

Wavemaker

by

Ben Slythe

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

Chapter 1

They still saw themselves as sailors, he thought disgustedly. They'd adopted the mannerisms of an earlier age to signify that they were different, somehow better. They worked on the water, not on land. These two were alleged engineers. They wore blue suits, perhaps the same colour as real engineers wore, but these were tailored, three piece, Italian, maybe. Korean more likely. They worked in a spotless control room, operating computers but still said 'Aye, Sir' to their supervisor. Sickening really.

"She sure stood out", said one of them. The other nodded vigorously. "Pretty as an Admiral's daughter", the first went on. Fletcher forced a smile to cover his wince. Focus on the job and get off this mobile desert, that's what he'd promised himself.

"What colour was her hair?", he asked.

"Blond", said one with a speed that showed he'd never stopped imagining it splayed on a pillow.

"Just below the shoulder", added the other.

"Eyes?", this threw the men into a quandary, they looked at each other for help.

"No!" Fletcher shouted, "I don't need a consensus, either you know or you don't, understand?"

"Aye, aye, sir", one responded. This time Fletcher couldn't hold back a derisive snort.

"Anything unusual you remember?"

"You can't miss her skipper, just follow your instincts, if you know what I mean", said one with a leer.

Fletcher knew exactly what he meant but didn't dignify it with a response. "Clothing".

"Shorts, and a T-shirt", responded the more talkative. It never failed, ask a man what a woman was wearing and they always mention what was below the waist first. Always.

"Thanks for your time", Fletcher stood and walked out without looking back. Hurrying alongside was 'CB', his name was actually David something-or-other but Fletcher thought of him as 'Corporate Bod'.

"Useful?", CB asked.

"No, those guys have taken what they actually saw and plastered it onto their fantasies." He stopped walking. "Still, she was blond."

"And unmistakable", chimed in CB.

"Unmistakable in shorts and a T-shirt. Not wrapped in a grimy blanket on a street corner in the lower levels". CB acknowledged the point. "How many levels are there here anyway?" Fletcher asked.

"About thirty below decks depending on where you look, twenty-four in the 'tween and a lot on top."

"Damn big ship; not really a ship at all, more like a city." Fletcher was looking around him at the remarkable sights of this huge place.

"Bigger," CB said, "no city in the world has this much useable area."

"So how do you police it?"

"I thought you were supposed to tell us how to do it," CB commented with a smile.

"Lay off, I got here less than twenty-four hours ago."

"What do you think of Neo-City then, first impressions?"

"Hate it," Fletcher almost spat out the words.

"That's a bit strong for twenty-four hours isn't it?"

"Not really, I hate everywhere when I first see it."

CB smiled, "so how long does it usually take before you stop hating a place?"

Fletcher looked at him as if thinking, "I don't know, it's never happened."

Fletcher had reflected at some length on Cera-Plastic since his arrival at Neo-City. There was, after all, a great deal of it to reflect on, half a billion tons or so. The most curious thing seemed to be that the huge corporations with the money to design these substances were headed by people who didn't want to be around them. The spacious office on the top floor of the Corporation Tower was constructed of cera-plastic but this was far from obvious. Everything was covered with expensive organic material, hardwood was everywhere. In the centre of the room was a large circular table and Fletcher and CB were sitting at it looking across at some very serious people.

An unusually tall man called Damon Reed had taken the chair. Fletcher didn't know what position he held or even in which company he held it, but it was clear from the fact that CB instantly accepted his chairmanship that this was an individual to be respected. There were a series of almost identical men in dark suits occupying the other positions at the table.

"What progress have you made so far?" Reed began without any preamble. He didn't even introduce the other people at the table.

Fletcher was caught by surprise, he'd expected far longer to marshal his thoughts. He stood, "I haven't had much time yet, but here's how I see the problem."

"Crime, it's a crime, not a problem," one of the identical suits interrupted.

Fletcher rounded on him, "Emotion undermines perception, for the victim it's a crime, for the investigator it's a problem." He stopped, aware he may have stepped over the mark. Glancing up he noticed a slight smile on Reed's face, seeing this he steeled himself and continued.

"We know the apartment security systems were compromised." This much was obvious since the owner had been found murdered. "We don't know exactly when the crime took place however." One of the suits made a movement as though he was going to speak. Fletcher bulldozed on, "yes, we know the security system was disabled at 19:00 on Saturday evening, that does not tell us when he was actually murdered, the body was not discovered till much later. The building security sweep identified that his security was off. That wasn't until 07:30 on Sunday. By the time a security guard had actually seen the body it was 08:00."

"Assuming that the murder had taken place by the time the system sweep started that still leaves a twelve and a half hour window during which the murder could have taken place." There were slow nods from around the table. "We have a possible suspect," Fletcher grimaced, remembering the pseudo engineers he'd had to interview, "a young woman of striking appearance entered the building via an access route from the engineering deck below the transport level under the tower. We know this because she passed two inconsequential engineers at around 07:30 on Saturday. The engineers say she didn't return that way and, as it happens, I believe them." Oh yes, Fletcher was sure they would have noticed.

"The timing of her entry tallies well with the daily building security system sweep, she'd have entered just after it finished, giving her twenty-four hours before the next system wide scan. Here, however, we have a problem. We're asked to believe that she entered the building by 08:00 on Saturday, but didn't commit the crime until after 19:00 on that evening. So right now I have a question which I don't know the answer to, what was she doing for those eleven hours?" Fletcher stopped waiting for comments.

Finally Reed spoke, "Do you know why he was killed?"

"No, do you?" Fletcher said and immediately regretted it, everyone leant back in their seats as if to distance themselves from him. Reed didn't seem ready to attack so Fletcher rapidly covered the rest of his thoughts.

"Let's look at our victim. Forty-five years old, highly successful, a director of Digital World Corporation and earning a huge salary. Bit of a loner, not much for the social scene, no known predilections that would cause problems. I understand he was well respected by his peers."

"Definitely," said Reed in a manner which made it clear that in a greatly divided world this man was 'one of us'.

