents, the payments, the characters, the intrigues. I can hear crying in the night.

"Are you here to get something from me?"

"You have the files."

ENCOUNTER

FILES: ANOTHER SERIES

NOT ARIEL: 08

EVERYTHING OUT OF THIS WORLD: FF

BANK ACCOUNT: 0F

THE STORY: 04 08 0F

“It’s already bad enough with Ariel.”

“Everything is hidden. Even the hidden is more hidden.”

01 01

The maid is cleaning the hotel room in Dallas. She finds the package. She decides to hang on to it.

“Did you find anything in the room today, Angel?”

“Not at all,” she tells her supervisor.

“Someone left a brown manila envelope in a room. Tell me if you find it.”

Later on she calls her contact.

“This is Angel. I’ve got that envelope for you.”

“This is worth a lot of money. Hold on to it.”

The package is put into a safety deposit box in Denver. The only trouble is getting it out.

“Walter, you just have to figure out how Ariel got all that money in that account. If you have her information, we can get it out for you.”

Ralph works in a bank. I listen to him detail a plan to get the money.

“Ariel thinks that she’s been clever. We’ve been onto her all this time.”

1 ENCOUNTER WITH AARON

2 THE PACKAGE

3 JENNY’S HELP

4 ARIEL’S DEMAND

5 THE DIRECTOR’S REACTION

6 DESPERATION

7 THE CUTTING

8 PORTRAIT GALLERY

9 WEDDING PICTURE

10 THE SWITCH

11 THE ACCOMPLICE

12 THE PURSUIT

13 DISGUISE

14 POSITIVE ID

15 THE TREATMENT

16 MEETING MR. FISHER

“Walter Aaronovitch is our undercover man. We’ll get his wife to pretend to be Ariel so that we can get the money out of her account.”

“How did she get all that money?”

“She didn’t save it.”

“If they find out, we’re going to need someone to blame.”

“Blame that teller, Ralph.”

I put together the full story.

“Ariel Evangeline moves to Atlanta from somewhere in Idaho. She gets a job in the

accounting department. She embezzles money from the company and shifts it into a bank account in Denver. Walter tracks her down. He is the company investigator.”

“You can turn me in if you like, Walter. But you’re never going to get your money unless you help me.”

“Why should I help you? You’re already guilty.”

“I can give you a cut.”

She’s this mix of good and bad, angel and devil.

“Walter, this is Angel. You’ve sent me some of that new story. All this stuff with the neighbor is so cliché.”

“It’s a sign of our times.”

“I don’t care. I’d expect something more original from you.”

“What about the twist in Denver?”

“I don’t see it yet.”

I haven’t told her enough to make sense of things. But I am really getting the hang of the story. I have a plan. And enough details to carry it through. I am still organizing the fine points.

“Walter, I want my cut or you’re going to have to kiss the money good by.”

“Am I the last piece in the puzzle? You knew that I’d come looking for you. You just needed to buy me off.”

“We could move to another city. Start our lives over again.”

She looks appealing. She is no longer the mousy little girl at Idaho State. She has learned how to exude glamor from every pore. Her muscles are taut. Her face gives off the confidence that she feels inside. She is somewhat ruthless. She’d kill Walter if she had to. She is not going to let him turn her in. Not this deep into the plan.

“I’m not working alone, Ariel.”

“But you have it all worked out. You figured out what I did. You tracked me down. Now you can make us both disappear.”

“There’s one guy there who’s better than me. He’ll realize what happened. He will never give up.”

Ariel doesn’t give up either. Her seduction is precise. Like her body, nothing is wasted on the frivolous. Every step in her plan is worked out.

“You like it, Walter.”

She comes out of the shower in a towel. He peels it off her until she is standing there before him naked. She has whetted his appetite. He wonders how he can have it both ways. She is a ready scapegoat. But if she gets taken without her money, she will sing to the authorities. How can he have it both ways? How can he get her to shut up. He has to let her get away. But he has to get the money first. That will be her inducement to silence, her freedom. If she talks, she’ll just lead the cops to her whereabouts.

