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INTRUDER

A NOVEL OF ELECTRONIC TERROR BY
LOUIS CHARBONNEAU

A WHOLE TOWN
HELD HOSTAGE
BY A POWER MORE
TERRIFYING THAN
ANYTHING ALIVE

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EVIL'S ULTIMATE INSTRUMENT

A frightened old man. A sexy young wife. A brilliant scientist. A hard-nosed woman reporter.

One by one they felt the force taking over the town. One by one they felt themselves being turned into puppets in the hands of an unknown master. But none of them could suspect what was behind this unholy transformation. Only the computer knew—and the computer was not printing the answer out. For this most powerful of all tools of progress had become the ultimate instrument of evil...

INTRUDER

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LOUIS CHARBONNEAU



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead,
is purely coincidental.

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reading, and was printed from new film.

INTRUDER

A Berkley Book / published by arrangement with Doubleday
& Company, Inc.

Printing History
Doubleday edition published 1979
Berkley edition / October 1982

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& Company, Inc., 245 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

ISBN: 0-425-05594-9

A BERKLEY BOOK ® TM 757,375

Berkley Books are published by Berkley Publishing Corporation,
200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016.

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Printed in the United States of America

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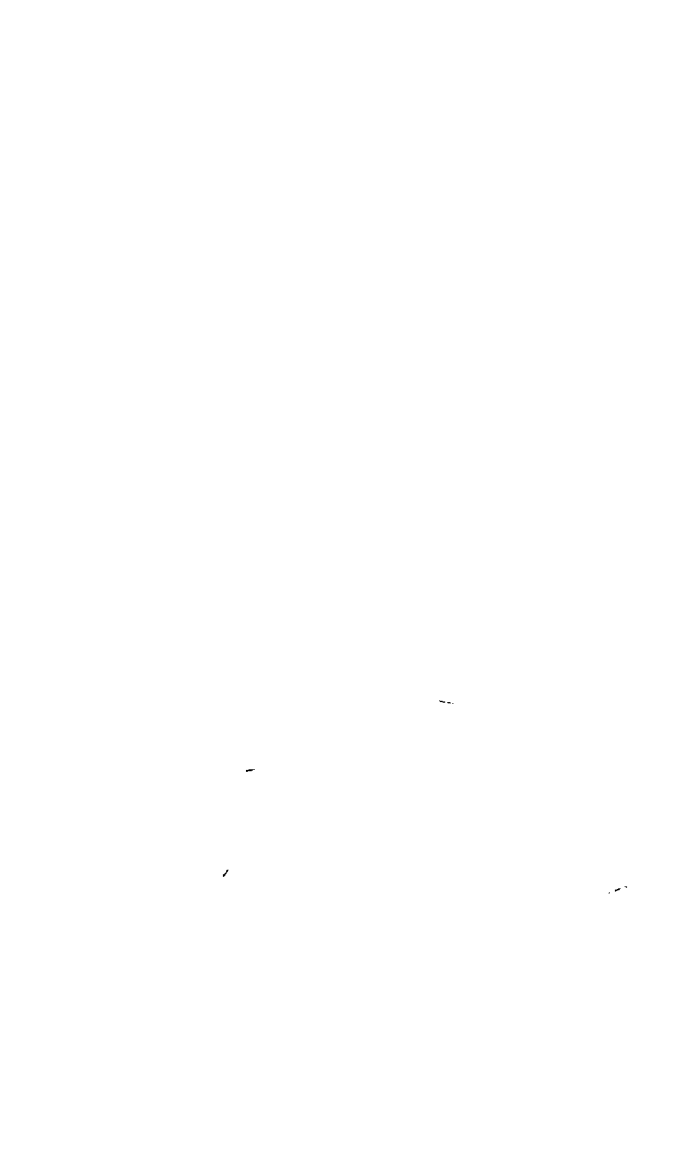
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PART ONE

BREACH



1 FRI JAN 28 / 03:00 PM

Art Prochaska was baffled. He paid all his bills on time—always had—and he had paid his last utility bill promptly. It was that damned fool computer that got everything mixed up.

"I was in before," he said, a querulous note in his voice. "Last time I talked to Mrs. Hemmings. She said she'd get it straightened out, that it was a mistake and I'd either get a new bill or the correction would be on my next billing."

"I don't see how that could happen," the woman on the phone said. She was a service representative named Raines.

"Well, it happened," Prochaska insisted. "Ask Mrs. Hemmings."

"Mrs. Hemmings is on her break right now. If you'll hold on, I'll see if I can locate your file."

"I gave her the last bill when I was in, the one that was all mixed up, and she said she'd mail it back to me. I never got it. You'll have it there, I guess."

"We don't keep customers' bills here," the woman said.

"Well, you got that one!"

"If you'll hold on a minute, please . . ."

Snappish, Art Prochaska thought. Not like Mrs. Hemmings,

who had been very nice and friendly when Art went in the first time to complain. He'd taken a liking to her right off, and she had been concerned and helpful. Reminded him a lot of Wilma. She was plump, like Wilma, and wore the same little half-glasses Wilma used for reading and her needlepoint, peering over them when she looked up. After studying the offending bill, Mrs. Hemmings had checked the file and agreed there was some mistake. Unaccountably Prochaska had been back-charged for service he had already paid for. Mrs. Hemmings explained that she could not make the correction herself: It wasn't done that simply any more because the computer handled all billing. One of the young girls in back who were trained as operators on the computer would have to put in the correction.

Mrs. Hemmings disappeared for a few minutes. When she came back she said everything would be corrected. The bill Prochaska had received was so confused that it would take some time to figure out what happened. Mrs. Hemmings assured Prochaska that the girl who would handle the problem was very smart—the older woman sounded in awe of the girl's ability to work with the computer—and there was no need to worry.

Now, two weeks later, instead of a corrected bill he had received a cutoff notice! The flat, impersonal, computerized note at the bottom of his bill read: NOTICE—NOW DELINQUENT—SUBJECT TO SHUTOFF IF NOT PAID BY 05:00 PM JAN 28.

That deadline was Friday—today. Prochaska had not even received the notice until the mail arrived just after two. If he didn't get this straightened out quickly he would be cut off. Just like that.

The snappish service representative came back on the line and said there did seem to be some confusion over Prochaska's bill. It would be better if he could come in and bring his previous bill.

"I told you, I left that with Mrs. Hemmings. Ask her! But I did keep my canceled check," he added quickly. "I figured I oughta hang onto that, and I guess I was right. It'll prove I paid the previous charges, so there shouldn't have been any doubling up."

"Yes, that's quite right, Mr. Prochaska, we have a record of your payment. That's no problem."

"Well, it seems to be a problem for your computer," Prochaska pointed out testily.

The clerk's voice took on a tone of careful patience, as if she had heard this complaint too many times before. "Can you come

in this afternoon, Mr. Prochaska? Perhaps you could make some kind of payment . . ."

"How can I make a payment when I don't know what I owe? Anyway, I can't come in, not this afternoon. I got this arthritis and it's been actin' up. I can't drive, and there's nobody I can get to bring me in today. Listen, I don't want my power cut off without a by-your-leave. I always pay my bills. It's your mistake, not mine. It's that damned computer! You can't cut me off—"

"There's no reason to get excited, Mr. Prochaska. No one's cutting you off. The computer sends out those notices automatically when the payment isn't received as scheduled. That's why you received the notice. But I've talked to the computer operator. She tells me that a correction was entered into the computer the last time you were in. For some reason that correction didn't get into the file at the Regional Data Center."

"How the hell could that happen?"

"I'm not an operator, Mr. Prochaska, I'm just a service representative," the woman said stiffly. "But there's no reason to be concerned. I've put a note in your file, and an inspector will be out to check the readings at your house."

"When will that be?" Prochaska grumbled.

"As soon as possible. We're very busy," she added pointedly, as if Prochaska were somehow responsible for interrupting that busy schedule.

"I bet you are, if this computer keeps making mistakes like this and nobody knows how to put them right."

"That's not the problem, Mr. Prochaska." There was a moment's hesitation before she added, as if the words came with an effort, "I'm very sorry this has happened, but you don't have to worry. It will be straightened out. Just ignore the cutoff notice."

Somewhat mollified, Art Prochaska hung up. He hobbled into the kitchen, favoring his left hip, the one with the metal socket. That operation had not been entirely successful, leaving him in permanent pain. The doctor who had installed the beautifully polished hip had not wanted to hear the word failure. "Would you say it was fifty per cent improved?" he would ask. "Sixty per cent?" Prochaska had never been able to give a satisfactory answer. He couldn't think in terms of percentages of pain.

He rummaged among the dirty dishes piled on both sides of the sink until he dug out a mug. He rinsed it out and poured coffee from the pot simmering on the stove. The brew was thick and

black, left over from breakfast, but he liked it that way—or told himself he did.

Not many people could make a decent cup of coffee. Wilma had been one.

Prochaska stood motionless for a moment, remembering with painful clarity the taste of Wilma's coffee, smooth and rich, without the dark bitterness of the coffee in his mug now. Hell, he sounded like a TV commercial, he thought. As if Wilma was Mrs. Olsen.

Shaking his head, he carried his mug of coffee into the living room, careless of the trail of spilled drops he left behind. The house had a neglected air and one more spot or two would make no difference. Prochaska no longer noticed the patina of dust over everything, the threadbare patches in the rugs, the soiling on the sofa that was burnished to a hard dark sheen. At some point of past concern for appearances he had draped an old bedspread over his favorite chair. That was the most he would do.

He settled into the chair with relief, sipped at his coffee and glanced out the front window toward the road.

The old house was set well back, inconspicuous among the mature oak trees and evergreens that sheltered it. Few of those who drove by on the highway even noticed the house. It was at the edge of an older section of the city, an area leapfrogged by the tract developers. There were no close neighbors. The nearest was Mrs. Ringer off to the left, the one with all the dogs she was always turning loose to soil his lawn instead of her own. Not that the lawn or garden amounted to much any more, even in summer. Art Prochaska wasn't able to do much gardening now, and he couldn't afford to have it done. Last summer Evelyn's boy, Johnny, had done the yard a couple of times when they came over from Mt. Washington for a visit. Those were the only times the lawn was mowed, and those were hurry-up jobs. Prochaska smiled faintly at the memory of his grandson's short-lived enthusiasm for the chore. The smile faded. They hadn't been over since Christmas. Evelyn didn't get over to Hollister much any more, or even telephone. She had a husband and children of her own to take care of. Art used to call her more frequently himself, but sometimes he would hear the whining note of complaint in his voice. He hated that. He didn't call as often now.

Peering through the trees at the gray sky, he felt a touch of cold. A storm was coming. Hell of a time to threaten cutting off

a man's power, he thought, even someone who *hadn't* paid his bill.

Art Prochaska prided himself on paying his debts. He had always hated having anything hanging over him. Except for the mortgage on the house, he and Wilma had tried to pay cash for what they needed. He didn't put much stock in paying for things on time. Better to wait until you could afford to buy what you wanted.

Of course, it had been different with the service station. Art could remember when that too was a cash-and-carry business, but not during the last years. You bought oil and gas on credit from the company, and you sold it on credit to most of your customers. The receipts you took in were simply credited against the company's invoices. There were days when he never took in any cash at all, when everything was on a credit card. People acted as if they believed that, if they didn't have to put out cash, if all they had to do was charge it, they weren't really spending money.

He wondered how Fred Seltzer was getting along with the station. He'd been robbed twice last year, Prochaska had heard. At least that was one advantage of not taking in much cash. They couldn't steal what you'd only sold on paper.

Six years had passed since Art sold the station. He'd been seventy then. Celebrating his retirement, he and Wilma had talked about doing lots of things, buying a trailer maybe and traveling some. But within a year Wilma was gone.

Restless, he shook himself, feeling the silence of the empty house around him. Wilma was a talker and he was a listener. They had always suited each other that way. She had a great many friends, people warmed to her, and Art had shared in that. Now it seemed as if all their friends had drifted away. Few visited him. Of course, many of them had passed on, like Wilma. There was always a funeral to go to, although Prochaska could no longer get out for them unless someone like Joe Peltier drove him. Joe was the only one who still came around regularly, the only one who seemed to care that he lived alone. . . .

Art shook off the feeling of self-pity with something like anger. Painfully he shuffled over to the television set and turned it on. He felt a familiar sense of relief when the picture bloomed and voices came on. Some game show, people old enough to know better shrieking and jumping up and down. But the noise chased away the empty silence. Art didn't always watch what was on the

TV, but he kept it on most of the time. It was company.

He was sitting in the living room, ready to watch the early news at five o'clock, when the lamp beside his chair suddenly went out and the television picture receded to a pinpoint of light and vanished.

Art Prochaska sat in winter gloom, shocked. In the sudden silence he could hear the rumbling of the furnace die away.

Around nine o'clock that evening Art Prochaska dialed the telephone number of his friend Joe Peltier. Because he was thinking about what he would say to Joe, how he would make a joke out of his problem with the power company and the mixup over his bill, he did not immediately notice that there was no audible hum on the line. Only when he had finished dialing and stopped to listen for the ringing of the phone did he realize there was no sound at all coming from the instrument. The line was dead.

Prochaska felt a momentary alarm, the inner lurch of a man who suddenly feels himself cut adrift. He shied away from the feeling. Certainly it was a strange coincidence, the phone going out on the same night his power was cut off. But there was no more to it than that. The wind was gusting and some lines were down, that was all.

Standing in the darkness, he felt the cold which was slowly penetrating the house. The new storm ached in his bones. He heard the bluster of the wind outside, rattling a loose shutter, making the eaves trough whine. Pads of snow tapped at the window like white fingertips.

He had lit a fire in the fireplace early in the evening, using up all of the available firewood. There were so many things he didn't get around to doing any more—he had intended to get in some more wood, but he had forgotten. And he was no longer equal to cutting his own.