Fletcher nodded quickly, "he was beaten to death with a hardwood cudgel, a table leg ripped from the small dining table in the kitchen. Two blows were struck, both on the head; the first was on the back of the crown causing minor damage. The second was the fatal blow, struck extremely hard on the back of the head, breaking two vertebrae and the base of the skull. Death was almost immediate after that. The murder weapon was left beside the body and an analysis shows plenty of residual traces of the victim but none from the murderer. I have yet to define a motive for the crime, but before we get into that, I'd like an opportunity to examine the scene, the apartment."

Reed stood, "David will take you at once."

Fletcher looked embarrassed, "Not at once, please, I need some sleep so please excuse me." The suits nodded and seemed to relax and Reed nodded and smiled. Fletcher walked out with CB in tow.

Reed looked around the room from where he stood at the conference table. "Who was that masked man?" he asked. He was pleased by the ripple of laughter which followed his comment.

CB had a car, unusual in this well organised, carefully planned city. It was electric and manufactured by Ford UK. On major traffic routes the car lowered two metal wheels which made continuous, rolling contact with two charged metal strips set into the roadway. Fletcher had been worried when he first heard this but CB assured him that the PD was only thirty-six volts. It was sufficient to run the small motor without draining the battery. The car had a respectable top speed of around fifty miles per hour.

CB dropped Fletcher off at his hotel, a large plush affair in the district known as Inboard Port.

The scale of the ship was difficult to come to terms with but one of the symptoms of this was the great size of Fletcher's room at the Hotel Atlantis. Ships, in Fletcher's mind were supposed to be cramped, claustrophobic affairs, this was over eighty foot square with a modern entertainment system which was totally beyond Fletcher's understanding. Fletcher poured himself a stiff drink and climbed into an unreasonably luxurious bed. He read a few pages of his current paperback but quickly gave up. He'd been given some photographs of the victim's apartment earlier and something was bothering him about them. He looked at them again but soon felt drowsy and slipped into a restless sleep.

Ben Slythe & JC Rocks © 2018

Chapter 2

Fletcher woke at about six, he always did, first night in a strange room. When he went downstairs to have breakfast he found CB sitting in the lobby waiting for him.

"Don't you ever sleep?"

"Not a great deal," CB answered.

"You look unnaturally well groomed for this early."

"I've been up for a while, had my first coffee."

"Well come and have your second with me at breakfast, we need to talk."

Despite these words Fletcher appeared to show no willingness to talk over breakfast at all. He ate a large and time consuming meal and it wasn't till he was finishing off his second cup of coffee that he looked up to see CB fidgeting slightly opposite him. "Itching to go, aren't you?" he asked. CB couldn't quite hide his anxious look. Fletcher grinned, "have you been to the apartment yet?"

"No, I've seen some pictures, the ones you saw."

"Something about them was bothering me last night, did you notice anything odd at all?" Fletcher spread the photos on the table in front of CB.

CB racked his mind, he felt as though he was facing an exam of some kind, and failing badly. "I'm sorry," he admitted finally after another look, "I can't think of a thing."

Fletcher looked disappointed, "well, never mind, I'm sure it will become clear when we visit the tower."

The 'tower' was a large corporate building with offices of a number of corporations in it. At the top was a series of luxury apartments and Miles Rocan had rented one. At the ground floor entrance there was a large lobby containing a beautiful fountain, tastefully spilling water over rough-hewn rocks into an irregularly shaped pool. Beyond, against the far wall was a semicircular desk, behind which sat a stocky, well-dressed young woman. Fletcher glanced

at her for a few seconds. Not unattractive and elegant in appearance she had a hardness around the eyes, a clinical, detached look which betrayed to Fletcher that she was professional and not as a secretary. No doubt there were others within easy range, the building was not inhabited by those short of the means to purchase the services of such people.

She recognised CB at once and waved him through, relaxing slightly as she realised she wouldn't be called upon to brutally slay the pair of them. Fletcher followed CB through an archway into a wide panelled hall at the end of which were a series of lift shafts. CB called the lift and at once a set of polished doors opened leading into a plush car. The lift car was well carpeted and the back wall was transparent, with water flowing freely down it causing wonderful patterns of light to be thrown into the car. CB selected the top floor and inserted a small card into a slot beside the panel to allow access to that level. As the lift started to move, the number of each floor appeared in the water flowing down the glass. A still patch which did not ripple outlined the number. Fletcher stared in amazement at this marvel. CB noticed his interest.

"There's a custom static field which can grip the water in any pattern you choose, it's clever, isn't it?"

"Not just clever, beautiful. Are many buildings like this?"

CB looked almost shocked. "There are other buildings of this," he stumbled for a word, "magnificence, but that particular effect is unique, as far as I know."

The ride was so smooth and the acceleration so gentle that Fletcher was surprised to hear the doors open behind him. He turned and stepped through into the security annexe. This was common in these corporate buildings, an area where a visitor could be screened and, if necessary, confined while awaiting the arrival of security. Often these expensive systems had some form of active deterrent as well, soporific gas, perhaps or something deadlier. CB quickly opened the door to the main apartment and stepped through. Fletcher took a moment to clear his mind and followed.

The apartment was extremely large and this main reception room was dominated by a large window, curved to follow the edge of the building and running all the way from ceiling to floor. Fletcher walked over to look out onto the city. "A strange choice of view for such a wealthy man, don't you think?" The window looked out over the airfield section of the city.

"If you wait for an hour or so it'll be different, the whole top of this building slowly rotates." CB looked amused, whether by Fletcher's lack of knowledge or the opulence around him was not clear.

"Impressive, this place would cost me about a century of salary." Fletcher was almost envious it seemed. "Where was the body found?"

"Just where you're standing, a few feet from the window."

Fletcher flinched and slowly stepped back, he felt as if he'd invaded somewhere private. "Has anyone checked for witnesses in other towers, a window this big could show a great deal."

"We thought of that, the window is actually one way, from the outside it appears black."

Fletcher nodded absently, then slowly started to look around the room. Miles Rocan was certainly a fairly solitary man. There were no coffee tables or open areas laid out for entertaining guests, no bar in the living room, not even a coat rack. Around the room were quite a large number of plants, withered and dead after a week of inattention. "Aren't there automatic waterers and things for plants?" Fletcher asked.

