

BRUNO By Dean R. Koontz 1 I WAS SLEEPING OFF HALF A BOTTLE OF GOOD SCOTCH AND A BLONDE named Sylvia, who hadn't been so bad herself. But no one can sneak up on me, no matter how bushed I am. You have to be a light sleeper to last long in this business. I heard the thump near the foot of my bed, and I was reaching under the pillow for my Colt .38 in the next instant. If I hadn't been out celebrating the successful conclusion of a case, the blinds and drapes wouldn't have been drawn. But I had been, and they were, so I didn't see anything. I thought I heard footsteps in the hallway to the living room, but I couldn't be sure. I slid out of bed, stared intently around the room. Brown gloom, no intruder. I padded into the hall, looked both ways. No one. In the front room, I distinctly heard the rod of the police-special lock pull out of its floor groove. The door opened, closed, and footsteps pounded in the outside hall, then down the apartment-house steps. I ran into the living room and almost into the corridor before I remembered I was in my skivvies. It's not a building where anyone would care - or maybe even notice - a guy in his briefs, but I like to think I have higher standards than some of the weird creeps I call neighbors. Turning on the lights, I saw that the police lock had been disengaged. I slid the bolt back in place. I carefully searched the apartment from the john to the linen closet. There weren't any bombs or other dirty work, at least as far as I could see. I checked the bedroom twice, since that was where I first heard him, but it was clean. I brewed some coffee. The first sip was so bad that I poured half the mug in the sink, wondering if the old plumbing could take it, and then laced what was left with some good brandy. Better. My kind of breakfast. So there I stood in my shorts on the cold kitchen floor, warming my gut with liquor and wondering who had broken in and why. Then I had a bad thought. When the intruder left, he'd pulled the rod of the special lock out of its nest in the floor. Which meant he'd entered the apartment through a window or that, when he'd first come through the door, he had replaced the police rod. The last idea was stupid. No dude is going to make it hard for himself to get out if the job goes sour. I went around checking all the windows. They were locked as always. I even checked the bathroom window, though it has no lock, is barred, and is set in a blank wall eight floors above the street. No one had come in any of the windows. I slapped my head a few times, as if I might knock some smarts into myself and figure this out. No smarter, I decided to take a shower and get on with the day. It must have been hallucinations. I'd never had what the two-hundred-dollar-an-hour shrinks call postcoital depression. Maybe this was what it was supposed to be like. After all, no one walks into your apartment after achieving the near impossible of silently throwing a police lock, then sneaks into your bedroom, just to look you over and leave. And none of my enemies would send a killer who would chicken out after he got that far. I finished the shower at four-thirty and did my exercises until five. Then I showered again - cold, this time - toweled hard enough to raise blisters, combed my mop into a semblance of order, and dressed. By five-thirty, I was sliding into a booth down at the Ace-Spot, and Dorothy, the waitress, was plopping a Scotch and water in front of me before the smell of the place was properly in my nose. "What'll it be, Jake?" she asked. She has a voice like glass dropped into a porcelain basin. I ordered steak and eggs with a double helping of french fries, then topped it off with a question: "Anybody been asking around about me, Dory?" She wrote half the question down on the order pad before she realized that I had stopped ordering. Dory was supposed to have been a fine-looking street girl in her day, but no one ever said she had many smarts. "Not me," she said. "I'll ask Benny." Benny was the bartender. He was smarter than Dory. Some days, he was capable of winning a debate with a carrot. I don't know why I tend to hang around with so many chumps, saps, and blockheads. Maybe it makes me feel superior. A guy who's dumb enough to be trying to make a living as an old-fashioned shamus in the late twentieth century, in the age of computers and space-age eavesdropping equipment and drug thugs who'd kill their

grandmothers for a nickel - hell, he needs some reason to feel good about himself. When Dory came back, she brought a negative from Benny, plus the food. I took it down in large bites, thinking about the stranger who had walked through the wall into my bedroom. After two more big Scotches, I went home to look the place over again. Just as I reached my apartment door and thrust the key toward the lock, this dude opened it from the inside and started coming out. "Hold it right there, creepo," I said, leveling my .38 on his big belly. I pushed him back into the living room, closed the door behind us, and turned on the light. "What do you want?" he asked. "What do I want? Look, buster, these are my digs, see? I live here. And the last time I looked, you didn't." He was dressed like something out of a Bogart film, and I might have laughed except that I was angry enough to chew up a little bunny rabbit and spit out good-luck charms. He had a huge hat pulled down over half his face. The overcoat might have been tailored for Siamese twins. It hung to his knees, and after that there were wide, sloppy trousers and big - I mean BIG - stuffy tennis shoes. The tennis shoes didn't fit Bogart, but the air of mystery was there. For size, this guy reminded me of that actor from the old movies, Sidney Greenstreet, though with a serious gland condition. "I don't want to harm you," he said. His voice was about a thousand registers below Dory's, but it had that same harsh sound of something breaking. "You