He know that if she fails and is not captured, she will have to do it again. She feels that hunger. She loves the game. She loves to hide in plain sight. She would be a lovely accomplice. But she is a viper. She would only turn on those that she loves. This is the lesson that he has learned through this whole investigation.

She has been looking for a way out all along. How to get money flowing to her account without having to work for it. She has found the perfect method. She could keep doing this

forever. A new face, a new fortune.

With Walter, she realizes how easy it is to dupe someone else into taking the fall. Even if she messes this up, she will make sure that all the blame falls on Walter.

“Angel, I’ve got more stuff for you.”

“Email it to me, and I’ll look it over on the weekend.”

“I’m running out of time. I need you to look at it immediately.”

“There really is no time. Not the way things are going now.”

“Couldn’t you take a peek at it.”

“You need to offer me more motivation. Describe her face. I want to see Ariel’s face.”

“Angel, I’m doing the best that I can.”

“That might not be good enough.”

If Ralph gets blamed for the embezzlement scheme, he is going to be pretty pissed. He needs someone to take it out on. The only person who could have been behind it was Walter Aaronovitch. It is certainly his doing.”

“They’re clever. It would have been too obvious to have recruited the bank president. They needed someone with power. A lesser officer. Walter was perfect.”

“Does he have access to all the transaction codes?”

“Of course he does. We also helped him get some codes that were only available to the president and the other VP. You have to be clever.”

“So how did the find out?”

“External audit.”

“It’s going to be pretty hard to blame it on a teller. He really had no access.”

“Ralph is a computer expert. He knows all the back doors.”

Ralph has a theory.

“All the information that we use is like a fingerprint. It is our digital image. It forms a consistent pattern as a whole. If you crack that code, you can assume another person’s identity. No amount of encryption can overcome the profile. Even the escape routes are mapped one for one.”

Ralph has provided the method for his own demise. He has offered the perfect digital representation for himself as thief.

“I think it has something to do with his aspirations.”

“He knows that he will never advance fast enough at the bank. This is his only route to success.”

“So why hasn’t he tried this on his own. He could break every code in the bank. Maybe even go further. Tap the Federal Reserve.”

“He believes in playing by the rules. He thinks that he will eventually get his reward.”

“He really is a dreamer.”

“He’s a joke. We’re going to really fuck over the little man. He almost deserves it for not being more ambitious.”

“That’s the American way. The spider gets the fly every time.”

“It’s all about the red tape. Just twist it around his little body.”

Nameless voices in the night plotting to bring down a little man. It is a sad commentary.

“Why don’t you have Ariel contact Ralph?”

“He’s the fall guy. We want no contact with him whatsoever. No trail at all!”

I get a phone call that night.

“Walter, I’ve found Ariel.”

“Who is this?”

“That’s not important. She’s in Phoenix. You’ve got to get a flight down here before she decides to take off.”

“Has she got the money?”

“I don’t know. I think so.”

I have to follow up the lead. I know that it all sounds pretty cracked.

Walter is able to track down Ariel in Phoenix.

“How did you find me?”

You’re good at doing the only thing that you’ve ever been good at. Fucking with people’s minds.”

“So what!”

“It sort of gets a reputation.”

“Phoenix is a big town.”

“You’re a pretty big tease.”

“I didn’t know that the word spread like wildfire. Besides, you’re the sort who could use a little push.

I’ve been in Phoenix for two weeks already. I’ve seen her around the restaurant. She is pleasant to me. We talk now and then.

“See that guy over there. I think that his name is Walter. He’s one of my customers.”

“What do you do?”

“I work in a massage parlor. Guys come in to watch us in bikinis. It gets them a little excited. And we give them hand job. They come into a paper towel. We clean them off and send them on their way.”

“Would you feel weird if I came in?”