"There are, but Mr Rocan preferred to do it himself if he was at home." CB's expression showed he didn't really understand why a man would take on such a task when a machine could do the job. Fletcher could understand easily, he kept cats.

There seemed to be little to see in the apartment so Fletcher sat at a terminal in the bedroom and accessed the security logs. He looked at them for a few seconds then leapt to his feet. "I can't believe I never asked, stupid, stupid."

"What?" Said CB with a decidedly puzzled look on his face, "What have you seen?"

"Look at the time the apartment security system was deactivated on Saturday."

CB looked, "19:00, we knew that, I don't see..." he tailed off.

"Not 19:00, I mean yes 19:00 but look at the time man, look closely at the time." On the screen it appeared as 19:00:00.00, "Nineteen hundred hours to the hundredth of a second." Fletcher paused triumphantly. He looked up at CB who nodded but slowly, unconvinced. "The significance is that only a preset computer program would have done it that accurately, someone pre-programmed the computer here to turn off the sensors at 19:00, the computer has no concept of approximation, so it carried out its orders exactly. No human being could have timed it that accurately and the odds of it happening by chance are millions to one. It means our killer is long gone from Neo-City." Fletcher sat down, he seemed almost deflated.

"It must be an alibi, yes." CB said quietly. "Whoever set this program didn't do it in order to commit the crime, it was to mislead us, that person expected to be off Neo-City by that evening."

Fletcher spent the rest of the morning poking through the apartment looking for the answer to his strange feeling he'd had when looking at the photographs the previous day. After a while he took the pictures from CB and stood where they were taken, comparing them with reality. He still felt something was wrong but he couldn't put his finger on it, the apartment had nothing particularly odd about it and the pictures were exactly as the apartment looked. They could have been taken an hour ago. If it wasn't for the fact that he'd come to trust his feelings above all else, he'd have dismissed it out of hand. He finally sat down hunched against the wall to think, resting his forehead on his knees. An hour or so later CB suggested they have some lunch and they set off to a restaurant nearby.

"I wish we had a time of death, it would make this process a lot easier, didn't the autopsy show anything?" Fletcher had finished eating and was sipping his tea thoughtfully.

CB started, then recovered, "I'm sorry, we did have a time of death from body temperature but we discounted it, it was before 19:00 on Saturday." Fletcher nodded so CB went on, "The pathologist suggested Mr Rocan had died at around 09:00 on Saturday morning, 23 to 24 hours before the body was found." CB paused, "could the analysis be that accurate?"

"In a climate controlled apartment it could, absolutely." Fletcher's brow creased. "How about biologicals, parasites?"

CB grimaced, "nothing lived in there except people and plants. Fully computerised." He paused, thinking, "So we're looking at our mystery girl again, the time's about right for her, she keeps cropping up." CB took a sip of his water.

"I think we're in a position to decide what happened that night," Fletcher said, "She entered the building at around 07:30, took about an hour to defeat the internal systems and make her way through the building and then killed Rocan. After that she set a program to suggest to us that he had been killed much later and quickly left the building. She then made her way to the airport and left Neo-City so she could have an alibi in case DNA traces were found or anything pointed to her committing the crime." Fletcher looked down at the table, "We still don't know why this young woman would want to kill Rocan, what possible motive could she have?"

CB thought for a moment, "Robbery?"

Fletcher shook his head, "no, I don't see it, she had control of the building systems, she could have used his own sensors to tell her if he was in the apartment. She must have known he was in there, no robber would intentionally enter an occupied apartment. She must have wanted to kill him, the question is why?"

"Could she have been hired as an assassin, perhaps by a business rival?"

"It's not impossible, CB, but I doubt it. She's a risky choice for such a mission. In fact, don't take this the wrong way, but you're the ideal choice for such a job."

"What, me?" CB looked shocked.

"You could easily make an excuse to enter the apartment, no doubt you have people in your company who could find all the pass codes you'd need to break his electronic defences and I'll wager you've been taught all the skills needed to kill. You're loyal to the Corporation and can be trusted to see the job through and never, ever reveal what you know. If you were then placed in charge of the investigation and suggested the inclusion in the team of an independent investigator who, perhaps, you can guide to the wrong conclusion, you could easily be considered above suspicion." CB had begun to look angry, "no, don't object, I know you couldn't have done it, you didn't get back to Neo-City until 16:00 hours on Saturday and we've established that the crime was committed well before that."

CB looked shocked, "I see you've checked my movements as well."

Fletcher didn't look embarrassed, he smiled as he replied, "sorry, it was the very first thing I checked. In corporate investigations you always suspect the person they team you with."

They stood to leave, CB authorised the bill on his corporate account and they walked down to the parking level to reach CB's car. Fletcher quietly said to CB "I'm serious about the corporate angle, a professional security man may be involved here."

"Or security woman perhaps," replied CB.

Ben Slythe & JC Rocks © 2016

Chapter 3

It had, of course, been CB's idea to bring Fletcher in on this case. CB had been a high flyer in corporate politics when he'd made a mistake. The mistake wasn't very large, but it cost the corporation money, an unforgivable sin. Memories were long, he'd been quietly and gently put onto a slower, easier career path never to have a shot at the big leagues again. To his surprise CB found that he rather liked the eddy in the stream of corporate existence which was Internal Security. CB had found a place he was comfortable, there was less pressure than in some divisions, the work was intellectually stimulating and it held a technical fascination. When this murder was given to CB to investigate he leapt in with enthusiasm. He soon found that he had been poorly prepared for the technique and the challenge of investigation, none of his expensive training had actually forced him to out think an opponent who'd had time to prepare the ground. His general security duties included devising defences against corporate espionage but these always allowed him time to set the traps the way he wanted. Arriving at the scene of the crime, CB encountered a situation in which the criminal had set the traps. CB was out of his depth. CB had known exactly what to do to solve that problem, he'd looked for a consultant.