the same dude who was here earlier?" I asked. He hunched his head and said, "I never been here before." "Let's see what you look like." I reached for his hat. He tried to pull away, discovered I was faster than he was, tried to slug me in the chest. But I got the hat off and managed to take the clip on the shoulder instead of over the heart where he had aimed it. Then I smiled and looked up at his face and stopped smiling and said, "Good God!" "That kicks it!" His face contorted, and his big square teeth thrust over his black lip. I was backed up against the door. And though I was terrified for the first time in years, I wasn't about to let him out. If my threats didn't keep him where he was, a hot kiss from the .38 would manage just fine - I hoped. "Who ... what are you?" I asked. "You were right the first time. Who." "Answer it, then." "Can we sit down? I'm awful tired." I let him sit, but I stayed on my feet to be able to move fast, and while he walked to the sofa and collapsed as if he were on his last legs, I looked him over good. He was a bear. A bruin. He was a big one too, no little Teddy, six feet four. His shoulders were broad, and under those baggy clothes he probably had a barrel chest and legs like tree trunks. His face was a block of granite that some artist had tried to sculpt with a butter knife, a straight pin, and a blunt screwdriver. All sharp planes, eyes set under a shelf of bone, a jaw better than Schwarzenegger's. Over all that: fur. If I hadn't been used to watching afternoon TV talk shows when business was slow, all those programs featuring husbands-who-cheat-with-their-wives'-mothers and transvestite-dentists-who-have-been-abducted-by-aliens, then sure as hell the sight of a talking bruin would have crumpled me like an old paper cup. But even being a couch potato in the nineties and facing up to what's creeping around on our city streets is enough to make you tougher than Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe combined. "Spill it," I said. "My name is Bruno," he said. "And?" "You only asked who I was." "Don't get cute with me." "Then you weren't being literal?" "Say what?" "By asking who I was, you were actually asking for a general accounting, a broader spectrum of data." "I could blow your head off for that," I told him. He seemed surprised and shifted uneasily on the sofa, making the springs sing. "For what?" "Talking like a damn accountant." He considered for a moment. "Okay. Why not? What do I have to lose? I'm after Graham Stone, the first man you heard in here a few hours ago. He's wanted for some crimes." "What crimes?" "You wouldn't understand them." "Do I look like I was raised in a nunnery, don't understand sin? Nothing any sleazeball would do could surprise me. So how did this Stone character get in here? And you?" I waved the .38 at him when he hesitated. "I guess there's no concealing it," Bruno said. "He and I came through from another probability." "Huh?" It was hard to make even that

sound with my mouth hanging open as if I were a stoned fan at a Grateful Dead concert. "Another probability. Another time line. Graham Stone is from a counter-Earth, one of the infinity of possible worlds that exist parallel to one another. I come from a different world than Stone's. You've become a focal point for cross-time energies. If this is the first time it's happened to you, then your talent must be a new one. Besides, you're not mapped - no record of you in the guidebook. If it were an old talent-" I made a number of wordless grunts until he got the idea to shut his yap. I made him go pour me half a glass of Scotch and drank most of it before I said anything. "Explain this ... ability I've acquired. I don't scan it." "It's possible to travel across the probabilities, from one Earth to another. But the only portals are those generated around living beings who somehow absorb cross-time energy and dissipate it without the rudeness of an explosion." "Rudeness." "Yes. That can be messy." "How messy? Very." "Anyway, you're one of those talented people who don't explode." "Good for me." "You broadcast a portal like - well, sort of like a spiritual aura in a twenty-foot radius, in all directions." "Is that so?" I said numbly. "Not all possible worlds have such talented creatures on them, and therefore the infinity of possibilities is not really completely open to us." I finished the Scotch and wanted to lick the glass. "And there is a ... a counter-Earth where intelligent bears have taken over?" I couldn't any longer blame this business on my hot night with Sylvia. Not even the most persuasive shrink in the world would ever convince me that postcoital depression could be like this. "Not exactly taken over," Bruno said. "But on my probability line, there was a nuclear war of distressing dimensions shortly after the close of World War Two. In the aftermath, science survived, but not a great many people did. In order to survive as a race, they had to learn to stimulate intelligence in lesser species, master genetic engineering to create animals with human intelligence and dexterity." He held up his hands, which were graced with stubby fingers rather than paws. He wiggled them at me and showed all his square teeth in a broad, silly grin. "If I can somehow get us an appointment with Steven Spielberg," I said, "we're both going to be filthy rich." He frowned. "Steven Spielberg? The father of space travel?" "Huh? No, the movie director." "Not on my world." "On your world, Spielberg is the father of space travel?" "He invented frozen yogurt too." "Really?" "And antigravity boots and microwave popcorn. He's the richest man in history." "I see." "And the architect of world peace," Bruno said reverently. I sat down as the implications of what he had told me began to work their way through my thick head. "Do you mean that weird characters from a thousand different worlds are going to be popping up around me