The fire was still burning, but it was down to red-eye coals. It kept that part of you warm that faced the fireplace when you stood close enough, but even this fading warmth would not last beyond midnight. And in his bedroom there would be no heat at all.

Prochaska swore aloud in frustrated anger. Shortly after five o'clock, when the phone was still working, he had tried to call the power company. There was no answer. That was one thing they did efficiently, he thought with heavy sarcasm: They closed up right on time. And it was Friday. The offices would not open again until Monday morning.

Listening to the storm buffeting the house, he faced the possibility that he would be without heat or light for the entire weekend. Deep in his mind there was a whisper of primitive fear. The knowledge of his helplessness bore upon him. With it came awareness of the absurdity of his situation. A mistake had been made. When he complained he had been assured that everything would be corrected, but those assurances had been empty words spoken by women who themselves didn't understand the machines that had now taken over the process of adding, multiplying, totaling, charging, billing, correcting. No one seemed able to control things any more. A mistake was made, and no one knew how to put it right.

Art Prochaska shivered, feeling the desolate loneliness of the empty house as he never had before. Someone would notice this compounding of error, he told himself. An inspector was coming out to the house, that woman had said so. When would he come? Art could not remember exactly.

Or was he afraid to remember, afraid to acknowledge the truth that inspectors did not come on weekends?

Out on the road late Friday night, Joe Peltier slowed to a crawl, peering toward Art Prochaska's house. No light showed. Surprised, he wondered where his old friend could have gone on a night like this.

Peltier had had the road to himself. Only a fool stuck his face into a blizzard—or, in Peltier's case, a father. His son Chad had come down with the flu. Doctor Jarvis no longer made routine house calls even in sunny times, but he had called in a prescription to the drug store. Grumbling, Peltier had managed to get the Scout pickup to start. Some things didn't wait on the weather. At that, he wondered if he would have had the courage to set out for the drug store if he hadn't had the four-wheel drive.

Perhaps Prochaska's daughter had come over for a visit and taken Art back to Mt. Washington with her.

Peltier had had it in his mind, as long as he was out on the road, to stop by briefly and see how his friend was feeling. The dark house discouraged him. Art *might* be home—he could simply have gone to bed early. He would be glad enough to be awakened.

But the drifts were treacherous along the side of the road, and Prochaska's driveway was completely hidden. Peltier felt uneasy about turning out of the narrow safe lane opened by the snow plow.

Before these obstacles, the impulse to stop faded. Besides, he ought to be getting on home with Chad's antibiotics.

Peltier felt a passing pity for his old friend, a momentary gratitude that his own wife was ten years younger than he and would surely outlive him. He would never be alone.

He drove on slowly, feeling an unaccustomed sadness for the human condition.

By next morning the house was gripped by cold as intense as that outside. There had been a heavy fall of snow during the night, and the muffling effect of the snow blanket made complete the silence of Art Prochaska's house.

He lay in bed, huddled under his covers, reluctant to rise. The blankets had not kept the cold from sheathing his bones in an icy chill. Movement was painful on the best of days, but today . . .

There was no special reason for him to get up. No one depended on him. No one else was there. No one would come.

He continued to lie in bed. After a while drowsiness overcame him, and he drifted in and out of sleep. The house cracked and snapped as the cold tightened its grip, but he did not stir.

When he came fully awake again it was evening, dark, and he no longer had any desire to rise, no wish to face the terrible cold that shriveled body and spirit. He discovered that he had soiled his sheets in his sleep. The fact disgusted him. He knew that he should stir himself, that it was in some way very important for him to get up, if only long enough to change his bedding, but a great indifference had enveloped him. He no longer cared.

The house in which he lived was soiled, neglected, shabby, he thought, seeing it with wonderful clarity, as if it opened out before him in the darkness like the setting on a stage. He had stopped trying to clean it up. Wilma had always kept a neat, tidy, spotless house, and for a time after she died he had tried to emulate her. Eventually he had lost interest, or heart. The dust accumulated, the unwashed clothes, the dirty dishes, the litter of a purposeless existence. He wondered how he had gone on so long without seeing it clearly, how he could have pretended to himself that it was the same as it had always been when she was there. It astonished him that he should see it so clearly now, in the darkness, as if he were able, while still lying there in his bed, to leave his body and drift through the empty rooms like a ghost.

He ought to tell someone about the power being out, the house

unbearably cold. But he could not travel far on foot through heavy snow. The only person possibly close enough was Mrs. Ringer, and he didn't get along well with her. She hadn't spoken to him since the last time he complained about her dogs. When was that? Six months ago? More? He could not bring himself to go to her, begging for help, even if he could make his way safely through the darkness and the heavy drifts.

At last he slept, and woke, and slept again, each time deeper. Each time it was a longer, harder climb out of the great dark trough into which he slipped, until the last time, when he had the physical sensation of letting go of something, falling back with a long, slow sigh.

2 MON JAN 31 / 11:00 PM

Late Monday night a sudden banging and crashing directly overhead drove Norma Hooper from her bed. She stood in the doorway of her bedroom, trembling. On the portable TV set facing her bed, the eleven o'clock news, which she had been watching, switched to a commercial. A diver dropped gracefully from a high cliff into the azure waters of Acapulco Bay, wearing a Timex. As he struck the water, breaking glass exploded against the floor above Norma's ceiling.

She fled from the room. As she hurried through her living room to the front door of her apartment, something heavy—furniture?—overturned with a thud that shook the ceiling.

With fumbling fingers Norma unlocked her door: the standard lock, the security deadbolt, the chain. She stepped into the hall, her glance shooting upward. The apartment manager's unit was

directly across from hers. She knocked anxiously. There was no answer.

Then she remembered seeing the manager go out earlier that evening. She hadn't heard him return.

As she stood uncertainly in the hallway, hugging her robe around her thin body, a single cry—to Norma's sensitive ears a cry of anguish—came from the apartment above her.

Then silence.

Norma's gaze was riveted on the empty landing at the top of the stairs. What should she do? Even if the manager were home, what would she say? She had heard noises from the upstairs apartment—but all was quiet now. The only sound in the building was a voice from her bedroom—the newscaster signing off at the end of the late news. In a moment there would come another familiar voice. "Heeere's Johnny!"

Her fright was ebbing. She was a sympathetic woman, and she didn't like to make trouble. Besides, the occupant of 211 had never given any indication that he was a troublemaker. He seemed quiet enough, keeping to himself most of the time. She wondered what could have caused him such distress.

In the cold of the hallway she shivered involuntarily. The reaction caused her to remember the news item she had been listening to when the commotion broke out in the room above her. It was a terrible story about an old man who had been found frozen to death in his own house on the outskirts of Hollister. The power company, it seemed, had mistakenly cut off his heat.

Norma Hooper shivered once more. She felt a sudden desire to retreat to the shelter of her own rooms, the familiar, reassuring quiet, her door closed and locked and bolted against a world that seemed ever more threatening, ever more random in its terrors.

In the upstairs apartment he lay on the bed, his rage momentarily spent. Terror still hovered in the dark corners of his mind.

It was an accident, a freak accident. No one could have known the old man would actually freeze to death.

For one awful moment he had seen everything failing, collapsing around him, all because of a single miscalculation, as if, like some recluse, he had built this towering, brilliant structure out of scraps of metal and wire, a work of genius, a painstaking labor of years, only at the very end, on the eve of completing it, to make one clumsy amateur's mistake, and to watch in horror

as the whole intricate edifice began to crumble. . . .

As reason returned, the tenuous structure steadied. Arthur Prochaska's premature death changed nothing.

He became aware of feeling chilled. He had sweated heavily, and his shirt was drying. He sat up and slowly peeled the shirt away.

Then he set about cleaning up the living room. He had to have it straightened out before morning. Wouldn't do to let it be seen this way.

The shards of broken glass, the pieces of a pottery ash tray, the wedge of wood chipped from the leg of a chair were like fragments of one small corner of that imaginary tower. The rest would stand. It had been too carefully planned to be so easily brought down.

3 TUES FEB 1 / 07:30 AM

Michael Egan had rented a small house at Lake Terry, twenty miles out of town. It was essentially a summer cottage, poorly insulated and dependent on a Franklin stove for heat, which probably explained why it had been available in late fall at a rent a hundred dollars below the modern apartments in town. Money had not been Egan's primary motive for choosing the place. He had arrived after the start of the fall term at Hollister University and there had been nothing available anywhere near the campus.

Besides, the isolation of the lakeside cottage had appealed to him. Until the unrelenting cold spell of January, he had had no reason to regret his choice. He enjoyed the quiet and solitude, the feeling of privacy—many of the homes around the lake were

empty at this season—and for a time the presence of wild ducks, vacationing on the lake before it began to freeze over. He told himself that the contrast with Los Angeles had much to do with his pleasure in the peaceful remoteness of the cottage. Los Angeles, and five years of fighting clogged freeways, angry streets, restaurants so crowded there was always an hour's wait for a table.

Los Angeles, and Joan Wellman.

He had not only been ready for a change. He had needed to be alone for a while.

Monday he was snowed in at the cottage and had to call the security office of the Regional Data Center, which was housed on the Hollister University campus, to say that he couldn't make it in. By Tuesday, however, the side road from the lake to the main highway was open.

Egan drove in through a countryside that was hilly and forested, beautiful even now, the latticework of bare branches and black tree trunks stark against the white slopes. But the road was a twisting, alarming roller coaster, still covered by a hard undercoating of packed snow and ice that had built up since Christmas. Driving cautiously, Egan wondered if he had been ready for this much of a change. Five years in Lotus Land had thinned out his blood, and he had felt this winter's cold more than any in his memory. It would take more than one season to adjust to bitter winters or to accustom himself again to icy roads.

The university campus was situated at the northern rim of the city, six miles from the civic center, which shortened Egan's daily drive from the lake. He did not have to work his way through the center of town.

As he was turning into the parking lot reserved for Data Center employees, using his ID card to activate the electronically controlled gates, the eight o'clock news came on his car radio. The lead story was a local one. An old man had been found dead in his unheated house on Monday, a victim of the latest storm.

So much for enjoying the four seasons, Egan thought.

He shook his head. Some Indian tribes had put their old ones out to die, but that had been a cultural choice, accepted in much the same way a warrior accepted death in battle. Now we're all doing the same, but it isn't a matter of choice and there is no honor in it.

He found his parking space, turned into it and cut the engine. For a moment he sat unmoving in the sudden silence. It was bad

enough, sometimes, to be alone at thirty-five. To be alone when you were old and useless . . .

Egan had seen more than one man die, although being an FBI man during his tenure had been nothing like the old days when Purvis went after Dillinger and Floyd. He had never hardened himself to it. Once a man was dead, it no longer seemed to matter as much what he had been or what he had done. The sadness was always there. Maybe we just don't like the reminder, Egan thought.

Turning away from his tenuous link to an old man he hadn't known, Egan opened the car door. The cold struck his face like brass knuckles.

The new Administration Building was the pride of Hollister University in many eyes, a naked tower of concrete and smoked glass, twelve stories high. It was flanked by two smaller, squatter but otherwise matching cubes. The one on the south was the Engineering College; its twin housed the Hollister Regional Data Center. The grouping formed Hollister University's giant step into the future. Egan preferred the low, red-brick buildings, most of them covered with ivy, which belonged to the university's past.

From his security office Egan was able to survey the computer room, the surrounding corridors, all entrances and exits, and other key points throughout the Data Center by means of a bank of closed-circuit television screens. The main security console also monitored environmental conditions and equipment, the functioning of machinery, the alarm systems that would warn of fire or a broken water pipe, an electrical failure or an attempt at unauthorized intrusion anywhere in the building. A security officer watched the screens twenty-four hours a day on a rotating schedule, with frequent duty changes, since no one could stare at the monitors for long hours without interruption and remain alert.

The computer room was a cube within a cube. It was located in the middle of the building, isolated behind solid, windowless container walls, buffered on the outside by offices and service facilities, storage and support equipment, tape library and other media storage rooms. In effect the computer room was like the tomb at the center of an Egyptian pyramid, and it was similarly protected against unwarranted intrusion.

There had been a time when computer rooms were set proudly out in the lobby behind glass walls, a leading attraction for touring visitors. The turmoil of the 1960s changed that. At the height of

the Vietnam crisis Dow Chemical's data center was ravaged, and computer installations were taken over and occupied by student activists at Brandeis, Northwestern and elsewhere. Bombs and other attacks destroyed or massively damaged computer centers at Fresno State, Boston University and the Universities of Kansas and Wisconsin. The lesson had not been lost on the more serious terrorists of the 1970s—and the potential for catastrophic loss was infinitely greater than it had been only a decade ago.

Access to the computer room of the Regional Data Center was through an anteroom called a man-trap. Programmers, operators and other authorized personnel opened the outer door into the "trap" by means of their personal ID cards, which bore both photo identification and a hidden magnetic stripe. The code-operated lock on the second door could be opened only on signal from inside the computer room: It was under the control of the computer system itself. Anyone who entered the anteroom and was not cleared by someone in the computer room was trapped, unable to go forward or backward.

This morning, studying the computer room on the monitor screens, the rows of gleaming machines with the own CRT displays, their keyboards and print-out rolls and card decks, Egan felt as much out of his depth as he had while driving along the curving, ice-slick road from the lake. After three months he was still an outsider at the Regional Data Center. Not only had he been hired from the outside to be the new security director, but he was not a computer man—a fact that automatically silenced a lot of conversation when he was present at a lunch table or around the water cooler. Most of the bright young men and women moving about among the computers and working at the keyboards merely tolerated him. He was not one of them. Even Del Thomas, the director of the RDC and the man who had hired him, shared this attitude. More than once Egan had wondered how he got the job at all. A recommendation from a well-placed former FBI friend did not seem to be adequate explanation.

Egan glanced at the digital clock on his desk. He picked up his phone and punched through to Thomas's office. The director's secretary, Ruth Coyle, answered immediately.