“You seem like a normal guy. You don’t even have to come in. I’d give you a treat. I could do you for free.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. At my place in your car.”

“At work, do you do anything else for these guys?”

“They ask for it. They offer me more money. But I won’t. Just a little shake and bake.”

“I didn’t know that you did anything like that.”

“I’m not a whore. They can’t touch me or anything.”

“For some guys, it’s pretty much the same thing.”

Things start messing up. Ralph is getting out of control.

“Ralph wants his cut.”

“You’re going to have to kill him, Angel!”

“I don’t think that I can do it.”

“If you don’t do it, its going to come back to haunt us.”

The President of the bank is already upset. He points to Ralph.

“Look at him. You can see it in his face. He’s prone to anger. You’ve got to get rid of

him.”

“Ralph’s really done nothing wrong.”

“He’s going to be a problem at this branch.

“Walter, you need to show his frustration. How he lets it build. *He grits his teeth. The sweat forms on his brow. It’s not that hot, but he feels as if someone has turned off the air conditioner.*”

Angel tries to guide me through my rewrite.

“You have to get him mad over something small.”

“That was the intention all along. We took one of his most trusted customers. Jill Damon. We messed with her account. But we made sure that there was nothing that would show the account was in error. This would really mess with his head.”

Ralph looks down at his computer, “The error isn’t showing here. You made an over draft on your account.”

“I deposited the money on Saturday.”

“It was the weekend. It wouldn’t have gone through.”

“It’s Wednesday today.”

“What’s wrong with your system? It’s your fucking fault.”

“You don’t have to swear at me, mam.

“You’re not helping. You always have before. What is wrong?”

They look at the incident as a point of disfavor for Ralph.

“We’re going to have to write you up, Ralph. You’re not going to lose your job. *Not yet!* But you need to correct the problem if you want to stay here.”

It is only going to get worse. After a series of similar occurrences, he is let go. All the incidents are sets ups. Everything is prearranged to condemn Ralph.

“I feel like someone’s got it in for me.”

“Someone does!”

There’s this couple living in there car.

“I’ve got a credit car. I’m going to keep going until I run up to my limit.”

“Are you working?”

“Just logging miles. I’ve been traveling?”

Even though he is blind-folded, Ralph is trying to figure out where he is. He’s sure that he’s near a body of water. He can feel the mist on his face, and there is a zest in the breeze. He still wonder what they want from him. What information does he have to give them. He’s just a bank clerk.

They lead him indoors. It feels musty and humid indoors. He feels closed in.

“Ralph, we know that you owe almost a hundred thousand dollars in credit card bills. You’re barely making ends meet.”

“Who are you?”

“That really isn’t important. Just call us your life line. You’re the only hope that you have.”

“I really don’t want to do anything illegal.”

“You really have no choice.”

“So what is this about?”

“We need you to help with an operation at the bank. We know how you can get into the computers. How you can bypass all the security codes. You’re going to be transferring money to an account.”

“They’ll trace the transaction.”

“Not if you do it right. Distribute it over bunch of accounts.”

“All someone has to do is notice a faulty transaction.”

“You know how to hide that. Just add a little something small to transactions that are already going through. So no one will question the difference.”

“Some people monitor their money to the penny. And there’s programs to check that kind of thing.”

“You’ll find a way to get around all that.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“You’ll get all your debt erased.”

“That’s really not enough.”

“That’s a lot Ralph.”

“If I don’t get a bigger cut, there’s really nothing in it for me.”

“If you accept what you’re going to get, you can prevent from going to jail or worse.”

“Why did you do it like this? Why did you kidnap me.”

“We just had to be sure of things.”

Ralph realizes that he has no choice. Even though they have been secretive, he already knows too much. If they effect their plan with someone else, he will catch on. So he has become expendable.

“We can do what we want. We have one of the VP’s working with us. But someone has to take care of Ralph.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He’s the only person meticulous enough at that bank to catch on.”

“The next thing that you’re going to do is start killing customers.