Less than an hour's work had provided CB with the names and contact numbers of over six hundred independent security consultants. CB needed someone with experience of detection and investigation so he narrowed the search to those with Police experience. He decided that he needed to restrict the selection to those with no major corporate connections, people who could be considered to be genuinely independent of all influence. The remaining options were less daunting and CB started to read about them. After an hour or so he decided on Fletcher and informed Damon Reed of his choice. Fletcher had been a policeman for over ten years rising to the rank of Detective Chief Inspector at Scotland Yard in London. The world was changing and state sponsored police were becoming a thing of the past. For several years Fletcher had refused to move to the private sector despite the financial rewards, a matter of principle it seemed. Finally Fletcher's daughter was reaching an age where she was getting expensive and he reluctantly moved out to work for Intersec in Manchester. He lasted less than a year, the corporate environment not suiting his tastes at all and he set up on his own as a private consultant. While he might not be the richest or most successful option from the list he could be seen to be reliable, you might pay his fee but that didn't buy his soul. CB got in touch at once and Fletcher wasted no time in flying to Neo-City, currently on its way from Rio to Tokyo and sailing through the Indian Ocean.

Fletcher had become convinced that the key to the mystery lay in the photographs of the crime scene. He decided to stay at the hotel to study them in the hope of illumination. This left CB at something of a loose end so he went back to the Corporation Tower and appraised Reed of the progress he and Fletcher had made. Reed was unimpressed, the data was valuable, certainly, but he needed to know they were on the trail of suspects. CB explained that they had what might appear to be a suspect but they had not had time to examine her movements closely yet. Reed encouraged him to make time; CB left the Tower at a trot.

CB felt that there might be information of value to them at the exit terminal on the airfield, all passengers were filmed and when their handprints were taken a small DNA sample was lifted from the skin surface at the same time. If they could get that kind of information they might be able to catch this mystery woman. After calling Fletcher and finding out by the most direct method possible that he wasn't answering his phone, CB drove to the terminal building.

The airfield sat atop the starboard hull of the city, Fletcher had been awe-struck when he'd arrived a few days earlier, its size was overwhelming. Nearly six kilometres long and half as wide, large runways crossed each other in an amazing pattern designed for maximum efficiency for taxiing. There was no need to worry about passengers being left with that uncomfortable feeling of being out of place when at a major airport, the terminal was totally integrated with the main city, part of it even being sunk into the 'tween decks.

CB was received with appropriate deference by the terminal security manager and quickly shown to a well-equipped and comfortable office suite and left to get on. CB had access to a powerful computer which could examine the DNA sample taken from the subject and use it to build a model of the person's appearance at several stages through life. Since he also had a database of pictures of these people, he could allow the computer to compare the two. Anyone with a match lower than average could have been biosculpted to resemble someone else or to hide or improve their appearance. He set the program to look for people with a match of less than fifty per cent. This revealed no individuals, so he raised the margin to sixty per cent. There were three matches at this level but all could be quickly eliminated. When CB raised the margin to seventy per cent he found over five hundred matches. He got himself a drink and sat down to work through them.

He'd been working for no more than five minutes and barely begun to eliminate people when his phone rang. "David Redmond", he answered into the mobile.

"Hi CB, it's Fletcher, get over here right now, I've finally seen what's wrong with those pictures."

"Was it worth the wait?"

"CB, it's dynamite, I'm not joking, it changes absolutely everything."

CB was not entirely sure he believed that this news, whatever it was, would change everything, but he found himself driving a little more quickly than normal to the hotel. He was even amused to find himself walking a little more briskly than was his habit as he approached Fletcher's room. He knocked at the door and waited.

"It's open," Fletcher sounded exhausted. As CB opened the door he saw Fletcher slumped in a large chair on the other side of the room. CB quietly entered the room and sat down waiting for Fletcher to start talking. It took several minutes.

"You see," began Fletcher, "it was the pictures, I couldn't see it for so long." He stopped and closed his eyes. A few seconds later he opened them again and continued. "I thought I'd understand when I visited the apartment but the scene there looked exactly as it did in the pictures, it took me all this time to realise, that was the point, it shouldn't look the same." Fletcher smiled a slightly ironic smile, self-mocking.

CB noticed that Fletcher wasn't going to continue for a moment so he ventured an opinion. "Apart from a couple of investigators, nobody's been in there, it should be the same."

Fletcher seemed to come alert, "What about the plants then?"

"They were dead, a week of no attention, the air is fairly dry in the climate-controlled spaces."

"Look at the plants in the picture, CB, they're dead here as well, don't you see?"

"Perhaps he didn't look after them for a while?"

Fletcher snorted, "no, absolutely not, Rocan took the care of his plants seriously, thought of himself as something of an expert perhaps. Those plants were killed quickly. I thought

someone might have poisoned them but I couldn't think of any reason at all. Finally I got it, the plants were cooked."

CB looked confused, "cooked?"

"Baked dry, they were baked dry because the temperature in the room was set much higher than normal. Probably to about thirty-five Celsius. From the time of the crime to the morning, nineish, the body was artificially kept warm to deceive your investigation."

"So when was the crime committed?"

"I'm sorry CB, there's no way to tell for sure. Probably during the middle of the night, Friday night." Fletcher got up and started to pace around the room. "The crime scene was supposed to make us think that the crime was committed at about the time our obvious young lady was in the building. This was not the case, however."

"Is there a way to catch the criminal anyway?"

Fletcher grinned broadly, "of course there is, the old fashioned way."

"Sorry, what's the old fashioned way again?" CB was eager to start the chase.

"Before we had liquids analysis, genetic profiling, holistic pathologists and computer modelling there were still crimes, some of them were even solved." Fletcher walked towards the door, "we follow the things we do know, and we start with the mystery woman."

CB groaned inwardly and as they started the journey to the airfield he outlined the problems he'd had earlier in trying to trace her.

Fletcher listened carefully and couldn't help laughing at the end. "Don't worry, CB, I have a talent for persuading computers to tell me what they know."

CB spoke up, "can we be sure that she left the city at all, or if she did, that she left by the airfield?"

"Yes, we can, her best course of action is to leave the area quickly and get some quick surgery. She must have used the airfield because she couldn't be absolutely sure that we

wouldn't issue her description within hours. She couldn't take the risk of being caught on a slow moving ship or sub; there's nowhere to hide on a space station. She must have flown."