"Good morning, Mrs. Coyle."

"Isn't it, though. Not like California, I don't suppose."

"Depends on what you want to die of, snow or smog." Egan frowned as he recognized the source of his macabre humor. "Is he in?"

"He's in, but there's somebody with him. Let's see . . . you're penciled in for nine-thirty. I think he'll be free by then. Is it controversial?"

"Not very."

"Then I'll block for you if anyone else tries to sneak in."

"O.J. should envy me. All he's got is Reggie Mackenzie."

In the director's office Del Thomas had adopted a soothing tone that irritated the slim, dark-haired young woman facing him across the desk. "Calm down, Mrs. Tyson. There's no point in getting excited."

"But there is! A man's dead!"

"I understand that, but . . ." Thomas looked slightly pained, as if he were a man of fine sensibility who had overheard an offensive remark in mixed company. "We can hardly be blamed for that. An . . . act of God, surely."

"His heat was cut off," Jennifer Tyson said, angry now. "He died because he was alone, and because the storm trapped him in that cold house."

"But surely—"

"The computer cut him off!"

"Oh." Thomas leaned back in his chair as if he had been pushed. "Yes, I see what you mean. Field day for the media. It'll be on the nightly news, I suppose."

"That isn't what I meant—" She choked off the bitter retort. Del Thomas was not the kind of man who suffered fools gladly or insubordinates who criticized him. She thought briefly of Robert Greiner. He had not been the only maverick among the programmers on the RDC staff, or the only one who disliked Thomas. Greiner had simply been the only one who had made no attempt to conceal his contempt. That, more than his tendency to work on his own time schedule and independently of any rules, had got him fired. "Perhaps you didn't hear what I said earlier," Jenny went on more calmly. "You see, Mr. Thomas, it was a mistake. Prochaska had paid his bills. He was right up to date."

Now Del Thomas frowned. Bad enough for the news people to sensationalize an unfortunate incident involving one minor program processed through the Regional Data Center. But the suggestion that there had been a computer error—oh, they would love that! Lately Thomas had observed that the local Channel 7 station had been inserting brief headline stories during the hourly commercial breaks throughout the evening, using them as a lure to get

viewers to tune in for the later news program. More often than not the teasing headline turned out to be an exaggeration or distortion of a story. He shuddered at the thought of a dramatic one-liner about Prochaska's death. There had been considerable resistance in Hollister to the rapidly expanding dependence upon the RDC to manage and monitor the city's life support and governmental systems. Critics would jump on the sentimentalized story of an old man who had frozen to death in his own home because of a computerized billing error.

"How could that happen?" he demanded. "Why wasn't a proper correction made, Mrs. Tyson?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. That correction was put through over two weeks ago. I checked back on the file this morning. Prochaska was billed the first week of January, but he didn't come in to complain until the fourteenth. There'd been an error on the data input from the power company, and he hadn't been credited with his previous payment. A correction was entered that day, January fourteenth."

Thomas stared at her as if she had announced the end of the world on Sunday. "That's impossible," he said.

"That's what I told myself," Jenny Tyson said quietly. She was angry still, if anything angrier than before, but she was in control of herself. He doesn't give a damn about that old man, she thought. All he cares about are his precious computers and the possibility of bad publicity. "I asked for an audit. The journal file shows that correction was entered on the fourteenth."

"Just what—" For the first time Thomas seemed openly perplexed. "Mrs. Tyson, what are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying that the corrected instructions were entered into the system." She paused a moment for effect before adding grimly, "The computer rejected them."

Del Thomas could not have been more shocked if the end of the world had actually come, heavenly trumpets and all.

Egan told Adams, the security officer watching the console, where he would be. He followed the wide corridor halfway around the building until he came to Thomas's office. Just as he reached the door it burst open.

Egan grinned with pleasure at seeing Jennifer Tyson. "Now this makes it a good morning—"

"Like hell it is!"

The young woman swept past him and strode down the corridor, long legs scissoring under a gray midi skirt that somehow managed to seem attractive. Movement is all, Egan thought, and wondered what was wrong with her. Jenny Tyson had a quality of cool reserve, but she was invariably pleasant and courteous. Egan had lately almost convinced himself that her casual smiles had become warmer, less impersonal.

He shrugged and went into the director's office.

For ten minutes Egan ran through the general outline of his recently completed security survey, the specific details of which were embodied in the report he had turned in the previous Friday. Thomas listened pensively without comment, running a finger along one side and then the other of a neatly trimmed mustache. Egan was not sure that he was listening.

Physical security was given a high priority at the Regional Data Center, and in his review Egan had found few problems with the existing protective systems that were designed to safeguard the equipment, data files and personnel throughout the center and especially in the isolated computer room. Thomas was tuned in to these needs; in fact, he had a passion for the privacy of the RDC. He discouraged any visitors, and he tried to mitigate any fraternizing between programmers—the people who worked out sets of instructions for the computers and translated them into machine-readable language—and operators, who carried out the daily routine of the system in executing the programs. Not only were programmers and operators assigned to separate areas within the computer room, but Thomas went so far as to juggle lunch hours and coffee breaks in an attempt to keep the two kinds of staff apart. Not that such measures really accomplished much, in Egan's view. A programmer could still sleep with an operator after hours, or play poker with one. Or even collaborate with one in a misuse of computer time, one of Thomas's special fears.

But a computer center, even more than most other complex modern facilities, was vulnerable to natural hazards as well as physical attack or internal personnel problems. Fire, for instance, could be devastating, not only to equipment and personnel but also to a data library, the core of information around which the computer system functioned. Heat alone could cause a system to crash. Egan remembered reading of an incident at the Aqueduct Race Track when the failure of an air conditioner had caused the

race track's computer to go haywire, with the result that it posted incorrect prices on the tote board. Before the error could be corrected, there was a small riot among angry bettors.

The main thrust of Michael Egan's job was to make sure that such things didn't happen at the RDC—that the physical environment was kept stable, dust free, temperature-controlled, free from intrusion or attack.

The one area in his survey which had caused Egan particular concern was the risk of fire.

"What's the problem?" Thomas asked.

"I don't like using CO₂. It's too dangerous."

"Oh?" Thomas had a habit of lifting one eyebrow inquisitively. The resulting expression was both skeptical and a little rakish. Egan wondered if he had practiced it before a mirror. "It was approved by the local fire department."

"I know it's used in some places, but our situation is unique. I think we can find something better than carbon dioxide."

"We can't use water," Thomas said. "That's out of the question. There's too much risk of damage to the equipment and even the tapes."

"The equipment could be shut down automatically and covered when an alarm is triggered. I wouldn't think water would bother the tapes."

"It's the humidity," Thomas explained. "When you add water from sprinklers to the high temperatures of a fire, you get both heat and humidity. Tapes disintegrate very quickly when they're exposed to that combination."

Egan frowned. "We wouldn't have to use water, of course. There are dry chemicals that make effective extinguishers."

"They leave a residue. Almost as bad for us as water."

"There's also Halon 1301," Egan persisted. "It's a gas, just as effective as carbon dioxide, and it's not nearly as dangerous."

"We've been through all this before you came to us, Egan. I understand there are problems with Halon, too. I really don't see why you object to the present system."

"It could kill people," Egan said bluntly. "That computer room is a closed environment. If anyone were trapped inside when the gas was released, it could kill them long before the fire would."

Thomas studied him in silence. He began to toy with his mustache again, a finger tracking the edge of the brush and plucking at the end, first on one side, then on the other. His fingers were

pale, the hands soft, like the man. Thomas was taller and bigger-framed than Egan, but there was a prevailing impression of softness about him, as if there were no hard bone and muscle anywhere under the pale skin. "How long have you been with us, Egan? Two months, is it?"

"Three."

"Three months." Thomas smiled. "Aren't you rushing things a bit? Oh, I don't mean you shouldn't look things over critically. This is an excellent survey"—he tapped the manila folder containing Egan's report—"really quite excellent. But don't you think you should wait a bit longer before recommending major changes?"

"It wouldn't be all that major," Egan protested. "The existing fire system could be used—"

"Converting would cost money," Thomas said, coming to the bottom line. His smile thinned out. "I'm afraid it would put you over your budget. And you're also recommending that we invest in a fingerprint-scanner program for the access-control system. I think that might be worth investigation—but we can't do everything we want, Egan. That's one thing we all have to learn."

Patience, Egan thought. You've only been here three months, remember.

"After all, the fire-protection system has worked fine up until now."

"That's because it hasn't had to work. There hasn't been a fire."

"All the more reason not to rush into expensive changes," Thomas responded smoothly. "But we'll talk about this again." The words were a dismissal, closing the meeting. "I don't want you to think that I'm rejecting your proposals out of hand . . . but let's sit on this one for a while, shall we?"

Lesson learned, Egan thought. Next time be better prepared to talk about money when you want to suggest a change.

He could only hope there wouldn't be a fire inside that closed computer room before he got another chance to see his recommendation.

4 TUES FEB 1 / 09:00 AM

After photographing the snow-covered isolation of the Prochaska house, the Channel 7 news crew went next door to interview the nearest neighbor. A one-sided conversation with the "Dog Woman," as she was to be called, was abruptly cut short when she threatened to turn a large, nasty-tempered black Labrador loose on the crew.

Heading back toward the truck, one of the cameramen grumbled, "Hell, what kind of a story is this?"

"Don't worry," said Karen Anderson, the leggy blonde co-anchor of the station's local "Eyewitness News" hour. "It'll be a strong two minutes. Did you get me in the frame with the house in the background?"

"They'll see you, beautiful. What's a house without a blonde in front of it?"

"A great big coffin."

At the morgue Anderson got on-camera statements from Leonard Hauss, the coroner, and John Toland, the chief of police. Toland spoke irrelevantly about the manpower problems of the police department. "During the storm, you mean?" Anderson asked sharply.

"Yeah. Well, the storm's certainly made things tougher for us, when you have hoodlums looting stores right downtown."

The reporters and cameras were waiting when Prochaska's daughter arrived at the morgue to identify her father's body. Rival reporters from Channel 4 as well as the Hollister *Times* and radio station KHOL competed with Karen Anderson in thrusting microphones and accusing questions at the harassed woman, who looked as if she had dressed hastily in the dark. The questions ran the usual range from "Did you have any idea this could happen?" to "How did you feel when you heard your father was dead?" And, from Anderson, "Do you blame the city for this tragedy?"

Anderson had not expected to get much in the way of coherent responses from the woman, but no matter. Her free-wheeling brain was already editing the material she had for a two-minute segment. "Eyewitness News" prided itself on shoehorning as many hard-hitting bits as possible into the nightly news slot, preferably stories involving murder, rape, greed, death and pathos. The Prochaska story, Anderson thought, scored on the last two counts.

When the reporters had gone the police chief managed to get the coroner alone for a few minutes. "What do you figure, Doc?"

"There'll have to be an inquest, of course. When anyone dies alone—"

"I know that!"

Leonard Hauss studied Toland shrewdly. "I don't see any problems, John. There is one thing, though, in Officer Ramsey's report. He indicates there's a possibility the telephone line to Prochaska's house was cut. What about that?"

"Nothing to it." Toland shifted the Browning belt slightly lower on his thick hard belly and absently shoved at the pearl-handled Smith & Wesson .38 Special, seating it more firmly in its holster. "The line was down, but with the kind of snow and ice we had that night and all weekend, there were lines popping all over the place. Anyway, there was a big tree branch broke off and fell against the side of the house. It could've cut across the telephone line. Or maybe the line just broke off from the ice, like I said."

"Wouldn't a cut show up different?"

"Who'd want to cut the old guy's telephone wires?" Toland demanded impatiently. "Look, Leonard, let's not make a federal case out of this any more than it is already, huh?"

"Yes, well . . . I see what you mean." He paused reflectively.

"That blonde from Channel 7—Karen what's-her-name—she's some looker, isn't she?"

"Leonard . . ."

"Okay, John. Don't get your ass in an uproar. This Prochaska case looks routine. Good enough?"

"Yeah. The guy got old and he died. That's routine, isn't it?"

The coroner, who was always a busy man at this season of the year and had been run ragged during the past incredible month of successive storms, was relieved. At least this one wouldn't be a problem.

James Conway, Hollister's mayor for over three years, was intercepted by Kenny Nance, his press communications officer, as he left the parking lot behind City Hall. "The vultures are waiting," Nance said. "This Prochaska thing looks like trouble. One of those stupid things that shouldn't happen but do."

"And it's always nice to blame someone so we don't have to accept the possibility of meaningless, random tragedy," Conway said.

"Yeah, something like that. Listen, you want to sneak in the back way? I can hold those guys off until we figure out an angle."

"No angles, Kenny," Conway said tersely. "Do your friends of the press know you call them vultures?"

"Who said I had any friends left?"

"See if you can find one, anyway. I'd like one friendly voice for the next few days. Set up a short conference, Kenny. Informal, playing it down. I'm not ready to start sneaking in the back way just yet."

"You're the boss."

They entered the elevator together, disparate figures, the mayor lean and cool, almost ascetic in appearance, Nance pudgy and rumpled, his fingers stained with nicotine, his face reddened by the cold. They had struck an amiable relationship on Conway's first day in office, somewhat to Nance's surprise. He had not expected to like Conway. Now they were friends.

Reporters in Conway's outer office started hammering him with questions about Arthur Prochaska's death as soon as he appeared. Kenny Nance quieted them down with the promise of a statement. Conway waved them into his office.

In the elevator he had decided that candor was the only possible approach to the morning's ugly headline story. He told the half-

dozen reporters who crowded into the office after him that, quite frankly, he had not received a detailed report on the incident. He probably knew less than the reporters did at this point—but he certainly intended to look into it.

"It was a computer error," one of the reporters pointed out. "Do you still feel the same about the Data Center after this?"