all the time?" "Not really," he said. "First of all, there just isn't that much reason to visit your probability - or any other, for that matter. There are too many alternate realities for cross-time traffic to get heavy in any one of them. Unless it's such a weird Earth as to be a tourist area. But your Earth looks bland and ordinary, judging from this apartment." I ignored that and said, "But suppose I had been walking down the street when you popped through? That's going to cause some excitement when it happens!" "Funny thing about that," Bruno said. "When one of us first pops through, not even you can see us. We gradually come into your perception, like someone seen out of the corner of your eye, and it doesn't look magical at all." I made him go and get me more Scotch. After a third of that, I felt more cheerful. "You said you were a cop." "Did I?" "Just as much. You said this Stone is wanted for some crime or other. Unless you're an average citizen with more than his share of humanitarianism, then you're a cop." He took a curious-looking silver circle out of his overcoat pocket and held it up: PROBABILITY POLICE. When he ran his thumb down its surface, the words disappeared under a picture of him. "Now, I really must be going. Graham Stone is too dangerous a man to be permitted freedom here." Beside me were the controls for the CD player. I selected a disc and turned up the volume while he rose and pulled on his absurd hat. When the Butterfield Blues Band blared in at top volume, I put a

slug in the couch beside him, incidentally tearing a hole through his overcoat. He sat down. I lowered the volume. "What do you want?" he asked. I had to admit that he was cool about it. He didn't even check out his coat to see how close the round had actually been. I already had my angle. "You're going to need help. I know this urban dump. You don't." "I have my own devices," he said. "Devices? You're not Sherlock Holmes in Victorian England, buster. This is America in the nineties, the big city - they eat bears like you for breakfast." He looked worried. "I'm not particularly familiar with this reality-" "So you need me," I said, keeping the Colt aimed in his general direction. "Go on," he said gruffly. If he could have gotten to me, I'm sure he would have shown me how fast those blocky fists could move. "It just so happens that I'm a private investigator. I never have much liked the badge-carrying kind of police - like you. But I'm never against working with them if there's a profit in it." He seemed about to reject the proposal, then paused to give it some thought. "How much?" "Let's say two thousand for the whole caper." "Two thousand dollars." "Or two pair of Spielberg gravity boots, if you've got 'em." He shook his head. "Can't introduce revolutionary technology across the probability lines. Bad things happen." "Like what?" "Little girls spontaneously combusting in New Jersey." "Don't play me for a fool." "I'm serious." He looked serious, all right-bearishly dour, bearishly grim. "The effects are unpredictable and often weird. The universe is a mysterious place, you know." "I hadn't noticed. So do we have a deal for two thousand bucks?" "You use the gun well," he said. "Okay. Agreed." He had accepted the figure too smoothly. "Better make that three thousand," I said. He grinned. "Agreed." I realized that money meant nothing to him - not the money of this probability line. I could have asked for anything. But I could not squeeze more out of him. It would be a matter of principle now. "In advance," I said. "You have any money on you?" he asked. "I'll need it to see what sort of bills you have." I took two hundred out of my wallet and flopped it on the coffee table in front of him. He lined up the fifties and twenties on the coffee table, then produced what appeared to be a thin camera from his overcoat. He photographed the bills, and a moment later duplicates slid out of the developing slit in the device's side. He handed them across and waited for my reaction. They were perfect bills. "But they're counterfeit," I complained. "True. But no one will ever catch them. Counterfeiters get caught because they make a couple of thousand bills with the same serial numbers. You only have two bills of each. If you have more cash around, I'll copy that." I dug out my cash reserves, which were hidden in a lockbox in the false bottom of the kitchen cabinet. I had my three thousand within a few minutes. When I had put everything back under the kitchen cabinet, with the original two hundred in my pocket, I said, "Now let's find Stone." 2 BY TWILIGHT, WHEN SNOW BEGAN TO FALL AND THE TRAIL STARTED TO get hot, we were in an alley two miles from my apartment. Bruno checked the silver wafer that had been his ID badge but that obviously served other purposes. He grunted approval at the shimmering orange color. It measured, he said, the residual time energy that Stone radiated, and it changed colors the closer we got to the quarry. "Neat gadget," I said. "Spielberg invented it." Yellow when we had left the apartment, the disc was now turning a steadily deeper shade of orange. "Getting closer," Bruno said. He examined the rim, where the color changes began, and snorted his satisfaction. "Let's try this alley." "Not the best part of town." "Dangerous." "Probably not for a seven-foot bear with futuristic weapons." "Good." Hunching to minimize his height, huddling in the big coat and enormous hat, striving to pass for a big bearded human being, he put his head down and plodded forward. I followed him, bent against the brisk wind and the driving snow. The alley led into a street lined with auto yards, industrial-equipment companies, warehouses, and a few other businesses that didn't look so obviously like mafia front operations. One of the warehouses was an abandoned heap of cinder block and corrugated aluminum; its two windows, high above the street, were shattered.