They arrived at the airfield and once again were shown to the operations room. CB went to collect a couple of drinks from the refreshment machine in the corner while Fletcher sat down at the terminal. After a couple of seconds Fletcher looked up. "There she is, they were right CB, she's a stunner." CB turned around quickly and stared at him.

"How did you do that so quickly?" CB came over to look at the screen. "My word, an exceptional young lady."

Fletcher laughed, "distinctive, even."

"So how did you do it?"

"I felt we were probably dealing with a professional, someone who could afford to pay for both a complete biosculpt job and get some engineered genetic material implanted into the palm of the hand. This material would have been designed to generate an individual looking like her current appearance. It occurred to me that she might have a set of DNA which generated an appearance exactly like she actually looked. There are differences in the way people look. Many have been altered, some carry childhood scars, eat more than they are genetically disposed to or unexpectedly turn prematurely bald. I simply set the system to look for the best match, not the worst. She had a match of 99.3 per cent, that is an incredible number, none of the others who came through that day had a match over 94 per cent, the mean was around 81. Her genetic mock up was too accurate."

CB looked amazed, he studied the picture, "she's very beautiful, why make herself so obvious?"

"I don't know for sure but two reasons spring to mind. She was acting as a professional decoy, being obvious as you put it probably helped. The other reason is simple vanity, maybe she enjoys looking like this, it's not unheard of."

"So how do we catch her?"

Fletcher looked at CB, "I fear I'm about to destroy any illusions you may have of my infallibility as an investigator, we don't catch her, sorry but she's long gone."

"Then all this was a waste of time."

"Absolutely not, CB, we've eliminated a lead."

"Our only lead."

"Not our only one, we haven't even looked at motive yet, that may be our next job. Tell me about the executives of Digital World, which of them have offices on Neo-City?"

"Mr Rocan had a deputy, now acting in Mr. Rocan's stead, his name is Karl Ventner, presumably he'll take over Mr. Rocan's position permanently."

Fletcher nodded, "are there any other senior people on the boat?"

CB flinched at having his home so described but shook his head, "no, Ventner's the only one."

"I think it's now time to get some help from Damon Reed, he'll know about this man, let's go."

CB threw back his drink and then followed Fletcher towards the car.

Chapter 4

Fletcher was kept waiting with CB outside Reed's office for over half an hour. He found himself becoming increasingly irritated by this though CB seemed quite content to wait. When they were finally invited to enter and offered a seat in Reed's luxurious chairs CB seemed determined to bring Reed up to date on the progress of the investigation at once. Reed asked a number of questions and the process took nearly an hour.

Fletcher's mind began to wander and when Reed asked him a question he had to gather his wits quickly to avoid embarrassment.

"You had a problem I can help with?" Reed asked.

"Yes, thank you, we have now closed off our major avenue of enquiry and we need to concentrate on another. I need information on Rocan's deputy Karl Ventner."

Reed inhaled slowly, "Frankly it doesn't surprise me that you ask, many of us felt he could be involved in some manner."

Fletcher noticed the use once more of the embracing 'us', obviously Ventner was not included in this social circle. "Why do you say that, have you any evidence?"

Reed took a sip of water. "No, not exactly, Ventner is an unusual individual in corporate groups, it has been suggested that he rose to his current position through the employment of, shall we say, somewhat unusual tactics. He has been suspected of violence and corruption on a large scale. To me it seems that he has few attributes which would make his advancement explicable by normal internal procedure. Rumour would suggest that he operates a crime syndicate in the city. I must caution you, he's a man with an unsavoury reputation, if you choose to investigate him, please take care."

Fletcher looked interested. "Will his promotion cause problems around here for you?"

Reed looked worried for the first time since Fletcher had met him, "It could be catastrophic, he'll have access to the information we discuss in conference, a man like him could do great harm in such a position."

"If he runs this crime syndicate as you say, he could probably get that information anyway, couldn't he?"

"Perhaps, but just giving it to him, watching him smirk as he notes down the information in front of us. Terrible."

Fletcher nodded, he understood well enough, spies are always more palatable than traitors. "We'll go then. This evening we're going to start investigating Ventner."

CB followed Fletcher out into the lobby. He noticed Fletcher chuckling to himself. "What do you find funny in this situation?"

Fletcher turned to look at him, "You're actually afraid of Reed aren't you, he scares you."

CB looked slightly flustered, "He's very important."

Fletcher narrowed his eyes, "No, that's not it, you're important compared to many. You know that importance is a matter of money and position. It must be power, what kind of power does he have?"

CB Sagged slightly, "He runs the Council, for all intents and purposes he is the ruling class of Neo-City."

Fletcher nodded, the subject was obviously satisfactorily closed. "If I attack someone, steal their money and run away, who tries to catch me?"

"What, here?" CB looked around him, obviously shocked.

"No, outside, maybe in the lower levels."

"Well if all goes according to plan, one of the commercial security companies would try to trace you."

Fletcher started to walk away. "We need to find an honest copper in this town." He paused, "More accurately, you need to find me an honest copper."

The 'Police Station' as it was known was a small structure slotted between two giant engineering structures near the stern of the city. It was almost precisely equidistant from each hull and if it were any lower in the vessel you'd be able to look straight down onto the water. In faded letters was a sign reading - 'TechSec - You pay us to care, and we do'. Just below it someone had scrawled - 'Translation - give us money or go away'. Fletcher had no confidence that this hadn't been written by an employee. Once inside it became obvious that the station was quite well cared for, the floor and walls were clean, shiny hard plastic furniture littered the waiting room but it too was clean. The air was extremely hot, hot and humid, behind a counter at the rear of the room a man in a bulky jacket slept soundly.

Fletcher woke him on the third try and explained that they wanted to see a senior officer. The man led Fletcher and CB to a back room and ushered them into a tiny office. In the office was a small desk and behind it sat a young, fit looking woman. She was dressed casually in a short sleeved shirt and shorts, typing on a computer. After a minute or so she looked up.

"Where's your property."

Fletcher was already lost; he saw this as a bad sign so early in a conversation. "What?" proved to be his best response.