Although the question was loaded, Conway did not try to evade it. Instead he took it seriously. Leaning against the edge of his desk (keep it casual, Kenny Nance thought), Conway addressed the reporter by name. "Do you know how much local government spending is up in this country, Bob? I don't mean state or federal, I mean local. Over 175 per cent in the last ten years. Personnel costs for state and local government are over one hundred billion dollars a year. I don't have to tell you what that means for this city and just about every other city in the United States. Finding ways to cut those costs and still provide the services people demand is the only way we're going to survive without a taxpayer revolution. When you have something you can use, like an efficient computer system, there's no real choice. The question isn't whether we should use computers or not; we *have* to use them. The question is how to use them safely and wisely and responsibly for the greatest good."

"You mind telling us where you were going to deliver that speech, Mr. Mayor?" another reporter asked. "Then I won't have to show up."

The others laughed, Conway along with them. "I wish to hell I'd had the tape recorder on. If any of you got that all down, could I have a copy?"

A young TV reporter cut off the chuckles when he said sharply, "The system wasn't used very safely for Prochaska."

"What happened—what apparently happened with Mr. Prochaska—was, indirectly at least, the result of a billing error," Conway said soberly. "It's a terrible thing, but that kind of error didn't start with computers. As a matter of fact, we have a lot fewer errors now. This one just happened to be very . . . unfortunate."

"I was beginning to think it was some kind of joke," the television reporter said.

"Can it, Hansen," an older newsman growled. "You're not on the tube now."

The gratuitous attack had temporarily won sympathy for Conway, and the rest of the questioning was friendly. After a few

minutes Conway caught Nance's eye. The PR man moved in quickly to herd the reporters out of the office. A few grumbled, but most of them liked Conway as well as they could be said to like any politician. Their objections were mild.

When the door closed behind the press representatives Conway dropped into his ancient leather swivel chair and rocked back and forth a few times, his expression somber. "Well, Kenny? How did it come off?"

"You said the right things."

"I wonder if Prochaska's daughter will think so."

"You have to worry about what fifty thousand voters think," Nance said reasonably.

Conway's answer was a sardonic glance. Nance shrugged. Sometimes he didn't quite know what to make of the man whose public image he zealously guarded.

Thirty years in public relations work had given Kenny Nance an unfaltering cynicism. The first time James Conway had upset his calculations was shortly after his election when he vetoed a \$10,000 redecorating of the mayor's offices. "The paint's good for another two years," Conway had said. "And the desks will outlast all of us." The decision had been more than a gesture. It had set the pattern for Conway's highly independent, no-nonsense approach to his job. Kenny Nance told himself that Conway was too good to be true, but he was still waiting for the young mayor to stumble. He hadn't been taken to the wall yet, Nance reasoned. Sooner or later it had to happen. Conway would have to make a hard choice between the right thing and the politically expedient. When that moment came, Nance's hard-earned view of the human race would surely be vindicated.

"They'll keep asking about the computer system," Nance said. "And that's where you could get nailed bad. As far as the public is concerned, you're the one who piped us into the RDC, even though the project was on the boards when you took it up. When something happens like this Prochaska thing..." Nance left the ominous consequences hanging.

"Kenny, stop worrying about how I'm going to be nailed. And while you're at it, will you tell me why you always talk like a refugee from an old Hollywood B movie? You can write like an angel. I'll bet you can talk like one when you want to."

Nance grinned. "Yeah, but I want to be understood."

"Don't we all."

Conway swung his chair around and gazed out the window. The city's dirt and shabbiness were hidden under the fresh fall of snow. Like the sheet drawn over Prochaska's face, he thought. A quick cover-up for the troublesome things we don't want to look at.

Like a great many others, Hollister was a city in trouble. But most of the real problems didn't make headlines. Conway wondered—not for the first time—if he could handle them. How would he react if a genuine crisis came?

He thought of his older brother, Larry, who had seen infantry action in Korea. While Larry seldom talked about combat, his war stories confined to hilarious escapades on leave in Japan, the changes the war had made in him didn't require words. He had come back older than his years, quieter, tougher, more completely in command of himself. He knew who he was and how he would react when everything was on the line. James Conway had envied his brother's ordeal.

His own way had always been made easy. High grades in school without excessive effort. Deferment from the Vietnam mess because he was in law school. The right credentials for a good New York law firm to take him on—and then give him its blessing when he decided to go into politics. A happy marriage to a beautiful woman. Fortuitous timing that led to a comfortable victory in his first try for public office.

Conway wondered if the real tests were sneaking up on him. In a growing fuel crisis that no one wanted to admit was real—it would be worse next winter, Conway knew, regardless of the weather. In steadily dwindling city income and a quiet erosion of its industrial base. And now in the shadowy figure of a lonely old man neglected by society.

Kenny Nance's political sense was unerringly accurate. For Conway, Arthur Prochaska might prove to be the most damaging problem.

Because the computer center had been involved.

People generally identified Conway with the RDC, and vice versa. When he was running for office the nucleus of the system, created largely because of an unexpected bonanza of federal funds, was being used primarily as a toy of Hollister University's faculty and students. "It's a fourth-generation system," Conway was told, "but it's operating in a primitive, first-generation mode." Conway recognized the potential of the data Center for the city, championed

it during his campaign, and then fought for the additional funds necessary to expand the system, with the city of Hollister as the chief user. The money had come from the federal government's Integrated Municipal Information Systems project, a multi-agency venture chaired by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. HUD had already financed total information systems in Wichita Falls, Texas, and Charlotte, North Carolina. Conway was credited with pulling the whole thing together in Hollister. And—in spite of what had happened to Prochaska—he remained convinced that the conversion of many of the city's basic functions to computerized control was the one step that might keep Hollister a viable entity.

But that was forgotten when the system malfunctioned.

He broke the silence. "Nobody should die like that. I want to know why, Kenny."

"You want a fall guy?"

Conway's clear blue eyes were suddenly cool and skeptical. "Why should I want a fall guy, Kenny?"

"I hear Councilman Burton is having his own press conference."

"So?"

"So he was the one who was against going all the way with the Data Center. He's the one guy on the council who fought hard against it. He's also the guy you whipped for mayor, in case you've forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten, Kenny. But I don't think Burton is as gung ho against the RDC as he makes out. He just needed an issue."

"He hasn't let go of it." Nance pointed out. "And you don't think he's gonna pass up this chance to say I told you so, do you? A lot of people still feel the same way he does, and they'll be listening."

"Why should they? The way I read it, it was a mistake, a billing error. It shouldn't have happened, but it could have happened without the computer. It must have happened a thousand times before."

"Yeah, but some clerk putting down the wrong numbers wouldn't make headlines. Your Honor, believe me, a lot of people don't *like* computers. They're afraid of them. They don't like having to deal with them."

"When you call me 'Your Honor,' Kenny, that's when I really start worrying." Conway paused. "Why should people be afraid

of computers? They're just machines."

Kenny Nance sighed. If James Conway had one weakness (one that had showed up, at any rate), it was an inability sometimes to understand the fear and weakness and insecurity that were the daily lot of almost everyone else. Conway had it all together. He was one of the youngest mayors around. He was married to a former model who made Farrah Fawcett-Majors look shabby. He was lean and cool and intelligent, he always knew exactly where he was going, and he had either forgotten or never knew what it was like to be hanging on by your fingertips. He didn't know what a quiet life of desperation was.

Nance said, "They aren't just any machines. They're machines that manipulate people's lives. They're part of big government and big business and big everything else, all the things that are becoming so big and complex and remote that *people* don't mean anything to them any more. Computers don't care; they can't. You can't argue with them or swear at them or make them listen to you when something goes wrong. They just keep giving you the same answer. So they're just another thing that says what happens is beyond us, out of our control. This Prochaska incident, that's what it's gonna say to all those people. And they're gonna think, what if it was me? What if I tried to say there was some mistake and the machines wouldn't listen?"

Conway stared at him. "I knew there was some reason I kept you around, Kenny. Besides being my conscience." He gave Nance one of those quick, rare grins which he refused to trot out for every camera but which, in Nance's opinion, had gone a long way toward getting him elected. That grin, and the kids out at Hollister University who had the vote now and thought Conway was honest, maybe the only honest politician they had ever heard, the only one who gave them straight answers without hedging even when the questions and the answers were uncomfortable. "You afraid Burton's going to nail me?"

"He's gonna try."

Nance waited, as if this moment might be very important, the one in which James Conway for the first time would start looking for ways to protect himself.

"Let him," the mayor said.

"This is just another example of what happens when government starts interfering too much in everyone's daily lives." Jay

Burton said. "It's a tragic thing, a really tragic thing."

"Are you blaming the city government?"

Burton hesitated, but having picked up the ball he was not about to fumble it. "I'm not trying to blame anyone," he declared. "But I would remind you that I had serious doubts about this city's over-dependence on the Regional Data Center, and I made those doubts very clear. What frightens me is this trend, and it is a very definite trend in this country and a dangerous one, to take things more and more out of the hands of the people and to turn them over to big government. We need to return control over government—and that includes this city of ours that we all love—to the people. And we're not going to do that by turning more and more of it over to the scientists and their computers. There are some who believe the answer to everything is just to feed more data into the machines. But let me tell you, those computers can't tell you anything about human values, because you can't reduce those to a set of numbers. They can't tell you anything about the value of a human life!"

Several of the reporters were grinning now and at least one was yawning, but another fed Burton a question. "Don't you use computers in your own business, Councilman?"

"I do," Burton admitted. A moderately wealthy man, he had inherited the Burton Trucking Company, a local and long-distance trucking firm. "We use it for scheduling and accounting, and that's the kind of things a computer does very well. But I'm not about to turn over the running of the company to a computer. The day that happens, it'll be a hot day in Hollister!"

Several of the listening journalists jumped on the phrase, scribbling it down. Given the current cold spell, it was as good a lead line as any.

5 TUES FEB 1 / 05:00 PM

From the office adjoining the physics laboratory Jennifer Tyson watched the head of the department, Dr. Linus Webster, talking with a young man who sat at the keyboard of the lab's minicomputer. The young man was a student assistant named George Devoto; Webster was her father. The small computer was a Digital Equipment Corporation PDP-11, which was linked by interfacing equipment with the main frame computer at the Data Center.

Everyone had a pocket calculator now, Jenny thought; soon every kitchen would come with a built-in microcomputer to program the week's meals, the shopping list, the calories per serving, the budget. With the aid of the laboratory computer Linus Webster could now test mathematical theories in a fraction of the time once required. Problems that might have taken years for a team to resolve could now be run through in days or even hours by one minimally trained assistant. Few revolutions were as significant.

Webster did not know she was there—probably wouldn't until she announced herself. An aloof, brilliant and difficult man of sixty-two, he was tall and angular, with the tall man's bent shoulders exaggerated by the habits of age and his indifference to physical appearance. He had been a remote figure to his only daughter

throughout her childhood, a man who inspired respect and awe rather than love. She still considered it somewhat astonishing that, after being on her own for nearly eight years, she was once again sharing the same roof with him—and with more amicability than they had ever known before.

He was not an easy man to live with. Often preoccupied with the problems of physics or mathematics that he carried around in his head, he treated any interruption as the intrusion of a fool. Jennifer's mother had seemed baffled and ultimately defeated by that irascible impatience and lack of tolerance. When she died, Linus Webster had acted as if her death were a betrayal, an attempt to shatter the comfortable, undisturbed routine that enabled him to concentrate on what really mattered—his work. Jenny suspected that the reason she had had no brothers or sisters was simply that Linus Webster had not wanted the additional disturbance in his life.

Jenny had been married and living in another city when Anna Webster died. She had been completely undone when her father broke down sobbing at the funeral. She realized then that she had never really known him. It was a long time before she got over her bitter resentment of the fact that Linus Webster had allowed her mother to die without knowing that he was capable of weeping for her.

Today Jenny was less certain of her mother's unhappiness. Had she really been more content with her role than Jenny knew, happy to provide a quiet, orderly shelter in which Linus Webster could function undisturbed? It was perhaps both unrealistic and unfair to try to push a liberated 1970s consciousness off on someone who had neither wanted nor needed it.

She poked her head through the door to the lab. "Are you nearly ready, Dad?"

He waved a hand absently, not looking up. She heard him speak sharply to his assistant. "Do it right, George. A computer won't correct your errors, it will simply perpetuate them." Devoto nodded and resumed his methodical key punching.

An odd one, she thought, like most of his predecessors. Her father had a penchant for hiring the most unlikely assistants. He was never interested in what they looked like, how they dressed or cut their hair, whether they were married or swinging singles. All that mattered was that they were as intensely single-minded as he was. George Devoto seemed to qualify.

Oh God, that's right, she thought, he's coming to dinner on Friday! One of her father's unpredictable gestures, certain to lead to a small disaster.

Suddenly Webster looked up, as if surprised to find her standing in the doorway. "Oh, there you are. You're late."

"I had a job to finish."

"Indeed."

The reply was distracted rather than the put-down it sounded like. Jenny retreated to the office, where she lit a cigarette. Linus Webster did not allow smoking in his laboratory. She glanced at the photo of her mother on the desk in a walnut frame, no longer surprised to find it there. Before she had finished the cigarette the two men emerged from the lab, blinking like miners coming up for air.

While her father went to get his coat she smiled brightly at George Devoto. "How did it go today?"

"Fine."

"I hope he's not keeping you working late again."

"No."

Witty dialogue, she thought, and wondered why she always had to sound so fatuous with him, as if she were trying to make conversation with a bright but surly child. "Did you get that apartment you wanted? Dad said you were moving in with someone closer to the campus."

"Yeah." Devoto glared at her as if she had been spying on him.

"Well, I'm glad it worked out." With relief she saw her father reappear in his heavy overcoat. "We'll see you Friday then. You *are* coming to dinner, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

The young man stared after her as she left the office. He did not answer when she said good night. Friday evening, she thought, was going to be a real delight.