Bruno checked his disc and looked at the warehouse. "There," he said. The wafer was glowing soft red. We crossed the street, leaving black tracks in the undisturbed skiff of white. There were two ground-floor entrances: one a man-size door, the other a roll-up large enough to admit trucks. Both were firmly locked. "I could blast the sucker open," I said, indicating the lock on the smaller door. "He's upstairs anyway," Bruno said, checking the wafer again. "Let's try the second-story door." We climbed the fire escape, gripping the icy iron railing because the stairs were treacherous. The door at the top had been forced open and was bowed outward on flimsy hinges. We went inside and stood in the quiet darkness, listening. Finally I switched on a flashlight when I realized that Bruno could probably see in the dark and I definitely couldn't. We were standing in a wide gallery that encircled an open well to the ground floor of the warehouse. A hundred feet to the left, a rattling sound arose, like a sack of bones being shaken. When we tracked it down it was only a wooden ladder, still vibrating after someone had descended it. I peered over the edge, but Stone was gone. We had not heard either of the lower doors open, so we went down after him. Ten minutes later, we had checked out all the empty crates and broken pieces of machinery, all the blind spots in the row of empty offices along the rear wall. We hadn't found a trace of this Stone joker. The front doors were still locked from the inside. Neither of us put away his gun. I had replaced the expended shell in the Smith & Wesson and now had a full clip. Bruno's weapon wasn't anything like I'd seen before, but he assured me it was deadly. "It's a Disney .780 Death Hose." "Disney?" "Walt Disney. Best armament manufacturers in the world." "Really?" "You don't have them here?" "Mine's a Smith and Wesson," I said. "The hamburger people?" I frowned. "What?" "You know - the Smith and Wesson golden arches?" I dropped the subject. There are some pretty weird alternate realities out there. I heard faint strains of heavy-metal music that seemed to emanate from the thin air around us, but when I looked carefully along the walls, I found an old door that we had missed, painted to match the walls. I opened it cautiously and stared into black depths. Thrashing guitars, a keyboard synthesizer, drums. I went down the steps, and Bruno followed. "Where's the music coming from?" my bruin friend asked. I didn't like his hot breath storming down my neck, but I didn't complain. As long as he was behind me, nobody was going to sneak up on me unawares. "Looks like maybe there's a cellar in this place or in some connecting building where they're playing." "Who?" "The band." "What band?" "How should I know what band?" He said, "I like bands." "Good for you." "I like to dance," said the bear. "In the circus?" I asked. "Where?" Then I realized that maybe I was on the verge of insulting him. After all, he was an intelligent mutant, a probability cop, not one of our bears. He was no more likely to have performed a dance routine in a circus than he was to have worn a tutu and ridden a unicycle. "We're getting closer," Bruno informed me as we continued down the stairs, "but Stone isn't here." The wafer still was not a bright crimson. "This way," I said as we reached the bottom of the stairs and arrived at the damp, fetid, trash-heaped basement of the abandoned warehouse. The place smelled of urine and dead meat, and it was most likely the breeding ground of the virus that will eventually wipe out humanity. I followed the siren strains of the head-banger music from one cold stone room to another, scaring rats and spiders and God knows what else. Even Jimmy Hoffa might have been down there. Or Elvis - but a strange, walking-dead Elvis with lots of sharp teeth, red eyes, and an uncharacteristically bad attitude. In the dankest, most stench-filled room of all, I came to an old timbered door with iron hinges. It was locked. "Stand back," I said. "What're you doing?" "Renovation," I said, and blew the lock out of the door. When that hellacious roar finished bouncing around the cellar, Bruno said, "I have subtler devices that accomplish the same thing." "To hell with them," I said. I opened the door - only to discover another door behind it. Steel. Relatively new. There was no handle or lock on our side. The double-door arrangement was meant to

seal off this building from the next, so it was impossible to get from one to the other without people acting in concert on both sides. Stepping forward into the beam of my flashlight, Bruno said, "Allow me." From a pocket of his voluminous coat, he produced a four-inch-long rod of green crystal and shook it as if it were a thermometer. I could hear the instrument begin to ring, way up on the scale where it would soon become inaudible to human beings but bother the hell out of dogs. Weirdly, I could feel the vibrations of the damn thing in my tongue. "My tongue's vibrating," I said. "Of course." He touched the crystal rod to the steel door, and the locks - more than one - popped open with a hard clack-clack-clack. My tongue stopped vibrating, Bruno returned the crystal rod to his pocket, and I pushed open the steel door. We were in a washroom, alone. Two stalls with the doors half open, two urinals that some of the stoned customers evidently found too stationary to hit with any regularity, a sink so filthy that it looked as if Bobo the Dog Boy regularly took baths in it, and a stained mirror that showed us grimacing like a pair of old maids in a bordello. "What's that music?" Bruno shouted. It was necessary to shout, because the heavy-metal band was nearby now. "Metallica!" "Not very danceable," he complained. "Depends on how old you are." "I'm not that old." "Yeah, but you're a bear." I sort of like heavy metal. It clears out my sinuses and makes me feel immortal. If I listened to too much of it, I'd start eating live cats and shooting people whose names annoyed me. I needed my jazz and blues. But a little was always good, and the band at this club wasn't half bad. "Now what?" Bruno shouted. "Sounds like a bar or club or something," I said. "We'll go out and look for him." "Not me. I mean, it's okay to be out on the streets, especially at night, at a distance from people where they can't quite get a look at me unless I let them, but this would be close quarters. Stone shouldn't be mingling either. He looks human mostly - but someone might get suspicious. He should never have tried jaunting into an unexplored time line in the first place. It was desperation when he knew I almost had him." "What then?" I asked. "I'll stay here, in one of the stalls. You check the place out. If he isn't there, we'll go back into the warehouse and up into the street where we can pick up the trail." "Earning my money, eh?" I asked. While I adjusted my tie in the mirror, Bruno went into a toilet stall and closed the door. From in there, he said, "Lord Almighty." "What's wrong." "Do people on this world have any respect for cleanliness?" "Some of us have standards." "This is disgusting." "Try the other stall," I advised. "What might be in there?" he grumbled. "I won't be long," I promised, and I left the reeking washroom in search of Graham Stone. 