"The place you need protecting, where is it?" The woman was looking impatient.

"I have no place", Fletcher finally caught up with the conversation, "I need to see you on a different matter."

"If it's a complaint then fill in a form."

"No, I need some information."

The woman sat back, "New in town?"

"Yes, why?"

"If you'd been here more than a few days you'd realise that we are not a source of information, we are a source of complaint, a source of amusement and a target for ridicule. We are the most famously inefficient, incompetent idiots ever to grace this floating cesspool. You don't want anything from us."

Fletcher grimaced, a sympathetic gesture. "You've got to let ninety per cent of what comes across your desk go because you've got no money and when you do find something you can chase, the evidence gives out or a technical error is made in procedure or you're told you can't take it to court but you're never told why. It seems as though you're running in the dark bumping into things and nobody, absolutely nobody cares.'

The woman looked surprised, "You're a cop." It wasn't a question. She glanced across to CB, then looked back. "I'm Officer Jones, Tarla Jones. How can I help?"

Fletcher handed her a photograph, 'This is Karl Ventner.'

Tarla inhaled sharply. "I know who he is."

Fletcher nodded, "Does he have any connection to crime in Neo-City that you know of?"

Tarla chuckled softly, "What I know or what I can prove?"

"What you know."

Tarla sat back in her seat, marshalling her thoughts. "Well, he runs a series of dodgy operations, gambling, prostitution, sharking. They're legal but nasty. Then there are the more serious problems: blackmail, protection, fraud and all backed up with a hefty dose of violence. He maintains a small group of well-trained thugs who do the dirty work. Once in a while we catch one of his people. We never have a chance to prove any link between Ventner and the suspect because an hour later a team of briefs turn up with a budget about ten times ours. He's got a little piece of every game in town, even the cops. He buys them, controls them and if necessary discredits them."

Fletcher didn't look surprised, "We feel that he may be connected with a murder."

Tarla nodded, "Rocan, yes, if he didn't do it then he knows who did, nothing illegal on that scale happens around here without him knowing about it."

"Would he talk to us, do you think?"

Tarla grinned, "No."

"Succinct," CB interjected.

"But I do know something which might be of use to you," Tarla looked triumphant, "One of our officers saw the crime committed."

Fletcher was shocked; it took him several seconds to regain his composure. "Saw it?"

Tarla was looking very smug. "Yes, he didn't know it at the time, but when the news came out about the murder, well he put two and two together."

Fletcher's mind was still racing. "What, I mean how does he know he saw the murder?"

Tarla was happy, enjoying the upper hand. "I'll tell you the story. About half four on Saturday afternoon one of our guys was walking the weather deck when he noticed a bright flash at a window high up in a building. He'd only seen it out of the corner of his eye, so he looked closely. He expected it to be one of those animated adverts you see plastered all over office buildings, but this was a residential building, at least primarily, and the window remained black. When the news of the murder was released he knew it had to be the muzzle flash from the murder weapon." She paused, "Impressed?"

CB started to say something but Fletcher waved him silent.

It was about half an hour later that the two of them walked slowly to the car.

"Well that was a waste of time," CB said.

"You think so?"

"Mr Rocan wasn't shot so what the policeman saw couldn't be a muzzle flash and it's unlikely he'd be indulging a passion for photography while he was dead."

"The information about Ventner was useful, and it's possible someone was in there with a camera." Fletcher climbed into the car. "Anyway, we have work to do, lots of it."

"What kind of work?"

"You need to follow the money trail, find out if Ventner is the only possible material beneficiary of Rocan's death. The money is the only unturned stone in this investigation and it's time we disturbed the beetles underneath. I have to return to Rocan's apartment, something's still bothering me about that place."

CB dropped Fletcher off at Rocan's building and drove off to his office.

Minutes later Fletcher was in the apartment again. He wandered over to the computer console and peered at the system logs, after a while he walked to the huge window which dominated the side of the main room. He pulled up a chair and sat looking out of the window. He was still there three hours later watching as the sun slipped from view.

When it was completely black outside Fletcher stood and walked out of the apartment.

Ben Slythe & JC Rocks © 2016

Chapter 5

In the morning Fletcher went through his normal routine and then walked to the breakfast room. CB was still at his office chasing decimal points down paper mazes. As Fletcher finished eating one of the obsequious staff approached.

"Sir, there's a call for you."

Fletcher took the proffered handset and raised it to his ear. "Fletcher."

"Mister Fletcher, you don't know me and you never will. I have a film for you to see."

"What's on the film?"

There was a pause before the man continued. "Ventner and a woman, you'll recognise her. The tape's been left at the front desk, tell them you need the package left for Paul Abel." Immediately the line went dead.

Fletcher walked to the front desk and collected the tape. Inserting it into his suite's entertainment system took only a second, working out how to make it play took a little longer. The tape was short, only just over a minute, but the quality was high. Fletcher watched Ventner handing a small white envelope to a young woman. She was unmistakably the woman who visited Rocan's apartment soon after he died. Fletcher needed to verify the tape's authenticity and he had no means to do so himself.

CB arrived a short time later with a final word on the money trail. It seemed clear that only Ventner had any financial interest in the murder. The noose was tightening. CB was able to help with the video; he took it away to his office to get it tested.

Fletcher went to the restaurant in the hotel for lunch, then returned to his room.

It was about 16:00 when CB finally returned. Fletcher climbed into the car and waited for CB to brief him. CB started at once.

"Firstly, your tape checks out, it's genuine. Probably someone in his organisation was looking for a quieter life. Secondly, I have secured a warrant to arrest Ventner today, we're going to join the team at his hideaway."

"Team?" Fletcher enquired mildly.

"Specialists, you see Ventner has a compound underneath the bow of the 'tween, it's quite defensible and frankly I expect him to fight."

The people gathered near Ventner's compound amazed Fletcher. There were thirty or forty corporate suits standing around looking important. Three large armoured vehicles had been parked close together and a number of heavily armed military men were standing by them talking quietly. He turned to CB, "Planning to start a war?"

"End one." CB strode briskly over to a small van parked to one side and pulled out two sub-machine guns. He handed one of them to Fletcher.

