



CHAPTER 24

KNOT CUTTING

Wire up the fingernail. Ouch. The thought of it was killing me but the actuality was causing Gupta to grit his teeth hard and suck in air. He was sitting on a piano stool clutching one hand with the other. A little drop of blood dripped from underneath his left fourth finger nail where a piano wire had abruptly entered.

It was late afternoon. Techo, Gupta, and I had been combing through Ross's ruined pianos—the ones in his back yard, the one inside his house, and lastly here the one at the studio where he's working on the two quite different experimental and tango CDs. I listen to Ross playing a piano accordion through the double pane glass. There's an engineer at a mixing console. They've been in the control room for a while. There's no one else here. They're intently listening to the tape to see what they think. The lovely tune was muffled, distant, no louder than Gupta's heavy breathing. I know this song

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and whisper so to Gupta. It's *El Desbande* by Astor Piazzolla, the great Argentine tango composer. Ross played it for us at his home—beautifully. I'm sitting right next to his accordion. They're not looking out here into the studio though. They're concentrating on the recording. They don't even know we're here—or that we were in his house. I figure it's better to break and enter in secret than to involve him in this somewhat extra-legal venture. He's a Zen teacher and musician with a reputation that might be tainted by association with riffraff like us—especially if this thing blows up. Anyway, we didn't find anything.

"Maybe we should go to the sheep station at Cue," I said as we sneaked toward the exit. "We'd have to fly. There's no time to drive."

"No. Enough," whispered Gupta fiercely. "That song—*El Desbande* means we should disband or rush away—not from each other but from the course of action we're taking. And this is a sign," he said holding up his finger. "It says no. No sticking your hands in pianos. No flying. No driving. We've got to get to the end of the treasure hunt and find Mindy."

"Well, that's the ring finger. It's a sign that you're having a problem with your love life. Have you considered counseling?"

"Oh boy are you psychic," he said. "No, I mean it. No more. No more running around."

"He's right," said Techo.

We walked out of the recording studio unnoticed and went around the corner to Techo's Chevy.

"Okay. I agree," I said. "Anyway, there was one clue in a ruined piano and that's probably all there will be. We just spent a couple of hours proving that. Cue's too far. But to review: *What started on cue by the first sign of the rise, flew to the let-down kingdom, and now in those bowels pecked, it hides where all the kings men are at loss.* The whole thing just means to look in a ruined piano somehow connected to Ross," I said.

"Or maybe it means we're sure to be at a loss in figur-

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ing out,” said Gupta.

“So okay. It’ll lead to... to something else. So it’ll take a fresh approach, an unexpected definition... or something.”

“Something like something’s wrong,” said Gupta. “We’ve got to take a radical turn.”

“Cut through the Gideon Knot,” I said.

“Cut through the Gordian Knot,” Techo corrected.

“Oh. Yeah—let’s channel Alexander the Great,” I said, “and swing a sword right through this convoluted mess. I think Fenster would appreciate that.”

“What?! You disgust me,” Gupta said. “Speaking of that man with any degree of respect or sympathy—like you were trying to please him.”

“We do want to please him,” I said. “He’s got something—someone—we want. Remember?”

“I’d rather just take her from him.”

“That may happen, but until then, try ‘please’. Thanks would be even better.”

“Thanks!? You’re nuts.”

“Mindy first, revenge second. Getting Mindy will be the best revenge. Didn’t your mother teach you to say ‘please’ to get things? Now just visualize Mindy back and, following the way of Shinran, say ‘thank you’ and our collective unconscious or subconscious or something will find her.”

“Jeez. You’re a religious fanatic. Let’s go,” he said shaking his head.

Back at Mindy’s. Techo’s at her computer.

“The submarine clue indicated the treasure hunt has loops, at least one loop, that takes us out of our way and brings us back to some point we’ve already been,” I said. “So what else would that riddle lead to that isn’t 650 kilometers away?”

“There’s no time to keep doing this,” Gupta said.

“Let’s take a break and pray for something different to occur to us,” I said.

“Oh no,” said Gupta, “more prayers.”

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“Maybe Samo and the others have come up with something,” Techo said. “He’s supposed to call soon.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Techo—I want to check my email, okay?”

“Just don’t write anything you wouldn’t tell Fenster,” he said.