3 I HAD TO BULL MY WAY OUT OF THE WASHROOM, BECAUSE THERE WERE so many people in the place that they were stacked like cordwood on end, wall to wall. I had seen Graham Stone's picture on that changing badge of Bruno's, and I knew what to look for: six feet tall, pale face, jet-black hair, eyes that were crystal blue and looked as empty as a tax collector's heart, thin lips - an image of cruelty. I checked out those around me, rejected them, and worked my way deeper into the mob of head-bangers who were swilling beer, smoking medicinal herbs, feeling up their girls, feeling up their guys, jumping to the music, and looking me over as if I might hand them copies of Watchtower magazine and try to convince them that Jesus was their savior. It wasn't easy finding one face out of that crowd. Things kept distracting me. There were strobe lights winking every few minutes, and when they were on, I had to stop and wait before moving on again. When the strobes were off, there were shimmering film clips from horror movies projected on the walls and ceiling, and on the patrons as well. About ten minutes after I had started across the floor, through the scattered dancers, past the bar and bandstand, I spotted Graham Stone working his way to the lighted doorway in the far right corner. A sign above the door claimed OFFICE, and another on the door itself insisted EMPLOYEES ONLY. It was half open, and I walked through as though I belonged there, keeping a hand in my jacket pocket where I had the pistol. There were several rooms back here, all leading off a short hall, all the doors

closed. I rapped on the first one, and when a woman said, "Yes?" I opened it and checked out the room. She was a stacked redhead in a leotard, doing ballet steps in front of a mirror to the sounds - now - of Megadeth. Ten chairs were lined up against the walls around the room, and in each chair sat a different ventriloquist dummy. Some held bananas in their wooden hands. I didn't want to know any more about it. "Sorry," I said. "Wrong room." I closed the door and went to the one across the hall. Graham Stone was there. He stood by the desk, watching me with those cold eyes. I stepped inside, closed the door, and took the Smith & Wesson out of my pocket to be certain that he understood the situation. "Stand real still," I said. He didn't move, and he didn't answer me. When I started toward him, however, he sidestepped. I cocked the .38, but it didn't grab his attention like it should have. He watched disinterestedly. I walked forward again, and he moved again. I'd had the word from Bruno that a bring-him-back-alive clause was not a condition of my employment contract. In fact, the bear had implied that any display of mercy on my part would be met with all the savagery of a Hare Krishna panhandler on a megadose of PCP. Well, he hadn't put it quite that way, but I got the message. So I shot Graham Stone in the chest, pointblank, because I had no way of knowing what he might be able to do to me. The bullet ripped through him, and he sagged, folded onto the desk, fell to the floor, and deflated. Inside of six seconds, he was nothing more than a pile of tissue paper painted to look like a man. A three-dimensional snakeskin that, shed, was still convincingly real. I examined the remains. No blood. No bones. Just ashes. I looked at the Smith & Wesson. It was my familiar gun. Not a Disney .780 Death Hose. Which meant that this hadn't been the real Graham Stone but - something else, an amazing construct of some kind that was every bit as convincing as it was flimsy. Before I had too much time to think about that, I beat it back into the corridor. No one had heard the shot. The thrashmasters on the bandstand were doing a fair imitation of Megadeth - a bitchin' number from Youthanasia - and providing perfect cover. Now what? I cautiously checked the other two rooms that opened off the hallway, and I found Graham Stone in both. He crumpled between my fingers in the first room, as solid in appearance as any face on Mount Rushmore but was, in actuality, as insubstantial as any current politician's image. In the second room, I shredded him with a well-placed kick to the crotch. By the time I reached the dance floor again, I was furious. When you blew a guy away, you expected him to go down like bricks and stay down. That was how the game was played. I didn't like this cheap trick. In the washroom, I rapped on Bruno's stall door, and he came out with his hat still pulled way down and his collar still turned up. Face wrinkled in disgust, he said, "If you people don't bother flushing, why even put the lever on the toilet to begin with?" "There's trouble," I said. I told him about the three extra Graham Stones and demanded some explanation. "I didn't want to have to tell you this." He looked sheepish. "I was afraid it would scare you, affect your efficiency." "What? Tell me what?" I asked. He shrugged his burly shoulders. "Well, Graham Stone isn't a human being." I almost laughed. "Neither are you." He looked hurt, and I felt like a blockhead. "I am a little bit human," he said. "Certain borrowed genetic material ... But forget that. What I should have said is that Graham Stone doesn't really come from any alternate Earth. He's an alien. From another star system." I went to the sink and splashed a lot of cold water on my face. It didn't do much good. "Tell me," I said. "Not the whole story," he said. "That would take too much time. Stone is an alien. Humanoid except when you're close enough to see that he doesn't have any pores. And if you look closely at his hands, you'll see where he's had his sixth fingers amputated to pass for human." "Sixth-finger-amputation scar - always a sure indicator of the alien among us," I said sarcastically. "Yes, exactly. There was a shipload of these creatures that crashed on one of the probability lines seven months ago. We've never been able to communicate with them. They're extremely hostile and very strange. The general feeling is that we've met a species of megalomaniacs. All have been terminated except Graham