"Not really my scene." Fletcher said with a smile.

"I'm not asking you to lead an assault, but there may be things in there you need to see, I'm not letting you in unarmed."

Fletcher took the gun and quickly checked it. CB looked on approvingly. "You've handled one of those before."

"I did a few years of assault duties to further my career a while ago. I've done my share of live firing."

CB nodded, "You won't actually need it today, I hope."

It was obvious to Fletcher that CB was very much in charge of the operation. He indicated when the jamming signal was to begin and then waved the troops forward. The jamming would disable any devices attached to the outer wall which might be sensing the approach of the assault team. The vehicles moved slowly toward the solid wall which connected the decks together. At the front of each vehicle was a large rectangular door, heavily armoured and secured by explosive bolts. Around the door was a ridge, raised a metre or so from the door surface and mounted on the face of the ridge was a loop of plastic explosive. The explosive had a thin metallic guttering pressed into its surface to shape the explosive force for best penetration. The three vehicles moved forward until their frame charges were pressed gently against the wall about fifty feet apart and there was a moment of quiet.

Fletcher didn't see the signal given, but there must have been one. All three charges detonated at the same instant, a deafening noise. In the aftermath the explosive bolts releasing sounded like an echo and the crash as the armoured doors fell outwards was inaudible.

Teams of armed men ran through the vehicles and into Ventner's compound. It became clear that there was resistance from within, rapid automatic fire began at once and within a minute two of the assault team had been pulled out through the back door of one of the vehicles, obviously seriously injured. After about five minutes, with the fire slackening, CB selected a vehicle to enter through and ran towards it. Fletcher followed and ran behind CB through the assault vehicle and, using the armoured door as a bridge, into the compound.

The air was smoky and smelled unpleasantly of burnt explosive. Fletcher crouched against the corner of a building while he tried to get a picture of what was going on. To both his left and right there was intermittent firing.

CB ran off to the left and Fletcher followed, staggering his run a few metres behind CB and on the other side of the corridor. The corridor led to an open space filled with vehicles, crates and bulky equipment. A small fire burned on a patch of oil in one corner and to Fletcher's left was a damaged area where one of the assault vehicles has made an entrance. There had been serious fighting earlier in this area, a dead soldier was draped over a pile of discarded wheels, so CB crept cautiously into the open and stayed low. He got less than a second's warning. There was a noise from directly in front of him and he threw himself behind a large storage crate. The shot fired at him missed by inches.

Fletcher could see the place the shot had come from, a narrow, high window in a long storage building built along one side of the open area. Fletcher knew what to do. When CB turned to look at him he pointed for CB to continue round the end of the crate. Fletcher could see that in order to get another shot, the hidden gunman would need to cross the window. CB began to move forwards, a shadow flicked across the window and Fletcher fired. The three round burst stitched a line across the narrow opening and immediately afterwards there was a solid sounding thump.

Fletcher ran, vaulting CB's crate and diving in a roll through the doorway to the storage building. As he stood he noticed his target stretched full on the ground with his skull crushed

by two bullets. Fletcher quickly put the matter beyond all doubt by placing another three rounds into his chest.

CB ran in behind him. "So this is not really your thing?"

"No."

"Well don't worry, I'm sure you'll eventually find something you're good at."

CB's communicator beeped, he opened it and listened for a second. "They've captured Ventner, perhaps we should leave the cleanup to the soldiers."

Fletcher smiled at him. "Well I hate to leave a party early, but we need to speak to Ventner about a few things." He walked swiftly to the opening in the wall made by the assault vehicle.

As soon as they were outside the compound, CB asked one of the suits where Ventner was. He was told that Ventner was already on his way to interrogation at the Corporation Tower.

CB wanted to drive off at once but for Fletcher it was all rather a let down. Essentially his job was over, they would never get Ventner to admit to murder, but that didn't matter, they had more than enough evidence to convict him without a confession. Though the feeling was a little hollow, it still felt rather good, by all accounts Ventner was an evil man, manipulative and violent, in general it was a good result to pin a man like that down for murder.

Finally Ventner faced a charge he couldn't buy his way out of. Fletcher felt that whoever actually committed the crime was irrelevant, conspiracy to murder would put Ventner away, that was all that mattered.

CB drove a quiet Fletcher back to his hotel, Fletcher watched the news in his suite until the story came on, he didn't have to wait long for it. It simply announced that Corporation Security had arrested Karl Ventner for alleged involvement in the murder of Miles Rocan.

Fletcher went to sleep happy.

Chapter 6

The following morning Fletcher was quite pleased with himself, not only was the case closed but it only took him fifteen minutes to find the news channel on the entertainment system. Nothing appeared to have changed so Fletcher took a shower, got dressed and went downstairs for breakfast.

After he'd eaten it occurred to him that he'd never had the opportunity to see the sights of Neo-City so he wandered out of the hotel and walked towards the bow.

On the surface of the deck there was a feeling of space which contrasted sharply with the claustrophobic atmosphere below, even when compared with walking in the valleys of concrete found in other cities there was a similar oppressive sense. Fletcher had finally found something he liked about Neo-City. Another was waiting for him further down the street.

A square opened up ahead with elegant buildings forming three sides and an open space on the other. The square was covered by a gently curving dome of some transparent material and people were walking through large sliding doors on the side of the dome. Intrigued, Fletcher followed.

There were two doors, automatic and transparent like the dome and they formed an airlock. As Fletcher made his way through he could see other doors dotted around the dome's perimeter. In front of him was a large hole. Fletcher was standing on a walkway which ran around the inside of the dome. There was a railing along it and a number of people were leaning on the railing looking into the hole. Fletcher walked over and looked down. The hole was perhaps half a mile square and two hundred feet deep. The bottom consisted of forest and garden and smelled wonderful. Every hundred feet or so along the walkway there was a cage lift to enable people to descend to the garden. Fletcher used one and didn't come up again for two hours.