“I can’t think of anything they’d discover by me going online from here. I could even write them notes.”

“Yeah,” said Gupta. “Tell them to go cram it.”

“First I must log on to the web site of my ISP.”

“ISP?” Gupta puzzled. “Let’s see—sounds like what the little round green thing in the pod answered when asked ‘Who is you?’ ‘ISP.’”

“Internet Service Provider,” I said, “is another less charming meaning.”

Techo moved over. I sat down at the McIntosh, went on the Internet, logged on to Sonic.net’s web site, and looked at my in-box. “It’s a miracle! It worked! Thanks Techo, this is beautiful. There are only a few messages and no spam!”

“What are you talking about,” asked Gupta.

“Techo told me to get a new email address and put an auto response on my old one that said to please resend your message to the new one. I was getting sixty spam a day. Spam doesn’t read the forwarding message. Yea!”

“Neat,” said Gupta. “But you really want to read your email now?”

“Hmm—nothing I need to read now. I’ll get back to them. I got another idea.” I Googled Ross Bolleter. “Ah, there’s a fine-looking photo of him in his Zen robes. I looked around for a while and asked Techo, “What’s that web site you worked on you said had stuff about Ross on it?”

“Yeah. Here.” He leaned over me and typed the address in.

“See anything here that might help? Maybe something in that riddle that bounces off something in here?” I said. “How about *in the bowels?*”

“What about it meaning ‘in the vowels’,” said Gupta.

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“Yeah, could be pecking in the vowels but I still see it as the bowels, the innards of the ruined piano. Hey, there are ruined piano images on this site,” I said. “Any interior views?”

“This photo shows the insides well,” Techo said leaning down and putting his hand on the cursor. “You can see how screwed up some of the piano keys are and how the strings and action are fallen apart in there.” He moved his cursor over the spot he was talking about. “Hey! What’s that?”

“What?” I asked.

“A hot spot. The cursor arrow changed to a hand indicating a link in there.”

“So what?” Gupta asked.

“So—I didn’t put any links there.”

“How about clicking on it?” Gupta said.

Techo’s mobile rang. Samo reporting in. He, Gelar, and Frannie had been scoping out some businesses associated with Fenster in the area. Samo was going through records and notes, talking to cop friends, trying to figure out what property might be tied to Fenster through other names. Frannie was keeping an eye on a shop for women’s clothing, browsing, going around back.

Gelar had been checking out a funeral home. Techo recognized the name—Amenity. I’d heard that name at Fenster’s place—one of the Goony Twins mentioned taking Gupta’s and my corpses to Amenity, an association that helped it to stick in memory. Samo said there were three branches of Fenster-owned Amenity Funeral Homes in WA—one here in Perth, one in Freo, and one in Dunsborough. Samo had some buddies keeping their eyes on the latter two—an ex-cop at one and an ex-con at the other. Gelar said Fenster had been in his office at the Perth site for a few hours. Techo said he’d done some work for a church that was next door to the Perth Amenity—set up their computer system, did their web site, and fixed up a big digital marquee in

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front to announce the Good News for everyone driving by. He said it's out by the airport.

I told Samo I had nothing to add other than to say we were still on an untamed dodo hunt but that we'd sort of given up running around though I didn't know what else we could do. I updated him on what was happening with our dead ends. He was clueless too. We agreed to check in with each other in a couple of hours.

Back to the computer. With Gupta and me looking on, Techo hit the link in the ruined piano image. It opened to the site for—oh my gosh—for The Maze.

"Why would that be here?" Techo said. "Someone planted a pop-up that goes to an amusement park site?"

"Techo, that's the place that Mindy took us to on our first day here."

Perplexed, we looked on. It was advertising a new maze, a seventh one that would be open soon, a special maze for "our foreign guests." I told Techo to try it out and it went to a page that said, "This maze site under construction. Take a nap and come back in an hour."

"What the hell is that about?" I said. I scrolled down for a phone number.

"That's odd," said Gupta. "But let's check on this."

Gupta called and asked if the new maze was open. "Maybe we should go there," he said waiting for an answer.

"What new maze?" the woman on the phone finally said. I could hear her voice.

Gupta told her about the seventh maze on their web site and she went away again and came back and said that their web site only promotes their six mazes.