Stone. He's escaped us thus far." "If he's an alien, why the British-sounding name?" "That's the first name he went by when he started to pass for human. There have been others since. Apparently even aliens seem to feel that being British has a certain connotation of class and style. It's also a constant on eighty percent of the time lines. Although there are a couple of realities wherein being from the island-nation of Tonga is the epitome of class." "And what the hell has this alien done to deserve death?" I asked. "Maybe if a greater attempt was made to understand him-" "An attempt was made. One morning, when the doctors arrived at the labs for a continuation of the study, they found the entire night crew dead. A spiderweb fungus was growing out of their mouths, nostrils, eye sockets ... You get the picture? He hasn't done it since. But we don't think he has lost the capacity." I went back to the sink and looked at myself in the mirror. Someone came in to use the urinal, and Bruno leaped backward into the toilet stall and slammed the door. "Oh, yuck!" he growled, but the newcomer didn't seem to find anything strange about the bearish voice. I had three minutes to study my precious kisser in the mirror until the head-banger left. Then Bruno came out again, grimacing worse than ever. "Listen," I said, "suppose Stone was within twenty feet of me, back there in the offices while I was playing around with those paper decoys or whatever the hell they were. He could have tripped right out of this probability by now." "No," Bruno said. "You're a receiver, not a transmitter. He'll have to locate someone with the reverse talent of yours before he can get out of this time line." "Are there others?" "I detect two within the city," Bruno said. "We could just stake those two out and wait for him!" "Hardly," the bruin said. "He would just as soon settle down here and take over a world line for himself. That would give him a better base with which to strike out against the other continuums." "He has that kind of power?" "I said he was dangerous." "Let's move it," I said, turning to the steel door from the adjacent warehouse basement. "You're marvelous," Bruno said. I turned and looked at him, trying to find sarcasm in that crazy face of his. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. "Marvelous? I'm marvelous? Listen, one guy doesn't tell another guy he's marvelous - especially not when the two of them are in a bathroom." "Why?" "Never mind why," I said, starting to burn. "Anyway, I'm not a guy. I'm a bear." "You're a guy bear, aren't you?" "Well, yes." "So can it with this 'marvelous' crap." "All I meant was, in the space of a few short hours, you have accepted the existence of probability worlds, an intelligent bear, and an alien from another world. And you don't seem shaken at all." I set him straight: "Yesterday, I got good and drunk. I spent six active hours in bed with a great blonde named Sylvia. I ate two steaks, half a dozen eggs, and piles of fried potatoes. I sweated out every drop of tension from the last job I took on. I'm a purged man. I can take anything tonight. Nobody has ever thrown anything at me that I can't take, and it isn't going to start with this. Besides, I have three thousand bucks at stake - to say nothing about a little thing called 'pride.' Now, let's get the hell out of here." We went through the steel door and the wood door beyond it, into the basement of the abandoned warehouse. 4 WHEN WE GOT BACK ON THE STREET AGAIN, WE DISCOVERED THAT AN inch of snow had fallen since we'd gone into the warehouse and the storm had cranked up two notches. Hard snow whipped about us, pasted our clothes, stung our faces. I cursed but Bruno just accepted it and said nothing. What seemed like a millennium later and some ten million miles from the metal bar where I had almost cornered Stone, using the color-changing disc as our guide, we found some of the shifty alien's handiwork. Five teenage boys were lying in an alleyway, all with a white, gossamer fungus growing out of their mouths, eyes, nostrils - even their rectums, for all I knew. "I was afraid of this," Bruno said, genuine anguish in his voice. "Don't sweat it," I said, bending to look more closely at the corpses. They weren't pretty. "They're thugs. Delinquents. Members of some street gang. They'd just as soon shoot your sister as eat a doughnut. It's a new gang to me. See the cobra each one has tattooed on his

hand? They probably tried to mug Graham and had the old proverbial tables turned on them. For once, Graham did something worthwhile. They won't be snatching welfare money from old ladies and beating grandfathers up to steal pocket watches." "Just the same," he said, "we have to dispose of the bodies. We can't allow these to be found. There'll be a lot of questions about what killed them, and this probability line is not yet ready to be taken into the world travel societies." "Why's that?" "Credit problems." "So ... what do you propose?" I asked. He took that strange pistol out of his pocket, changed the setting on the regulator dial on the butt, then ashed all the dead gang-bangers. He was right about the Disney .780 Death Hose - it was the mother of all ray guns. As we stirred the gray residue around with our feet and let the wind blow it away, I didn't feel so good. I kept reminding myself about the three thousand bucks. And Sylvia. And the taste of good Scotch. And how I would lose all those things if I once let my nerve crack. Because, see, once a private richard backs down, his career is finished. Either his career or his life. After the snowplows had passed, we walked in the middle of the street where we didn't have to fight the drifting snow. At first, the tracking disc was little more than amber, but it soon began to change to a brilliant orange. As redness crept in around its edges, our spirits rose again. We eventually had to leave the street for the river park, where the untouched snow soaked my socks and trouser cuffs. As the wafer in Bruno's hand grew brighter red than it had been all evening, we topped a knoll and saw Graham Stone. He was at the end of a pier at the yacht basin. He scrambled onto the deck of a sleek boat, ran for the wheelhouse door, swung up the steps, and disappeared inside. The running lights popped on along the length of the boat, and the engines coughed and stuttered to life. I ran down the hill, my pistol in my right hand, while I thrust my other arm forward to break any fall I might make on the slippery ground. Behind me, Bruno was shouting something. I didn't listen to it. He shouted it again, then started running after me. I could tell he was running, even without looking, for I could hear his big feet slamming the