They spoke little in the car, Webster preoccupied as usual. When they reached the neat brick home they now shared (what kind of a roommate had George Devoto found? she wondered idly), Linus Webster went directly to his study. Jenny started a baked potato in the microwave oven and carried her father's ritual glass of wine to him. He was at his desk.

"I've put a potato in the oven," she said. "It won't be long."

"Just one? What about you?"

"I'm having dinner with Rob Greiner."

"You're meeting Robert? Why didn't you tell me?" he grumbled. "I could have worked later."

"You work long enough hours. Besides, how would you have got home?" Webster no longer drove. He had had his heart attack—the unexpected event that had brought her back to Hollister—while he was driving, and a young girl in the car he struck had been severely cut about the face. Webster would not admit that he was now afraid to drive. He simply found ways to avoid it. Fear became an eccentric gesture.

"George could have driven me home."

"George has a car?"

He smiled ironically at her surprise. "Yes, George has a car. He's really quite normal, my dear."

"I'm not sure what that says for normality. He's not very sociable."

"I didn't hire him to be sociable. He's bright, and he's diligent."

"I know, Dad. I'm not trying to criticize him."

"But you don't much like him." He paused, studying her as if surprised to discover that she was not a child. "I suppose I could make an excuse for canceling Friday evening."

"We'll manage it somehow. You don't mind being on your own tonight?"

"My dear, I was living alone for several years before you came back. I'm very good at TV dinners."

"You don't have to eat a TV dinner. There's some of the roast left over, and the baked potato. Will that be all right?"

"That'll be fine."

She went back to the kitchen, feeling vaguely guilty about leaving him to dine alone on leftovers and was annoyed with herself for feeling that way.

The Mill was a huge, two-story structure converted from an authentic old mill. It was barnlike and plain, with massive wooden beams and rough-sawn plank walls. It was a favorite watering hole for the university community. Upstairs was the noisy disco, with the ground floor occupied by a cocktail lounge and restaurant. The lounge had a great stone fireplace for warmth and atmosphere, both enhanced by the crowds that always jammed the place.

Jenny Tyson was at the bar with Rob Greiner, waiting for a table and nursing her second Godfather, when she recognized

George Devoto's bearded face in the bar mirror. He was drifting along behind the row of crowded stools searching for an opening. His eyes were wary, as if he were afraid of being recognized and having to say hello.

She turned around and said brightly, "Hello, George!"

He stared at her without speaking.

"Don't pretend you don't recognize me, George," she chided him, instantly falling into the cajoling tone he unfailingly evoked in her. "If you say that, I'll have to tell Dr. Webster where you spend your nights away from the lab."

"I don't think he'd be interested," Devoto mumbled. He flicked a glance at Greiner, ducked his head in what might have been meant as a nod, and hurried on.

"Who was that?"

"Dad's latest assistant. He came in the fall—it must have been about the time you left the Data Center."

"Why were you needling him?"

"I wasn't needling him," Jenny protested. "He's just hopeless when it comes to conversation. As a matter of fact, he's a lot like you when you want to be that way, except that I think he's really afraid of women." She groaned melodramatically. "And I have to go through my lively Jennifer act Friday night. Dad's asked him over for dinner. I don't know how I'll get through a whole evening of jolly Jenny."

Greiner stared at her, scowling under black brows, as she explained about the dinner invitation. He had a beautiful scowl, she thought. It came from the high arch of the dark eyebrows, the piercing stare of hazel eyes. He was a thin, elegant man, although he dressed in a studiously casual uniform of jeans and flowered shirts. His hair was very curly and thick, almost shoulder length, and complemented by a Fu Manchu mustache and a small, untrimmed beard. He looked a little like Bob Dylan, and Jenny suspected that if she had been a little younger when they met she might have had the crush on him that Greiner had half expected.

"Why do you put yourself through all that?" Greiner demanded. "You don't have to. Why don't you move out?"

"I can't do that . . . not yet."

"You mean you won't. There isn't any *can't* about it."

"I can't explain it. I feel sorry for him. Since his heart attack—"

"Don't give me that. You're just doing a number, the dutiful

daughter bit. I don't need to listen to it, and you don't need to dump it on yourself."

She bristled. "I owe him something. He's my father."

"Nobody owes anybody anything! Haven't you learned that yet, for God's sake?"

The remark was typical of Greiner, defiant and belligerent. She said, "I don't believe that."

"You mean you don't want to believe it."

"What difference does it make to you?"

"I want you to get clear in your head. You walked out on your parents once, right? You told me you thought you hated your old man. Now all of a sudden you owe him your life? Get off it."

"What are we if we don't care anything about anyone but ourselves? The new generation?"

"Listen. You've got to think of yourself first. It's like the beer people say, you only go around once in life, and you better grab all you can for yourself because if you don't, if you let someone else run your life, you've just thrown it all away." Greiner's grin eased the sting of his words. "Jenny, you think he needs you there. Well, what do you think he's been doing the last couple hours while you've been sitting here worrying about him? He's back there in that den of his, inside his head with his numbers, and right now he doesn't even know you exist. And you know I'm right."

Before she could answer, the call came over the intercom announcing that their table was ready. Over dinner the argument was dropped by unspoken consent, although Jenny Tyson's thoughts kept returning to it. While there was truth in what Greiner said, it was a limited truth. People did have connections. They did owe each other something. Even people whose connection was remote and accidental—like her and Arthur Prochaska.

She waited until they were having coffee before she brought up the Prochaska incident. Greiner listen with a faintly sardonic smile that was meant to suggest indifference, but she knew better. Any computer problem interested him, even if the people involved did not.

"So what do you think?" she prodded when he remained silent. "How come that correction was aborted?"

Greiner shrugged. "Let Del Thomas crack his own nuts. It doesn't have anything to do with me."

"Okay, so Thomas fired you and you'd like to see him hanging there, turning slowly, slowly in the wind. But look at it as my

problem, not Thomas's. Thomas doesn't even think there *is* a problem." She caught the flicker of anger in his eyes. "Look, you don't have to help—"

"We went through that at the bar," Greiner scowled into his coffee. Finally he said, "Somebody's being funny."

"What do you mean?"

"Whoever it was won't admit it now—can't admit it. But that's what it looks like to me."

"Do you want to spell that out for a less devious mind?"

"Someone in the computer room is playing games, that's all. It's nothing new, it goes on all the time. Maybe some day it'll take the place of baseball as the national sport. This time it boomeranged. Maybe that's what helped to kill this old guy you're worrying about and maybe it didn't. Probably he would've died anyway. But it looks like somebody's been fooling around with that billing program. Look at it this way. Anyone in that room could've used your password and user number—"

"But I haven't told anyone my identifier or my password!"

"You don't have to. Hell, I knew most of them myself, including yours. Some of those jokers can't remember their numbers. Look around. You'll find those numbers taped right on the keyboards sometimes. And those that aren't written down, you can pick up by listening or watching. Everybody's busy, right? They aren't paying attention to who's standing around behind them or just passing by. Who cares? Everyone inside that room is cleared, right?" Greiner paused. "Anyway, there are ways to get security information out of the system if you've got an inside track."

"But if someone made a change, there should be some kind of record. I can't find anything!"

Greiner shrugged. "If it was done right, you wouldn't. Look, I'm not saying this is what happened, but it *could* have. Somebody could've put in a correction or a change and instructed the computer to erase the fact that anything was done. Simple as that."

The possibility left her shaken. "Why? Why would anyone do that? You're talking about people I know, Rob."

"I'm not asking you to believe me. You asked me, remember? I'm only telling you it could happen. Besides, whoever did it couldn't have known this old guy would freeze to death." He paused. "Have there been any other errors like the Prochaska bit?"

"No . . . nothing out of the ordinary. At least none that I know of."

"Then it was a one-shot deal. Whoever it was got his kicks one time, but he won't try it again after what happened. Or she won't."

"*She* won't!"

"Why not? It would be sexist to assume it was a man. It couldn't have been anyone. Anyone at all. Even someone from one of the remote terminals, or even careful Carl."

"Mac? You've got to be kidding."

"Not in something like this. I'll admit MacAdam doesn't have a sense of humor, but it's still anybody's game." Greiner studied her speculatively. Even in the darkness of the Mill there was a glow about her, he thought, as if every other woman in the place had been somehow put on a dimmer switch and turned subtly down. "Speaking of computers, what say we go back to my place? We can play my new input game. You can be the processor, and I'll be the input device."

Her glance was quick, oddly soft. "We've been through that once, Rob. You know it won't work."

"What's wrong with me? I'm not exactly ugly—at least some people don't think so."

She smiled wryly. "David was handsome too."

"Don't give me your David number. I know it by heart."

"I doubt that. I doubt it very much."

"Why?"

"Because you don't have a heart. You've told me so yourself. All you've got is something inside your chest that pumps blood, and that's not the same thing."

"Yes, it is!" Greiner pounced on the point in triumph. "That's all I've got and it's all you've got. It's all anybody's got. That's what I've been trying to tell you. When you get clear about that, you'll get clear about a lot of things."

She shook her head stubbornly. "It's not that simple, Rob. Life isn't a number set. You can't punch in a simple instruction like that and have all the correct answers come out. There's more to it than just grabbing what you can for yourself. Even that old man who died in his house last weekend because nobody cared. I owe *him!*"

Greiner sighed. "You're a hopeless case, Jenny Tyson. I don't know why I don't give up on you completely."

"Maybe you feel you owe me something," she said with a laugh.

"I don't know what the hell for."

She sobered quickly. "Will you do something for me, whether you owe it or not?"

His response was guarded. "Maybe."

"Think about this Prochaska thing. If it wasn't an insider, then what, Rob? What happened?"

He was silent a moment before he said grudgingly, "I'll think about it. For you. But that's *all* I'll do."

"It's all I'm asking." Considering his feelings about the RDC, she had done far better with him than she had hoped.

Eddie Hamilton and Joe Martinez were having coffee in the cafeteria at Hollister County General Hospital. The room was large and cheerless, with only a half-dozen white-coated hospital personnel scattered among the empty tables. The hard, shiny table tops were a pale green formica, a color presumably chosen to complement the drab walls, which had long ago been painted—in a choice comprehensible only to an interior designer—a bilelike green.

Hamilton was a premed student at the university who worked part time as a hospital orderly, a display of eager-beaverness that Martinez found both astonishing and impressive. Martinez, a compact, dark-skinned man with a handle-bar mustache and glossy black hair, was an intern.

Martinez's gaze shifted from the main corridor, where he could see the bank of elevators, to the front windows of the cafeteria, which overlooked the emergency entrance and a portion of the visitors' parking lot. "There it is again," the intern said.

"What?"

"That van in the doctors' parking lot. I know damned well nobody on this staff has a van like that. It's taking up one of our parking spaces—I had to park in the visitors' lot and walk back tonight."

"Maybe it belongs to a non-resident."

"What kind of a doctor would be driving around in a whorehouse on wheels like that?" After four hours in emergency Martinez was not in a tolerant mood.

"So it's some guy whose wife's in the hospital. Or maybe he's queer for one of the nurses," Hamilton suggested lightly. "What do you think he is—the mad bomber?"

"Okay, so I could be wrong." Martinez glanced again toward

the elevators, impatience showing.

Hamilton shoved his empty cup away and glanced at his watch. "Gotta go push my broom. Isn't Maggie coming down?"

Martinez gestured toward the elevators. "She was going to try. She's not supposed to leave that terminal of hers now, but hell, this seems like the only chance we get to say hello even. She gets off at midnight, and sometimes I don't get home until six in the morning. We're always going in different directions. It's like we're on different planes. Might as well be different planets," he concluded disgustedly.

"You won't be on nights forever," Hamilton said, sympathetically. He scraped his chair back just as Maggie Henderson stepped off the elevator, looked anxiously around the cafeteria and spotted them. "I'll leave you two lovebirds with your lousy twenty minutes together."

"Stick around," Martinez said half-heartedly.

"Once more," Hamilton replied with a grin, "with feeling."

Martinez laughed, his mood brightening as Maggie approached, threading her way among the tables with her leggy stride. "For a premed you show surprising sensitivity."

"Maybe I should think about psychiatry."

Hamilton grinned at the young nurse as he passed her. Maggie slipped into the chair he had vacated, more breathless than her hasty elevator run from the sixth floor accounted for. "Thank God," she murmured. "When I saw the beaver with you I was afraid he wouldn't leave."

"He's okay," Martinez said. "I thought maybe you wouldn't make it."

"I can't stay long. You know I'm not supposed to leave when Junior is running..." She gazed into Martinez's soft brown eyes and felt her heart give a familiar lurch.

For the next twenty minutes she did not think once of Junior, her unattended terminal.

The name was printed by hand on a strip of tape stuck to the terminal: Junior. The Intruder did not smile.

The operator had neglected to log off again. That lapse had been helpful the first time he used this terminal to gain access to the Regional Data Center. All he had to do was resume transmission on the open line. On that occasion, however, he had acquired the operator's password and identification number simply

by asking for a repeat of the previous transmission. The computer could have been programmed to suppress the password on re-transmission, but that elementary security precaution had not been taken. He was no longer dependent upon an open line.

He typed his write request on the keyboard. A reply appeared instantly on the cathode ray tube display.

**SYSTEM IN USE. YOUR SERVICE BEGINS
IN 2 MINUTES 28 SECONDS. CURRENT
SEQUENCE IS**

- 1. HOLLISTER UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS**
- 2. CRTC**
- 3. HOLLISTER COUNTY GENERAL HOSPITAL**

The Intruder waited, third in line. His heartbeat had quickened.

He had exploited two important facts about the system. There was a "systems status" program in effect, a convenience to users, informing them who else was currently accessing the system and how long a wait there would be. This gave him valuable free information about when different programs were running and for how long. The second weakness was that the memory space of the immediately preceding user was not automatically wiped out when he had finished. It was possible to read at least the last page of data just printed.