"What the heck?" Gupta said after he'd hung up.

"Ditto," I said.

"Take their advice," said Techo. "You look beat."

"Whose advice?" I asked.

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“Whoever’s talkin’ to you through the computer. They told you to take a nap for an hour. Good advice. You’re both a little delirious. Rest up for a while. Let me look into this.”

“I don’t like them telling me what to do, but I can sleep,” said Gupta plopping down on the couch.

“Me too.” I reclined on the floor with a cushion under my head.

“Try the bedroom,” said Techo.

“Too far,” I said and was gone. I can sleep anywhere no trouble—a talent I’ve always had, and which was enhanced by sitting long hours of meditation.

An hour later cat nap over. Gupta and I got up and sipped from cups of strong tea Techo had brewed. Darjeeling with lemon. Techo said while we were sleeping he looked at the actual site of The Maze and it indeed has no seventh maze.

“The way this looks to me is that Fenster’s tech guy...”

“Sid from Sydney,” I said.

“...just copied their site, added the seventh maze ad to it and gave it a new temporary address with a link from Ross’s ruined piano innards here—hacking it just for you.”

“That’s kind of him,” I said. “But the seventh maze just says ‘under construction.’”

“That was an hour ago. I think when we went there it hit an alarm on their end. Look at it now.”

There’s a blue screen with a strange phrase on it: *Beneficials of the lemon you want*, it reads. Below were six empty squares in two groups of three.

“It’s the password to get in,” said Techo. “Six characters.”

“I don’t want a lemon,” said Gupta. “Except the lemon in my tea. Hey! They don’t know about *it* do they? Come on—tell me that’s a coincidence.”

“It’s a coincidence,” said Techo.

“Or you’re working for Fenster.”

“They paid me to put the lemon in your tea. You caught me.”

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“They paid me not to tell you Gupta,” I said. “But they said I could mention it in jest like I’m doing right now to further divert your suspicion.”

“Stop it or I’ll have to be straight-jacketed! I want this to end. I want Mindy back.”

“And what’s Mindy?” said Techo.

“Trouble,” Said Gupta.

“What else?”

“I don’t know...a girl?”

“She’s a woman,” said Techo.

“Okay. For once we can say woman.”

“What are we looking for?”

“Tell me.”

“A woman. But this is plural,” Techo said.

“Lemon women,” said Gupta.

“Women,” I repeat. “*Beneficials of the women you want.* Need two sets of three letters each.”

“Big tit?” said Gupta. “That fits.”

Techo tried it and failed.

“Doesn’t sound like Fenster to me,” I said. “I think he’s a mite prudish—despite his porno biz.”

“Big fun?” Gupta continued. Didn’t work.

“How about beneficials rhymes with... sacrificials,” said Gupta.

“I don’t care for that,” I said.

“I don’t either,” said Gupta.

“Beneficial initials of the women you want,” suggested Techo.

“Initials of the women you want!” I said excitedly. “That’s what we’re to put in the squares below.”

A call to Gelar with Samo’s help got Mindy’s middle name. Alice. “Melinda Alice Waters. Or Dugan. MAD,” said Gupta. “Sounds right. More than MAW. I’m mad about her and mad at her and she’s mad as a hatter if that matters.”

We added Frannie’s initials forwards and backwards with both sets for Mindy but couldn’t get anywhere.

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“What other woman do we want?” I said. “What about that stewardess, Gupta?”

“Just know her first name. Uh—and I forgot it. What about your Malaysian friend.”

“I don’t think so.”

“What’s that story you’re working on?” asked Gupta.

“I’m not working on any story.”

“About your devoted dog who should be reborn as a woman?”

“Lola! Oh. She doesn’t have three initials. With my last name it would be two.”

We tried a few combos. Nope.

“What’s the name of the story again?” Gupta said.

“It was just a joke, a curious idea.”

“You mentioned it in an email?”

“Maybe.”

“Okay the name of the story in the joke?”

“Lola, Come to Me as a Woman.”

“Try Lola as woman, LAW” said Gupta.

Techo writes LAW MAD. It doesn’t work. He tries LAW MAW. Nope. He reverses it. MAW LAW. MAD LAW.

Eureka! Flashing across the screen are the words, “Welcome Pilgrims! Do come in!”