ground. When I reached the end of the pier, Stone had reversed the boat and was taking it out into the dark river. As I ran the last few yards, I judged the distance to the deck of the receding craft at maybe twelve feet. I leaped, fell over the rail of the boat in a tangle of arms and legs, smacked the polished deck with my shoulder, and watched the pretty stars for a moment. Behind me, I heard a bellow of frustration, then a huge splash. Bruno hadn't made it. From where I lay, I could look up into the wheelhouse windows. Graham Stone stood up there, staring down at me - maybe the real creature or maybe just another of his shed skins. I pushed to my feet, shook those stars out of my head, and looked for my gun. It was gone. I glanced back toward the pier. There was no sign of Bruno. And somewhere in the intervening stretch of dark water, my .38 lay in river muck, useless. I didn't feel so good. I wished that I had never left the Ace-Spot this morning, had never met Bruno. Then I shook off all the negative thoughts and started looking around for something I could use as a weapon. If you start wishing things were different from what they are, the next step is depression, then inactivity, and finally vegetation. No matter what the state of the world, you have got to move. Move. I found a length of pipe in a tool chest that was bolted to the deck against the far railing. I could cave in a skull very nicely if I put the proper swing behind it. I felt better. Stone was still in the wheelhouse, still watching me. The blue eyes gleamed with the reflection of the ship lights. He seemed too confident as I walked along the deck to the steps. I swung inside, crouching low. I kept the pipe extended, and he didn't even bother to turn and look at me. I approached carefully, using mincing little steps because I hated to commit myself to more than a few inches at a time. I kept thinking of the five young thugs lying back there with the cobweb fungus growing out of their bodies. When I was close enough, I swung the pipe in a short, vicious arc. It slammed into his head - and on down through his neck and chest and stomach and thighs. Another snakeskin. The lousy simulacrum collapsed, seemed to

dissolve, and was a little pile of wrinkled useless tissue at my feet. Damn him! Or should I say it? When I looked through the bridge window, I could see that we were more than halfway across the river toward the West Shore district of the city. The boat was on automatic pilot. I couldn't make anything of the controls, and though I worked them at random, safeguards must have kept anything from changing. More wary than I had been, I left the wheelhouse in search of Stone. I found him by the toolbox where I had found the piece of pipe. He gripped the railing with both hands and stared longingly at the approaching shore where we would surely run aground. I sneaked up behind him, and I let him have it. Hard. It was another tissue-paper construction. I wished I knew how the bastard made those things. It was a handy talent. We were two thirds of the way to shore now, and if I didn't find him soon, he might escape us again. And Bruno had explained that a few days in any one probability will dissipate the residual energy of cross-time travel-rendering the tracking disc useless. Stone had to be below deck. I could see all of the planking above the waterline, and I knew the wheelhouse was empty. So I found the hatch and the stairs to the lower cabins. I went down like any good private richard learns to do - carefully. In the galley was another simulacrum, which I heroically crumpled with my trusty pipe. I felt like an idiot, but I was not about to take it easy with one of them - and then discover that it was the real and deadly thing. I found another paper demon in the first of the double-bunk sleeping quarters and dispatched him quickly. The second sleeping cabin was empty, containing neither a scarecrow Graham Stone nor the real one. Which left the bathroom. The door was closed but not locked. I twisted the lever, yanked it open, and found him. For a moment, I was disoriented. Before me was the real Graham Stone, and a false shell separating from him. It looked like I had double vision, with the two images overlapping slightly. Then he snarled and smashed the simulacrum away as it separated from him. On his hands, ugly brown bubbles of flesh rose up, burst free, and spun at me like biological missiles. I stepped backward, swung the pipe, and broke open one of the spinning ... seeds, spores, whatever the hell they were. Instantly, the end of the pipe was sheathed in writhing white fibers. The fungus spread inexorably down toward my hand, and I had to drop the pipe. The second bubble had struck the doorjamb; a colony of cobweb fungus wriggled along the wood and aluminum, anchoring itself, spreading outward in all directions. "Hold it right there!" I said, pretending that I was tough. His hands came up again. I could see the spores forming. The skin turned brown, bulged, leaped away from him. One of them burst on the wall next to me and sent climbing white tendrils toward the ceiling and the floor. Cracks appeared in the fiberboard as the stuff ate its way into the core of the ship. The second spore struck my sports-coat sleeve, exploded with a bubbling froth of white growth. Never before or since have I stripped off a coat that fast, not even when a delectable blonde was waiting for me and cooing sweet things; I nearly strangled myself in the damn thing, but I got rid of it. By the time the coat hit the floor, the albino fronds were trembling like the hairs on the back of my neck. Stone stepped out of the bathroom into the companionway, raising those hands at me again, and I turned and ran like hell. Once before, I said that a private detective is finished when his nerve cracks, that the first time he backs down is the point at which his career begins to terminate. Well, I stand by that. I wasn't turning chicken. I was just using my head for once. Those who fight and run away - live to fight another day. So I ran. There are times when you know it isn't sensible to take on a tank with a target pistol, because you'll be standing there holding your target pistol and looking at the twelve-inch hole they just put in your gut. Besides, this creepy Stone character wasn't playing the same game I was. He didn't know the rules. Even the crummiest two-bit punk will give you half a chance. He'll use a rod or a knife or even a jar full of sulfuric acid. But nothing this tricky. Stone didn't have any respect for tradition. Topside, I ran - to the bow of the craft and checked the onrushing bank of the river. It seemed no more than two hundred feet away now.