The Intruder asked for a repeat of his own write request. With it he also got what he wanted: a fragment of data from the CRTC, the city's Computer Regulated Traffic Control program...

6 WED FEB 2 / 08:00 AM

Wednesday was the day Ralph Lambert was going to move up in the world. Banner Textiles was about to hire a new sales manager.

Lambert was convinced the preliminary interviews had gone well. Of course, anyone who had spent a lifetime selling could easily become overly optimistic. That was the nature of the beast. But selling had also made Lambert a shrewd judge of others' reactions to him—a salesman had to know how he was coming across. Those who counted at Banner Textiles had been favorably impressed. And he didn't think Banner would balk at the price tag. He had asked for forty thousand with a performance bonus arrangement. They might want to offer less up front and more as a carrot, but that would be no problem.

As he ran this through his mind that morning to the comforting buzz of the Norelco Tripleheader, he felt buoyant and eager. Banner had kept him waiting for ten days since his interview with Lew Wallerstein, the company president. Then Bud Taylor, a sometime golfing partner who had told Lambert about the opening, called on Monday to set up an appointment for one o'clock Wednesday. While Taylor would not commit himself over the phone, Lambert was certain that Banner was going to offer him the job.

Banner had been running a background check during these past

ten days, of course. No well-run company hired anyone at an executive level without a thorough backgrounding. The Credit Bureau to see whether he was having money problems, the Medical Information Bureau, Dun & Bradstreet, personal references. Lambert was not concerned about the investigation. He knew exactly what kind of portrait would emerge. He had been with Knox Industries for fifteen years, the last five as sales manager. Belonged to the right country club but didn't get in over his head. Played tennis and golf (twelve handicap). Vacationed sensibly. Not a gambler. No serious debts other than the whopping mortgage on the new house on Sunset Circle Drive, and that would be in line with his increased income at Banner. Three children, all in their teens, and a wife who might have stepped right out of one of those Geritol ads on TV. In short, no visible problems. A stable, solid, dependable type—adjectives that could apply to Banner Textiles, which had been doing business at the same stand in Hollister since 1872.

Leaving the house that morning, kissing Janet on the lips and giving her bottom a squeeze (tight and solid, thanks to good old Geritol and three hours every week at the health club), Lambert felt the way he used to in the old days when he was on the road, charged up, adrenalin flowing, setting out for his first call of the day *knowing* he couldn't fail to make a sale.

It was a bright, cold morning, but the sun sparkled off the recent snow and it felt good to be alive. That feeling of jaded lethargy which had been there too often of late was gone. The best part wasn't over after all. The best was still to come.

At noon the Data Center's cafeteria was crowded. Funneling out of the line past the cashier with his loaded tray, Michael Egan glanced around for a familiar face. Finding no one at an open table, he took one of the smaller tables by the windows.

A moment later he looked up to find Jennifer Tyson standing there. "Mind if I join you?"

"Are you kidding? It's one of my favorite fantasies."

With a quick laugh she took the chair facing him. Absently clearing her tray of its tuna salad, crackers and hot tea, she glanced with amusement at Egan's rapidly disappearing lunch. Meat loaf with mashed potatoes and plenty of brown gravy. And peas. Meat loaf, she thought. And peas. Exactly what she would have predicted. After all, she knew his type. Solid, heavy-footed, all the

square pegs of his personality in all the proper square holes. She had not expected any surprises.

"Sorry I came on like a shrew yesterday. I was . . ."

"Coming out of our director's office. Sometimes that'll do it."

She smiled. "You too?"

"On occasion. Yesterday was one of them. You're lucky you weren't standing around when I came out."

"I have a sneaky feeling you're being a gentleman."

"Don't believe it."

They talked idly about the weather (cold), the probability of more snow (high), the cafeteria food (monotonous), the coffee (bad). She was surprised to discover that he lived in relative seclusion out at Lake Terry in a rented cottage. The revelation caused her to examine him more closely.

Egan had a compact, athletic build, as might have been expected of someone with his FBI background and his current job as Security Director for the RDC. When she bumped into him outside Del Thomas's office she had noticed that he was taller than he appeared at a distance, probably close to six feet. His hair was sandy, neatly trimmed but not as short as it had been when he first came to the Data Center. Eyes brown and steady, their expression thoughtful and calm. That pleased her. She seemed to have spent a lifetime coping with volatile, angry men. Maybe this wasn't such a wild hunch after all. David, let it be remembered, despised meat loaf. So did Rob Greiner.

Egan went back to the counter for a refill. When he returned he regarded her quizzically. "Congratulations, Mrs. Tyson."

"It's Jennifer, please."

"Does anyone call you Jenny?"

"Almost everyone except Dad, who insists on Jennifer."

"That would be Dr. Webster." He smiled at her reaction. "Security has a file on every employee at the Center."

"And you remember them all?"

"Only the most interesting ones."

She decided to let that go. "Why the congratulations?"

"You haven't once asked me whether or not I spied on the Weathermen or robbed a doctor's office or taped a congressman's love nest."

"Did you?"

"No."

"Do people usually ask?"

"It's fashionable right now. I'm labeled ex-FBI. They used to ask about Hoover. You know, what was he really like. As if a field agent out on the Coast would know. Today . . . let's say the image is a little soiled. Ring around the collar."

"But you don't think it's really dirty."

His glance was quick, not apologetic. "No. That's not what the Bureau is all about. People forget quickly. Not that some of the things you've read about lately didn't happen, but some of them were necessary, or seemed to be at the time. It's true the Old Man was in there too long, and he got to the point where he was above the rules. But when he was gone the Nixon people had a free hand, and there weren't any rules. . . ." Egan shrugged the subject aside. "That's not what you wanted to talk to me about."

"Was I that obvious?" She had been trying to measure him as he talked, sensing that he felt deeply what he was saying, but she realized that his open face, even the eyes that regarded her with such apparent candor, actually revealed very little. He was a man firmly in control of himself, and this encouraged her. "You're right, there was something I wanted to ask."

"Ask away."

"It has to do with security. That's why I picked on you."

"Ah well," he said with a mock sigh. "Maybe next time. . ."

She did not smile. "Is there any chance that . . . well, that anyone could have got into the computer room recently who didn't belong there?"

"There's always a possibility, but I'd have to say no."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Well, for one thing there's no way for an outsider to get in without going through the man-trap."

"Man-trap?"

"The anteroom before you get into the computer room. Your ID gets you through the first set of doors, but you're trapped there until someone inside authorizes your entry through the second doorway. You can't get in or back out unless you're cleared."

"I understand that, but—"

"And we keep a log on everyone who comes in or goes out. A daily log and a running log. If someone gets inside and doesn't leave, for instance, that means an automatic investigation. Not that that has happened. And anyone gaining access who isn't an identifiable employee is photographed. Those photos go on file."

"What I'm getting at is this. I completed a security survey last

week, and during the course of that I went over the logs for the three months I've been here, and I checked the photo file. We don't get many out-of-the-ordinary visitors, anyway, and those we did get were photographed and escorted. And there haven't been any off-hours incidents."

"But there were some visitors."

"Yes. But you know that nobody just wanders around in there—no visitor, I mean. There's always an escort. Usually it's Thomas's assistant."

"Mac."

"That's right, MacAdam. And if he isn't there, or he's tied up, someone else has the assignment." He paused, regarding her speculatively. "That's a weakness in the system, by the way. We—that is, the security staff—don't have any control over much of what goes on inside the computer room itself. But there's no problem if the people inside take their jobs seriously. Why are you asking, Jenny?"

Egan's comments had been deceptively casual, and the unexpected abruptness of the last question flustered her. She had known from the start that she could not give a plausible explanation for her uneasiness. Egan was so damned calm and . . . and sensible. She didn't want to sound like a fool.

Oh, to hell with how you sound, she thought. And she told him about Art Prochaska, the mistake that had apparently contributed to his death, and her search for the source of the error. "The point is, that correction was put through. There's no reasonable explanation for the fact that the man's service was cut off."

"Unless someone had unauthorized access to that file and countermanded the correction. Is that what you're saying?"

"Something like that." She had decided not to bring up Rob Greiner's explanation. She simply couldn't bring herself to accept the idea that someone inside—someone she knew—would play such a dirty trick. "I just don't understand what happened, that's all. That's why I wondered about visitors."

"Have you talked to Thomas about it?"

A wry smile touched her lips. "You saw the result. He thinks someone made a mistake."

"What about the computer?"

"It can't make a mistake."

Egan thought about the incident at the race track and the scrambled tote board. "But they do make mistakes, surely."

Jenny Tyson shook her head emphatically. "No, they can't. Literally, they can't make a mistake. The programmer can write a bad program, the operator or data preparations clerk can make a mistake—even the maintenance engineers. But not the computer itself. If the program is correct and none of the people involved make an error, then the right answers *have* to come out."

"You can have hardware failure or other malfunctioning," Egan persisted. "Like overheating, for instance."

"Yes, that happens," she admitted. "But the system is self-monitoring. It knows when there's a breakdown or malfunction. It will shut itself down or tell us something is wrong."

"And this time it tells you that nothing went wrong." Egan was no longer casual about it, she thought, if he ever had been. The knowledge pleased her more than she would have anticipated.

"That's right. I know what this all sounds like, Mr. Egan—"

"Michael."

"Michael." She smiled briefly. "I know what Mr. Thomas thinks. It sounds as if I'm trying to cover up. Errors and omissions are common enough, God knows, they happen all the time, but *this* time someone died because of a mistake—and because I fell down on my job. Quality control—following up on errors—is what I'm there for. It looks as if I don't want to accept the blame, and that isn't it. If that was what happened, I could face it. I wouldn't like it, but I could admit what happened, at least to myself. But I checked back. I took a dump of the file, and that correction was put through properly. I'm saying that the right information went into the system, there was no breakdown anywhere, and the wrong answer came out. And that," she concluded, "is impossible."

Egan's gaze shifted from hers. He stared out the window at the snow-encrusted campus. It was relatively deserted during this week between terms. Monday, when the new term started, there would be throngs of students moving along the walks that were empty now. He doesn't believe me either, she thought, keenly disappointed.

"I heard about Prochaska on the radio," Egan said. "And I read the story in the paper. His funeral is tomorrow morning, I believe."

Jennifer Tyson was silent.

"There's so damned much I don't know about computers," he said. "Maybe you'll be able to help me there. Maybe we can help each other."

"Does that mean you're going to open a Prochaska file?" It

might not come to anything, she thought, but at least it would be a start. At least the whole incident would not be dropped and forgotten by everyone but her.

Michael Egan smiled at her. "I already have," he said.

*DATE: 01/14/77 * TIME: 08:02 AM *
RDC/NO: L1279863 * B/D: 06/03/35 * NAME: LAMBERT
RALPH RICHARD
ADDR: 1431 SUNSET CIRCLE DR
HOLLISTER 95260 * EFF: 06/03/75 * EXP/BD: 79
CLASS: 03
LEGAL HISTORY:
DRUNK DRIVING VIOL/DATE: 01/02/72 *
CONV/DATE: 02/05/72
RECKLESS DRIVING VIOL/DATE: 05/11/73 *
CONV/DATE: 07/01/73
DRUNK DRIVING VIOL/DATE 11/15/76 *
CONV/DATE: 12/17/76
DRUNK DRIVING VIOL/DATE: 01/01/77 * PEND
VEH LIC: SOR 026
ACCIDENTS: 05/11/73 * 01/01/77 INJURIES 02
END*

"What the hell is this?" Ralph Lambert asked incredulously. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"It's nothing to laugh about, Ralph," Bud Taylor said. "None of us are laughing."

"I don't get it." Lambert stared at the computer printout Taylor had handed him. "This is crazy."

"Well, it's plain enough. Christ, Ralph, what made you think it wouldn't come out?"

"Wait a minute—"

"No, *you* wait a minute." The expression on Taylor's face was not friendly. "I stuck my neck out for you. Damn it, you could've told *me*. Hell, we might even have been able to handle it if you'd laid it right up front. We've got a company rehab program for alcoholics. The board might not have been willing to take a chance on an incoming executive with a drinking problem, but at least they'd have listened. Now . . ."

"Bud, will you listen to me? This is crazy. I've never had a drunk driving charge in my life!"

"Oh, come off it," Taylor said disgustedly. "It won't wash, Ralph. No way. You can't hide something like this. It's on the record." He gestured toward the printout. "We ran a routine credit-and-criminal check through the local credit bureau and the RDC. When that hit Wallerstein's desk—"

"But it's not true!" Lambert was on his feet, his voice shaking with emotion. "Bud, you *know* me. Have you ever seen me really loaded? You think it wouldn't have got around in a town this size? There's been some kind of a mix-up, a mistake."

"No mistake." But the first crease of doubt appeared in Taylor's forehead. "You mean that, don't you?"

"Of course I mean it!" Lambert's anger was rapidly giving way to desperation. He knew how company executives reacted to the smell of trouble. Even if he could get them to withhold judgment until he proved that this record of alcoholism was in error, the damage might be irrevocable. Doubt would have been sown. The normal response would be to pull back and proceed cautiously—to reconsider any earlier decision. "Bud, this is my life we're talking about. Those court dates . . . I can prove I was never up on any of those charges."

"Now take it easy, Ralph . . . sit down. Let's take a look at this thing. Maybe there's still a chance. If you're telling me the truth—"

"If?" Lambert said bitterly. "Even you don't believe me. It won't make any difference now, will it? Even if we do get this straightened out."

"Well, I won't pretend this hasn't hurt. But Wallerstein's a reasonable man. Believe me, he'll reconsider your situation once I tell him what's happened." Taylor hesitated. He was a hearty, outgoing man, a joiner, member of the club, the kind who always had a new vulgar story to tell, and, judging by the broken capillaries of nose and cheeks, a heavy drinker himself. Now he showed worry. "Ralph, you're absolutely leveling with me about this? I mean, you wouldn't let me go out on a limb again?"