When he had wandered through the park for a while Fletcher went back to the surface and walked forward to one of Neo-City's tourist attractions. Mounted on the fo'c'sle was a small building, very elegantly designed, with a queue of people waiting to go in. Fletcher joined the queue and ten minutes later he was on the bridge of the giant ship. The room was spotless and had around twenty busy-looking engineers and sailors checking computer screens. After a while spent watching, Fletcher collared one of the tour guides and asked whether the ship

was really being controlled from here. The answer, as he suspected, was no. All of the ship's functions could be controlled from the room but in fact that had never happened. The Captain used this bridge as a monitoring station. In actuality the work was being conducted several decks below in much cheaper real estate.

Fletcher felt this was analogous to Neo-City itself. Theoretically the whole place was controlled from the Corporation Tower, in fact men like Ventner had the reins in their grasp, hidden in dark corners. Fletcher headed aft on public transport and looked for a bar. He finally found a bar which didn't look too clean. There was a television showing some indecipherable local sport, which seemed to consist of throwing a boomerang around a pylon to land as close as possible to the centre of a target. As he was finishing his drink the news came on. The headline was electric; Karl Ventner had confessed to the murder of Miles Rocan. Fletcher left the bar and walked aft once again. Shortly he found a cluster of tourists standing by a rail looking over. He joined them and looked down. Below there was water, lots of water. The huge engines were running and the sea for over a hundred metres was in tumult. The water was hypnotic, this far above the surface there was almost no sound and no spray at all but the foam and waves were fascinating to watch. Fletcher wondered if, on some distant island, a sudden wash of breakers was being heralded as the work of some great God, the Wavemaker. Fletcher had to decide whether or not he was going to make waves, somehow he felt that the decision would be easy when the time came.

CB was still delighted and exuberant as he drove Fletcher to the airport, Fletcher had been paid, but even that didn't make him entirely happy. As the two waited in the lounge CB told how he felt when he heard Ventner had confessed. As he finished he held out his hand to Fletcher. "I hope we can work together someday, it's been a pleasure."

"Not for me, I'm afraid I'll never want to work with you again."

CB looked surprised, he withdrew his hand. "Why?"

"Ventner didn't kill Rocan, you know it as well as I. Assuming he wanted to kill Rocan he had an army of thugs to use. Why would he confess to something he didn't do? Anyway, Ventner didn't have a motive. Rising up the corporate ladder is something you might aspire to but not Ventner. His power derived from a different source."

CB nodded. "What about the tape?"

"Again Ventner had no need to run monkey missions himself, he'd have sent someone else. In any case, we've already established that Ventner didn't have a motive."

"So who killed Rocan?" CB leaned forward.

"CB, do you realise something, that's the first time I've ever heard you call him Rocan and not Mr. Rocan. The evidence is overwhelming, the killer will probably never be found, but I know who organised the murder." CB was now alert, excited. "CB, you arranged for Miles Rocan to be murdered."

"I have never organised a killing, Mr. Rocan or anybody else."

Fletcher sadly shook his head. "CB, there's too much evidence. Firstly when we went to Rocan's building the woman at the desk recognised you and waved us in. You told me you'd never been there. I think you'd been there on a number of occasions; certainly often enough to get quite used to that marvellous lift. Secondly there's that gunshot. After we left the police station it dawned to me that light couldn't leave the building anyway. That window was turned black. The only way the police officer could have seen the flash is if the window had changed colour suddenly, just like those advertisements I see all over the place. I went back to the apartment to see which direction the building would have been facing at the time. I made a discovery; do you realise that the top of the tower doesn't rotate any more?" CB shook his head. "Yes you do, it was part of the building system trick that was pulled by the murderer or their accomplice. The window faces the airport now. The flash happened at 16:00. At 16:00 you were in this lounge having just got off your flight." Fletcher looked through the tall windows and could clearly see Rocan's building. That flash told you that the mystery woman had done her job. As soon as you saw it you went to pay her, she got on a flight shortly afterwards. That transaction you filmed and took it to the Corporation labs to get it modified so later you could have it passed to gullible old me."

Fletcher sat back with a smug smile on his face. "You got the fake authenticated by the people who faked it, clever I admit."

CB was thinking fast. "But you keep going on about motive, what motive could I have?"

"That was the part I had most trouble with, if it hadn't been so obscure I'd probably have worked all this out much earlier. Today I suddenly realised that we'd been investigating the wrong crime. Rocan was incidental, anyone in a similar position might have done. The

objective from the start was to frame Ventner; first a crime had to be committed which he could plausibly be accused of. The murder of his boss was the obvious choice. I saw Ventner's compound, I know how difficult it would have been to kill him directly, all you needed to do was to bring the law into it and you would have the support of anyone you needed. Nobody objects to an armed assault if the police carry it out. You manipulated an entire city. The funny thing is, I actually respect what you did. Ventner was a genuinely evil man and if you had to kill a good man to get rid of him you probably raised the average goodness in the city. After all, I doubt Rocan was a saint."

"Interesting theory, it seems you've thought it through rather carefully. What are you going to do now?" CB was tense; adrenaline seemed to flow in him.

"Nothing, I'm going home. I can't prove any of this and, as I said, I don't begrudge the removal of Ventner from the world scene. I am curious to know whether I'm right though. Am I?"

CB relaxed and smiled. "You're very close actually, there's only one piece you haven't got in your jigsaw. The murderer."

Fletcher was amazed. "Who was it? Not your boss, he wouldn't get involved."

"Miles Rocan was murdered by Miles Rocan. He isn't dead, the body was a biosculpt. The victim was hired to make himself visible while Rocan went off to a mistress, a lady of dubious reputation and exotic taste. When we needed a crime it was too good to pass up. I don't even know the poor man's name."

Fletcher was speechless, CB grinned at him, finally able to show Fletcher how easily he'd been deceived. At that moment the call for boarding on Fletcher's flight came over the public address system. CB escorted Fletcher to the departure gate and wished him a warm farewell. As he walked away to the lounge to watch the plane take off he could only imagine how frustrated and powerless Fletcher must feel. It must really grate on an old fashioned policeman to let a murderer get away, however much he admired the skill of the crime.

In fact Fletcher was feeling quite good as the plane took off. He accepted a drink from the dispenser in front of him and smiled to himself as he looked down at the recording disc held safely in his hand. The clever ones were always the easiest, they can't wait to show you how clever they are.