It was the most welcome sight of my life. On the rail next to me, a pod of fibrous death split and wrapped spidery tentacles around the iron, bored into the metal, and began to greedily devour it. I was struck with the notion that these pods were more virulent than those that had killed the gang-bangers in the alleyway. I dove to the right, behind an exhaust housing. Cautiously, I peered over the top and saw Stone standing by the wheelhouse steps, his bright eyes flashing, his palms flattened in my direction. The boat rushed closer to the shore. But not fast enough to suit me. Two pods spun over my head, landed on the deck behind, and ate down through the planking. Before long, the yacht was going to be honeycombed with the white tentacles, each as thin as a thread but as strong, surely, as a steel wire. A whining sound arose, the sound of tortured metal. The deck of the boat shuddered, and we seemed almost to come to a stop. Then there was a jolt, and we sped forward again. The bottom had dragged over a shoreline rock formation, but we had not been grounded. And then we were. The boat hit the second reef, tore out its bottom, and settled into four feet of water, most of its bulk still high and dry. I rolled back across the deck, grabbed the rail, heaved myself over the side. I struck shallow water and went under, striking my jaw on a hunk of smooth driftwood. My mouth sagged open, and I swallowed water. So this is what it's like to drown, I thought. Then I closed my stupid kisser and struggled to the surface again. I broke water, flailed my arms, pushed up, and staggered toward that blessed beach, sputtering and coughing and trying not to pass out. I may not have a number of qualities that modern society considers admirable - like refined tastes and finesse. But there's one thing I do have, damn it. Grit. I was five short steps from dry ground when the pods of fungus erupted before me. Two. Then two more. A wild tangle of white snakes rose up to block my escape. I turned and looked back. Graham Stone, alien Anglophile, looking like an evil Cary Grant, had left the ship too. He was splashing toward me. I turned to my right. Two spores fell there. The pale snakes twisted out of the water, seeking, wriggling toward me. On my left, two more. No respect for tradition at all. The water was only halfway up my calves, not deep enough for me to go beneath the surface and swim away. Besides, if the fungus was going to take me, I'd rather it happened up here, where I could see what those filaments were doing. Graham Stone came relentlessly onward, holding his fire now. He knew he had me. We were on a dark stretch of shore. No one to whom I could call for help. Then from the left arose the furious whine of a small powerboat driven to the limits of its performance. A whooping siren wailed to life, one of those ooga horns from ancient automobiles. Out of the gloom and the falling snow, Bruno appeared. He was standing in a two-seat twelve-footer, holding on to the wheel for all he was worth. The craft was hitting better than fifty miles an hour. It skimmed the water, the bow in the air. Since the boat sat higher in the water than the yacht, it passed over the rock formations and kept coming. "Bruno!" I shouted. He was a textbook example of a man - or a bear - in the grip of an anxiety attack. His big eyes rolled wildly, and he braced for the worst. The little boat hit the beach, the screws churning frantically. It slammed forward through the sand at twenty miles an hour for ten feet or so, struck a rock, stopped dead, and pitched the bruin over the windshield, across the bow, and onto the beach, flat on his enormous back. And he got up. He looked dizzy, and he was covered with sand, but he had survived. I started jumping up and down in the water yelling, "Get him, Bruno! Get him now!" Those white tentacles were threading their way closer to me, even though Graham Stone had stopped approaching. The bear raised his head, looked at me, felt for his floppy hat, then shrugged when he couldn't find it. "Get him, Bruno, get him!" I bellowed. He took out that silly-looking pistol of his, and while Stone tried to hit him with a spore of fungus, my friend the bear burned the sonofabitch on the spot with the Disney .780 Death Hose. The only thing left was some ashes, which floated away. I knew I was going to have to get one of those. Maybe Mickey Mouse sold them out of a secret shop in Tomorrow Land. "You killed him!" I shouted as Bruno burned down the white

forest of fungus on all other sides of me. Then I must have had an attack of low blood sugar or something, because I passed out. I'm sure I didn't faint. 5 WE HAD TO DISPOSE OF THE YACHT. IN ABOUT FIFTEEN SECONDS, WHEN Bruno was done with it, it was only a dusting of ashes slowly washing away on the water. No fire, really. Just whoosh - and it was nothing but dust. He destroyed the powerboat too, every trace of what had taken place here this evening. We walked the dark shore for about a mile, until we found a waterside club where we could call a cab, and went back to my place. The driver kept wanting to know if Bruno had won the prize at the costume party, but we didn't answer him. At home, we cleaned up, ate every steak in my refrigerator, every egg, every slice of cheese, every - well, everything. Then we finished off three bottles of Scotch between us - though I have to admit that he drank most of it himself. We didn't talk about Graham Stone once. We talked a lot about being a cop - both the private and the badge-carrying kind. We talked about the types of punks at work out there - and discovered that they don't vary much from probability to probability. He explained why my Earth is not civilized enough to be welcomed into the probability societies - besides that credit thing. Strangely, he said that it won't be quite good enough until my type has all but vanished from the face of the Earth. Yet he liked me. I'm sure of that. Strange. Shortly before dawn, he gave himself an injection that sobered him instantly. We shook hands (or at least he reached down and shook mine) and parted company. He went off to find a transmitting point to return to his own probability. And I went to sleep. I never saw Bruno again. But there have been other odd characters. Stranger than all the crooks I've known in this city. Stranger than Benny "the Ostrich" Deekelbaker and Sam "the Plunger" Sullivan. Stranger than Hunchback Hagerty, the deformed hired killer. Stranger, in fact, than either Graham Stone or Bruno. I'll tell you about them sometime. Right now, I've got a date with the cutest redhead you ever saw. Her name's Lorella, she can dance like a dream, and aside from a weird interest in ventriloquist dummies, she's got her head on straight.

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