"No," Lambert said, suddenly exhausted. "I'm telling you the truth."

"Then let me see what I can do. Believe me, I'll stay right on top of this . . ."

Numbness crept over Ralph Lambert as he listened. Taylor would do his best, Lambert knew. He had to; his own judgment was in question. But would that effort come too late?

It was incredible, he thought. One machine error, one stupid mistake, and twenty years of hard work were wiped out. How could it happen?

Throughout the afternoon Michael Egan's thoughts kept turning back to his lunch-hour conversation with Jenny Tyson. He was disturbed by her emphatic conviction that what had happened with Arthur Prochaska's utility bill couldn't have happened without some unknown intervention. Egan didn't know enough about computers to evaluate her judgment—and that was what bothered him most.

Six months earlier Egan was still a Special Agent in the Los Angeles field office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He had put in ten solid years with the Bureau, three as a clerk in the Detroit office and seven as an agent, the last five years out on the West Coast. He had been dedicated to his work, liked it, believed in it. Only after the Old Man died did he become aware of unsettling factors—the attempt by people in the White House to use the Bureau as a personal investigative force against personal and political enemies, the surfacing of petty jealousies and rivalries not visible before, the in-fighting as a struggle developed between old-line Hoover men and a more independent faction. Hoover's inner circle still held most of the power, and they yielded little of it willingly, relegating talented men to impotent outposts on the perimeter of the organization. Egan's earnest, even naïve faith in the Bureau began to erode.

Egan still believed in what the Bureau stood for, and he admired most of the men who were part of it. But he no longer saw the FBI as the palace guard in Camelot. It was human after all. Like Hoover, it was fallible—and mortal.

He realized that it was time for him to leave.

After he quit he discovered how closely knit FBI men remained even on the outside. They had their own organization, the Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI. Even a monthly magazine, the *Grapevine*, to keep members up-to-date on who was doing what. More importantly, perhaps, there was the former agents' version of the Old Boy Network.

Michael Egan had picked a bad time to be job hunting. The economy was down, businessmen were uneasy about the future, and Egan at thirty-five, was suddenly in competition with men ten years his junior with comparable business experience. But he soon

learned that many of his former colleagues—friends, sidekicks, mentors and bosses, men who had retired before he did, a trend encouraged by an organization that stopped promoting its people at age fifty and retired them at fifty-five—now held influential positions in the business community. Major U.S. corporations seemed to like ex-FBI men in positions that ranged from administration to legal and investigatory staffs to security.

Two weeks after he left the Bureau Egan was offered a job in South Carolina as assistant security director for a countywide school system, working under a former partner, Evan Burke. While he was still mulling that over, Egan received a phone call from Joe Hamill urging him to fly over to Honolulu, where Hamill was security manager for a group of major hotels, two of them on the beach at Waikiki. Hamill had been Egan's chief in the Los Angeles field office for several years, and he was delighted at the prospect of recruiting him as an assistant. "Hell, you can handle this without getting off the pot, Mike. And the women! We got more beauties on our beaches than the Bureau's got files."

Unfortunately, Egan had seen both offers for what they were: friends making room. He would end up feeling obligated and uneasy, whether he went to South Carolina or Waikiki beach, and he couldn't see either friendship surviving the indebtedness.

Another two months passed, time enough for him to question his wisdom in worrying about independence, before the first tentative feeler came from the Hollister Regional Data Center. This came by way of another former FBI contact, but the only help Egan got was the chance to go in and sell himself. The job was open, the RDC people liked him (or his FBI credentials), and when he was offered the position he didn't hesitate.

After three months Egan knew that he liked the college community and enjoyed the complexities of his job. He could even learn to live with the climate and with Del Thomas. But now he had other doubts, one serious: He wondered if he hadn't got in over his head.

He could handle the paper work and the people who worked for him. He could set up a rotating guard schedule and a budget. He understood, at least in principle, the functioning of CCTV, access control systems, microwave and ultrasonic intrusion alarms.

The computers were something else.

They couldn't make a mistake, Jenny Tyson had insisted. But had they?

"Huh? Wha'd you say?" Adams asked, turning away from the bank of television screens on the security console. The guard's eyes looked bleary, slightly out of focus.

"Take a break," Egan said. "I'll watch for a while."

Adams shook his head. "Those things'll put you to sleep."

"It's like driving on the turnpike," Egan said. "Some people get so hypnotized they ram right into a slower moving truck or car without even knowing it's there. Go ahead, smoke if you've got 'em."

Adams grinned and vacated his seat at the console. While he poured himself a mug of coffee from the pot kept simmering on a plate in a corner of the office, Egan took his place and stared at the rows of computers visible on the monitor screens, the gray people sitting at the keyboards or moving about the computer room in the service of the machines, like acolytes performing a ritual around an altar.

What good was a TV camera, Egan wondered, if the computers themselves went crazy? What if one of them got so smart that it wouldn't be rigidly programmed any more? What if it started to think for itself—and make mistakes?

What good were all your cameras, card keys and alarm systems then?

7 WED FEB 2 / 10:00 AM

"Jay, is it something I've done?"

She was standing in the bathroom doorway, which was connected to the bedroom in the contemporary manner, assuring privacy for the room's occupants from everyone else in the house

but little from each other. Jay Burton could always hear everything Evelyn did in the bathroom. He supposed that his was the last generation to care about such matters. Terri Helms, who was nineteen, never bothered to close a bathroom door. "It's a natural function," she would say. "Why should we hide natural functions?" The light from the bathroom was behind Evelyn, shining through the pale green gown she wore. When had she bought that gown? He did not remember it. Usually she wore more sensible, warmer nightgowns; this time of year she was always cold.

"Jay, dear, are you awake?"

He pretended to be asleep, hoping that she had not seen that his eyes were open when she came out of the bathroom. They were closed now, and he tried to keep his breathing deep and regular. He sensed it when she came around to the side of the bed and stood over him. He could feel her presence even when she did not move—he knew that she was watching him. He began to snore lightly, hoping that he wasn't overdoing it. She knew him so well. They had been together so long that Evelyn almost always knew when he was trying to deceive her. Did she know when he was feigning sleep?

She sighed, and after a moment he heard the whisper of her thin new silken gown as she moved around the room to her own bed. Suddenly he understood the reason for the nightgown—she was trying to be sexy!—and he almost groaned aloud.

He lay there as Evelyn's bed creaked—they had been using twin beds for five years—as the covers rustled and she shifted around, settling in and punching her down pillow into comfortable shape. Quiet settled over the dark room. The shade was up on the window Jay Burton faced, the curtains drawn aside and the window opened slightly. He could feel the draft cold against his face. Evelyn never forgot to leave a window open for him, even though she preferred a warm room. In the distance he could see the shine of snow and the blackness of bare trees climbing the slope to the east. He had forgotten to maintain his steady breathing and, catching himself, he resumed the pretense of sleep.

He knew it would be a long time coming.

Is it something I've done? The question cut through all pretense, leaving him unable to evade the miserable secret that disgusted him, the reason for his feigning sleep. Another time he might have responded to her plea, using a rough joke and the familiar tricks of their lovemaking to quiet her fears and to reassure her that, no

matter how often he might turn to others, he would always come back to her. This time he couldn't do it. And he couldn't tell her why.

All because of a nubile nineteen-year-old with a pouting mouth and a body that wouldn't quit.

Terri Helms could not type or file. He had hired her to sit out front in the reception area at the main offices of the Burton Trucking Company, to answer the phone and display her gorgeous chest, to greet salesmen and visitors and to make them happy to be kept waiting. At least that was what Burton had told himself when he hired her.

Now he wished to God that he had never seen her.

At 10:31 P.M. that Wednesday night Maggie Henderson was typing updated file information on the keyboard of the remote terminal at Hollister County General Hospital. Most of the data involved routine medical histories, including socially pertinent records such as those involving communicable diseases. While complete data for the latter records would be stored in the hospital's own file area at the RDC, the computer system was programmed to delete personally identifiable information and to pass the resulting statistical records along to the appropriate government agencies, such as HEW and the new National Medical Data Bank.

Maggie paused in her keyboarding to glance at the clock. Joe would be in the cafeteria now, waiting for her.

She had told him that she might not be able to come down to meet him tonight. She couldn't keep stealing time from her work. This was the period assigned to her by the Data Center. The last time she hadn't even logged out, and the hospital would be charged for the computer time even though the terminal had not been active. Time was what you bought as much as anything.

But when she thought of Joe Martinez waiting for her, his gaze impatient as he stared toward the elevators, she began to tremble. It happened like that often when she thought of his eyes, his hands, his mouth. She would begin to quiver, and there was a demoralizing feeling of being out of control, as if she were taking a forbidden step and sliding over into another dimension where she was no longer sensible, practical, level-headed Maggie who wouldn't dream of losing her head over an intern. She became this other woman who incredibly resembled Maggie, who had all the gestures down pat, the look, the walk, the voice, everything,

except that she did crazy, unpredictable things. She left Junior open and unattended to meet Joe Martinez for coffee because they wouldn't see each other again until morning—nine or ten whole hours!—and then he would be too tired to talk or do anything. This crazy Maggie laughed too much and too loudly. She left the top button of her uniform unbuttoned. She looked into those liquid brown eyes and felt as if she were one of those wide wax candles melting into a hot pool.

It's no use, she thought. Crazy Maggie wins again.

But at least this time she remembered to log out. No more memos from the RDC brass about sinister computer time thieves sneaking in to use her open line—not that Maggie really believed those stories. But she believed the hard fact of so many dollars for so many seconds of computer time wasted.

She logged out and hurried to the elevator.

Joe Martinez was waiting for her. She was relieved to see that he was alone. "Where's your eager disciple?" she asked.

"Hamilton?" Martinez shrugged indifferently. "It's the between-semesters ritual—he had to go home. You know what that means. Mama called." Martinez's smile teased her. "Just like you last Christmas."

Maggie reddened slightly. "Visiting your family once or twice a year isn't exactly abnormal. Not yet, anyway."

"Hey, don't get uptight. I was joking, okay?"

"You keep bringing that up."

"Yeah. Well, it was lonely Christmas Day without you."

Mollified, she leaned toward him. Her eyelids drooped and her voice turned huskier. "I made it up to you, didn't I, honey? Didn't I?"

Joe Martinez grinned. "You didn't hear me complaining."

She looked into his eyes. "You won't believe this," she murmured, "but I didn't rush down here to talk about Eddie Hamilton and his folks."

"Oh, no?" His grin became a playful leer. "What, then?"

Crazy Maggie. She felt as if she wanted to dance her way across the green sea of empty tables, like the star in one of those silly, glittery musicals of the 1930s...

The Intruder tapped out his request for access to file number 382-ELC. Then he paused. The initials were a risk. Why did he take it?

He shrugged off the question with arrogant confidence.

The file he had asked for was fictitious, but the computer system's response was automatic. As he waited, he knew that the system was searching for the file with its incredible speed, scanning its memory for file 382-ELC.

In seconds the response appeared on the video display:

FILE DOES NOT EXIST.

The Intruder responded politely.

**SORRY, MY MISTAKE. PLEASE GIVE ME
A DUMP OF MY CORE FOR CORRECTION.**

The dump—a printout of the entire hospital information program—followed almost immediately. Included was a transcript of the unsuccessful transaction the Intruder had requested moments before. Scanning this last readout quickly (snail-like, he thought, in comparison with the computer's ability to read), he felt elation. This time he had panned gold. Unquestioning, the system had provided him with a record of its vain search through its memory for the "missing" file. The kind of random data vacuumed up in such a search was called garbage, but the Intruder knew how much of value he could find sifting through this rubbish. File locations. Data sequences. User patterns. Even ID numbers.

Improvise, improvise. He would take what was open to him. Introduce a change, steal a password or a file, add false data, alter an instruction sequence. Hit them anywhere, everywhere, like dolphins butting a shark until it became maddened, biting at its own flesh...

8 THURS FEB 3 / 09:00 AM

Michael Egan had coffee and a Danish with Tom Ames in the latter's office Thursday morning. Ames was the Security Director for Hollister University. Although the Regional Data Center was responsible for its own internal security, functioning autonomously, and thus Egan's job was not under Ames's jurisdiction, Egan made a point of getting together with him at least once a week. He would have been a fool, he reasoned, not to recognize their mutual interests and the need for cooperation. The time might come when he would need Ames or vice versa. The computer center was part of the physical complex of the university. At the very minimum, its external security needs overlapped Ames's area of responsibility.

As far as Ames was concerned, the Data Center was the least of his worries, especially right now. It was heavily alarmed, had few entrances, and the lowest windows were twelve feet above the ground. Its access was completely controlled. You didn't have students coming and going at will by the thousands on an open campus. And you didn't have student problems.

"Three rapes last month," Ames told Egan. "One a week up until last week. The place is in an uproar. Jesus, what kind of society are we living in, Egan?"

"The same man, you think?"

"Looks like it."

"Why nothing last week? Lying low?"

"Oh hell, that's easy. The bastard hasn't been around. He's home on vacation between terms, visiting the folks."

"That means you're thinking student."

"Yeah, that's what I'm thinking. What else? It's someone who knows his way around here."

"What are you doing about it?"

"I'm crying a lot. No, wait a minute, erase. Let me take that back. Three girls *are* crying a lot. One of 'em is still getting medical treatment and maybe will be for a long time. She hasn't been able to handle what happened to her. She got beat up pretty good—all three of 'em did—but it's the mental thing with this one. The other two seem to be coming along okay, but you never know with rape." He looked at Egan defensively. "I'm not one of those cops who go around thinking they asked for it, you know. So what am I doing? Listen, you know as well as I do that I don't have the manpower to patrol this whole campus, to be everywhere there's trouble. No way. The handle comes too high. Until something like this comes along, security is just an expense, you know. Nobody wants to pay the price."