“When it’s about twenty million dollars, things get serious.”

“I only got five hundred thousand for that book that they made into a movie.”

“Was it worth it?”

“Not when I see how easy this is.”

“It’s not as easy as it seems. We’ve been planning this for months.”

“I just hope that you’ve thought about all the details.”

The Director of the company has been very cautious about effecting his plan. But things are a mess. The whole debacle with the lost package and Walter’s inability to recover it has put him at incredible risk.

His Security Chief has a wealth of experience in making things right. And he plans to apply his skill to just that sort of thing. He just thinks that the Director has gone overboard.

“Ariel is still going to have to go in there to pick up the money.”

“I thought that you were going to use a wire transfer.”

“That’s one transaction too many.” He is very firm with his subordinate. The Security Chief wonders if the Director is an unneeded luxury. How could he carry out this operation in a more favorable way for himself. For the time being, he decides to go along.

“Have you heard that they promoted Walter to head of Security?”

“No, I didn’t realize that.”

“I think that it was the extra computer training that he got.”

“Don’t forget that Aaron needs help.”

“He needs a right hand man. Someone to do his dirty work.”

“I thought that was Angel’s job.”

“I’m having a lot of trouble figuring out who’s who.”

“Ralph, look in a mirror. Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“Since they made you Aaron’s assistant, things have started to change at this company.”

“Some people are on the way up.”

“And others just hang around on the fringes of things.”

“That’s why we need to keep track of all the shit that’s going down here. Including that thing that they’re doing with the bank.”

“Jenny, how did you find out about that.”

“I’m the assistant to the Director. I know more than he does.”

“We could transfer all that cash into our accounts.”

“And then just disappear completely.”

“They’d come after us.”

“Not if they thought we were dead. We just need to find two bodies.”

“That kind of stuff works in the movies.”

BEYOND RECOGNITION

DISFIGURED

INCINERATED

NOT RECOGNIZED

*There was a car crash yesterday!*

1	live	<b>ENTER ACCOUNT CODE</b>
10	expense	<b>PET’S NAME</b>
11	save	<b>SECURITY CODE</b>
100	purchase	<b>TRANSACTION</b>
101	invest	<b>AMOUNT</b>
110	resell	<b>SUBMIT</b>
111	interest	<b>HANDSHAKE</b>
1000	dispose	<b>CONFIRMATION</b>
1001	estate	<b>REPEAT</b>
1010	insure	<b>COUNTER</b>
1011	market value	<b>STOP</b>
1100	speculation	<b>TOTAL</b>
1101	profit	<b>DISPLAY</b>
1110	franchise	<b>SUBMIT</b>
1111	confirm	<b>FINAL</b>

“You’ve taken my money and my time. I swear that I’m going to get it all back.”

“Are you following this?”

“I’m not kidding. You can’t fuck with someone, and not have them do something in return.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Ralph is looking frustrated. He’s feeling the heat of the room even though it is quite comfortable.

“What can you do for me?”

“I really can’t do a thing?”

“You’re going to have to do if you don’t want something bad to happen.”

“Something bad already is happening. Ralph, get the fuck out of here.”

“Who the fuck do you think that you are?”

“I’m the President of this branch.”

“Big fucking deal! You act like you print the money yourself.”

He needs to get Ralph out of there as soon as he can. Ralph needed to have handled his problem with the grievance committee. Now it is too late.

“Everyone just looks at me as if I’m some kind of freak.”

They all are pretty perceptive if that’s the case.

The limousine pull up for Mr. Fisher.

“I hear the he has an oxygen cannister in there.”

“He’s got some kind of weird disease. He was healthy as a marathon runner a few weeks ago.”

“I didn’t know that it was his limo. I thought that there was a celebrity inside.”

“Bill Fisher is a celebrity.”

I get a call from Bill Fisher.

“Walter, I emailed you before about those files. Now you’ve just gone off and written more. You’re plagiarizing my work. It’s all in those files. You’ve added another one to the first. This is criminal.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. The files are just gibberish.”

“They’re the formula for my new novel.”

“If they are, I can’t make sense of it.”

“But you’re writing this novel that is exactly the same as mine. Except, yours is all disorganized. You should have never seen those files. They were meant for my publisher. “

*I think that I did something really fucked up. Really, really, really, bad.*

“That stuff looks so mysterious on the page. Then it becomes just all cliched on the screen.”

“There’s two sides to the story. The guilty side, and the side that doesn’t know that it is guilty.”

“That’s Ariel and Ralph.”

“They haven’t done anything.”

“They will. I’m giving her just enough rope to hang herself, and then BOOM!”

“What are you going to do next, Walter? Hang her for real.”

“It’s just a story.”

“I can’t make heads or tails out of it. It makes no sense whatsoever.”

“It will when I catch her trying to clean out my bank account.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She’s just going to go off on her own.”

“It’s getting more and more crazed all the time.”

“It’s too crazy to follow.”

I wonder if Fisher is playing a joke on me. Perhaps he wants me to finish the novel for him. All of it is making sense to me that way. Just that way.

“I’m not a lunatic. I just have to do some bizarre thing if I want it all to make sense for me.”

“It’s not supposed to make sense. It never does. That’s the feeling of wanting to fuck the world.”

“Or to fuck the world over.”

“Or fuck the world over, over and over again.”

“Or drive a car off a cliff.”

“With another body inside made to look like me.”

“That’s a tired story.”

“I have a new variation. One of the bodies is you, Mr. Fisher.”

“No, it’s you, Mr. Fisher.”

There is someone out there trying to mess with me. I am sure that it is Mr. Fisher. And he is trying to get me to stop writing. This isn’t because it’s his story. It’s his fear that I am going to find out something important.

Fisher calls Aaron.

“That little prick Walter won’t stop. I asked him to investigate. Now he’s taking on things by himself. I can smell a double cross.”

“Bill, I’m too sick to think about it today. Walter came by here. He was looking for the disk. I told him that I sent it back. You got it back?”

“I haven’t seen it.”

“You told him that he’d get fired if he didn’t get it back.”

“I’m going to fire him anyway.”

“He’ll take you to court.”

“His sales are off. There’s nothing that he can do to stop me.”

“He knows more than he’s letting on. I told him to create the files himself. He’s going to do that. When he does, he’ll realize that you’ve been screwing with him all along. He’ll come after you, Mr. Fisher.”

“He won’t come after me because there is no one to come after. I’m a phantom. A made up identity. And I’ll just disappear back into my real self.”

“You’re the Director of the company.”

“And you’ll take over for me.”

“I’ll have to kill you if I take over.”

“My life is too good for you to do something like that. The company is going down, but I’m taking my shares with me before it does.”

“Is this a warning?”

“The company was only a shell. We’ve been connected to something bigger all along.”

“The bank?”

I have been writing for hours. I am almost able to reconstruct the missing files. How will they take it at the company when I do this?

“Walter, you needed to bring in the files last week.”

“I was here, and you said that it wasn’t important.”

“But it was.”

I have to find Mr. Fisher before this all spirals out of control. I have followed his lead. I have been a dutiful ghost writer. He needs to send me more files so that I can align everything. I call Ariel. She is not in. I wonder where she is.

I can finish another chapter and send it on to Angel. She will edit and then forward it to Mr. Fisher. If he likes it, then I can move on to the next. Sometimes I have written way ahead of myself. Mr. Fisher makes me redo the edited chapter, and I have to scrap everything that follows.

“Ralph is already dead in this chapter. You can’t have him getting together with Ariel in Phoenix.”

“That is the beauty of it all. He fakes his own death.”

“But he gets caught doing it. His double doesn’t have a good likeness.”

I have the picture on my mirror. I am trying to match my face to the image. It is difficult rearranging myself. I do what I can.

“Bill, it’s all in a day’s work.”