Egan nodded. It was a familiar complaint, and he had run into the same attitude with Del Thomas. "How about using students?"

"We're doing that. We brought in this sergeant from the police department, a woman who's sort of their rape specialist. She suggested a few things, like student patrols, and she's been giving talks in all the dormitories. We're trying to get the girls to take their locks seriously. Every resident has a key that opens her own room and the outside doors, but no other rooms. So even if a guy gets inside the building, he can't get into a room unless a girl is careless and leaves the door open." Ames sighed. "Not that that did the one girl any good. She was grabbed in the hallway."

"In the dormitory?" Egan asked in surprise.

"Yeah, he took a chance," Ames said disgustedly. "Grabbed the girl in the hall and dragged her down some stairs to the heater room in the basement."

"Where did he attack the other two?"

"One in the library, back in the stacks—that's always a security problem area. And one right out in the open. Hell, it wasn't even at night. He caught this girl, a little thing who was too scared even

to scream, between buildings. It was a quiet time of day, late afternoon, and he pulled her behind those open garages over in the southeast corner of the campus." He glanced questioningly at Egan.

"I know where they are."

"He took a chance that time too, doing it in broad daylight."

"Sounds like he wants to be caught."

"Maybe. At least that time somebody saw him. A couple girls saw him running away from the garages. They're the ones who found the girl back there, the one who was attacked. Trouble is, they never were close to the guy, and anyway they didn't know it was important when they saw him."

"What about the victims? Can't any of them give you a good description?"

Ames brooded over this before he shook his head. "Maybe one could, but she's the one who can't talk about it. The one in the library was grabbed from behind and he pulled her sweater up over her head and kept it there. The one in the dormitory didn't get a good look at him because it happened too fast, and he'd turned off the lights in the stairwell and the basement. All she knows is he wasn't very big and he had a beard." Ames produced some folded photocopies of a police artist's rendering and handed one to Egan. It pictured a young man with long dark hair, black mustache and beard. The brief description below the sketch said that he was between 5'8" and 5'10" tall, about 150 pounds. Like most composite feature drawings, there was a flatness about the picture, a lack of dimension. And the face resembled a few thousand male students on campus. Ames said, "All we've really got is a beard, and you know that doesn't mean much these days, on or off campus."

"I'll keep this copy," Egan said. "I gather you don't think you've heard the last of him."

"No, but we're making it tougher for him, like with the student patrols Sergeant Davis suggested. No girl is supposed to go anywhere alone. There's always someone who wants to go to the cafeteria or the library or wherever, but if she can't find anyone to go with her she can call on these escort teams. They're male student volunteers. The big thing we've stressed is nobody goes anywhere alone. Especially at night."

"He takes risks," Egan said thoughtfully. "Even with all that, he'll probably try again."

"Can't help himself, I suppose." Ames finished his coffee and stared pensively at a chip on the edge of the rim of his mug. Ames was a retired New York City cop, a stolid, unimaginative man. But he took his job seriously and Egan respected that. He also appreciated the fact that Ames had displayed no resentment over having an ex-FBI man dumped onto his terrain.

Ames glanced up. "What about you, Mike? You got anything going on?"

"Nothing like your problem."

"Nothing you can talk about anyway," Ames said without rancor. "I don't envy you your job, that's for sure."

"I don't envy yours. You've got a lot of people to worry about."

"So do you. Those computers—hell, we're all in there somewhere, aren't we? Every one of us." Ames shook his head. "No, sir. At least I know what I'm dealing with. And when I find this particular son-of-a-bitch, I'll know what to do with him!"

9 THURS FEB 3 / 05:00 PM

James Conway had a Thursday afternoon meeting with the Downtown Mall Committee, of which Jay Burton was a member. The councilman was in a particularly belligerent mood and the meeting disintegrated into a shouting match. Seeing that no useful progress was being made, Conway—over Burton's objections—adjourned the meeting.

"What was eating him today?" Conway grumbled afterward to Kenny Nance. "Some of the people on that committee want to turn this into some kind of a candyass town. They want special architectural restrictions. They want to put up invisible little plaques

instead of street signs. They want turn-of-the-century gas lights that would make the mall a mugger's paradise. It would cost a fortune we don't have, and besides, Hollister isn't that kind of town. It's a place where people live and work. We've got truck stops and billboards and factories. I don't object to the mall—in fact, I think it's a great idea. It'll be good for the civic center. But we're not going to turn Hollister into Disneyland North. I thought Burton knew better. Hell, he's always yelling about expenses."

"Slow down. Burton is just being Burton. Which means he's still running against you. Just don't let him know you're in favor of the mall but against Disneyland."

"How the hell am I supposed to do that?"

"Don't ask me, you're the politician."

Conway shrugged irritably. Burton was an annoyance, but he was not the real problem. "Did you check with the people at RDC about that Prochaska incident?"

"I talked to them."

"And?"

"I talked to Del Thomas, the director—you know him. And the new security man they've got, Egan. Thomas is a stuffed shirt, but Egan seems okay."

"How new is he?"

"Three months or so. Out of the FBI. He told me he can't find anything out of line about Prochaska, and Thomas said the same thing. Mistakes happen, even with computers. From what I understand, it's kinda hard to pin down who's to blame. The data clerk at the utility company supposedly put in a correction on Prochaska's bill, and the operator out at the Data Center, who's an assistant in quality control—her name is Tyson—checked it out. It seems like the right dope went in. It just didn't come out right. They're still trying to figure out why."

"Are they protecting themselves?"

"Could be, but I don't think so. I can usually smell that kind of thing. Listen, is that still bugging you? How it happened, I mean?"

"Yes—no. I don't know. Prochaska was buried this morning. That's bugging me. All in all, it hasn't been a memorable day."

"Why don't you take the night off?" Nance suggested. "Do whatever it is the Beautiful People do at home."

"Don't *you* start in on me."

Nance grinned. The citizens of Hollister had acquired a certain

pride in thinking of their mayor and his young wife as the city's Beautiful Couple. This was, in part, a recognition of Conway's image as a very contemporary politician, a member of a new generation with fresh ideas and attitudes. However, although he was lean and intense, and stayed in shape with Yoga exercises and tennis, he was hardly beautiful. Toni Conway was. Conway said he could have been a gorilla and they still would have been called the Beautiful Couple. No one would have noticed that the man was a bit hairy.

Nance said, "A woman who looks like Toni shouldn't be left alone too much."

Conway smiled. "For once, Kenny, I think you've come up with a good idea."

"Sooner or later it happens to us all."

Some hours later Conway remembered Nance's words as he looked into his wife's beautiful face, now half hidden by the spill of black hair. If this wasn't what the Beautiful People did at home, he thought, it would do for starters.

She caught his smile and smiled back, eyes dancing. "Do you think I'm bawdy?" she murmured.

"I should hope so."

"No, I mean seriously. Do you hate me sometimes?"

"Not when you're being bawdy, no."

"When, then?"

"When you ask too many questions. When you don't believe in yourself."

She leaned forward to kiss him. "I love you, do you know that?"

"If you don't, you really are being bawdy. Or something."

Languid in the aftermath of lovemaking, they relaxed in each other's arms, enjoying the simple warmth and closeness of their embrace, neither wanting to stir. Idly Toni ran a fingertip across his lips, tracing their outline. "What if your constituents could see us now?" she murmured. "What would that do to your image?"

"Ummm."

"That's no answer. What if someone had a bug planted under this bed all along, and everyone found out that you took an innocent little Mormon girl who didn't know any better and turned her into this wanton, bawdy creature who can't get enough of you? What would your Mr. Burton do with something like that, do you suppose?"

"I wish you wouldn't tell him. Or anyone."

"Why not?"

"Because they're envious enough as it is, just looking at you. If they knew the whole truth they'd shoot themselves. Or me. Especially Jay Burton. He's got an eye for the ladies, they tell me."

"Oh he does, does he? That sanctimonious fraud! Does he have an eye for me?"

"He'd have to be blind not to."

"I think he's too busy looking for trouble. He's got an eye for your computers."

Conway turned his head on the pillow to look at her closely. "They're not my computers. But what makes you say that?"

"I heard him on the news . . . talking about that old man who died over the weekend. He makes it sound as if . . . as if it's somehow all your doing. He's disgusting."

"No, he's just a politician." Conway was silent a moment. "He's like the quarterback in the Super Bowl game we watched—Kenny Stabler. Remember? He'll take what you give him. You can't protect yourself from every point of attack, so he'll find what looks like a weakness and he'll attack you there. It's good strategy—part of the game."

"Then I don't like the game."

The phone rang.

For a moment they did not move, jarred into silence by the unexpected sound. When Conway received a call at this hour, it usually meant trouble.

Finally he wriggled out of her embrace and hunched himself back against the headboard as he reached for the telephone on the nightstand.

The voice on the line sounded agitated. Toni could hear the thin rasping of the voice without being able to make out most of the words. She watched Conway's reaction. He seemed to turn into a statue carved in stone. "That's vicious," he said flatly.

Toni heard the caller say, "Yeah, I think somebody's trying to shaft you."

"What are you going to do with it?"

There was a short silence followed by a laconic answer. Conway said, "Thanks. I'd appreciate that."

When he hung up Toni studied him worriedly. Without knowing why, she was frightened. She had never seen him look so cold and hard. She knew there was toughness in him, there had to be

or he wouldn't survive in his chosen arena, but he had never been that way with her. She had never seen him like this. "Who was that?" she asked nervously.

"A reporter from the *Times*."

"What was it all about? You look . . . upset."

"Do I? His glance was remote, impersonal. "Someone got hold of a criminal record and sent a copy to the *Times*. The man who called, Greenberg—he's their political reporter—isn't going to use it, but he thought I ought to know about it. He's not sure whether anyone else got copies. Some of the hungrier TV people might go with it if they did."

"But what does that have to do with you? Is it . . . is it someone on your staff?"

He stared at her without answering. If she touched his lips now with her fingertips, she thought, she would bruise her fingers. She would find no softness at all.

"Who is it?" Toni demanded, her obscure fright expanding in her chest like a balloon. "Honey, what kind of criminal record are you talking about? What did he say?"

"It's a morals charge," Conway answered evasively. His voice was cold and distant, like his eyes. "The bastard! If I find out who dug this up—"

"Jimmy! Is it someone I know? Tell me what's wrong!"

He regarded her for another moment before he shook his head, curtly. She felt shut out, but she quickly reasoned that he was trying to shield her from something nasty—vicious, he had called it—and she accepted that.

A little later she slept, her head against his shoulder, unaware that he continued to lie rigidly beside her, wide awake.

10 FRI FEB 4 / 08:00 AM

Grayson's Department Store was a Hollister institution. Founded by Angus Grayson in 1910, the store was to Hollister what Macy's was to New York, Marshall Field to Chicago, J. L. Hudson Company to Detroit. Control of the business had passed from the founder to his son, Angus Grayson, Jr., who was still the chairman of the board, and from him to his son, Laurence Grayson, who was currently president and in actual control of the firm's operations.

It was a conservative, quality store, with much of its success popularly attributed to its traditional adherence to the tenet that the customer is always right. If you bought something from Grayson's and were not happy with it, you could take it back a week or even a month later and there would be no raised eyebrows, no static. Grayson's had the most liberal returns policy in the retail department store business.

Laurence Grayson had introduced many changes, but the famous customer-is-always-right policy remained intact. Increased profitability had been sought in other ways, one of which was the purchase and installation of an IBM System/370 computer with a CICS (Customer Information Control System) software package. This on-line system had been programmed to handle virtually all

of the documentation involved in the operations of a large retail store. This included computerized sales check creation and verification; computerized buyer purchase order issuance as well as shipping and receiving controls; inventory verification; records of outstanding or delinquent transactions; and, of course, accounts receivable.

Improved speed and efficiency were major advantages of the computer program. Even more important was the elimination of errors, particularly in customer accounts. The billing procedure was entirely automated from the moment a charge customer's credit card was inserted into the terminal at the sales register to the mailing of the monthly statement. Human handling of information, with its vulnerability to human error, was virtually eliminated.

That Friday the monthly statements went out as usual without incident.

It would be Monday before the first complaints began to come in.

James Conway left for City Hall shortly before eight. At the doorway Toni, slender and vulnerable in her blue robe, lifted her mouth to his. Unbidden, an erotic image shot through his mind. He brushed her lips with his and turned away quickly.

At the bottom of the hill, distracted and driving too fast, he went into a spinning skid when he braked. He nudged fenders with another car in the same tentative way he had kissed Toni. When Conway apologized for his carelessness, the other driver was not appeased. "I hope you run the city better than you drive," he snapped.

Driving downtown, Conway could not shake the image of Toni's lips reaching for his, a picture of innocence.

He remembered the first time he met her. A party in Greenwich Village. She seldom went out in those days, he later learned. What chance had brought them together that night on their collision course? She had been pale from overwork and careful avoidance of the sun, an incredibly beautiful young woman as elegant and brittle as a piece of fine china. He had gravitated to her compulsively, wondering who she was, curious about her aloofness. A model, he was told. On a half-dozen magazine covers that year. "An icicle in drag," someone said. "You're wasting your time."

Conway would not be put off, and he had always congratulated himself on his luck.

He could recall the first words he ever spoke to her: "What do you think of this Eagleton business?" She looked startled. McGovern had recently been nominated and was in the middle of a flap over his Vice-Presidential choice. Toni had followed the story; she simply hadn't expected anyone to ask her opinion.

Somewhat tentatively she said, "I think there's something bizarre about the way the press has treated it. They're like Italian paparazzi. They don't care who gets hurt in the shoving and shouting." She paused, then added more firmly, "Why don't they ask President Nixon some tough questions, too?" This was before Watergate had become an issue. Even Eric Sevareid, she pointed out, had, perhaps in the aftermath of the China trip, come to regard Nixon as a statesman.

As they continued to talk, Conway learned that she hated the nightly bloodletting in television coverage of Vietnam and wanted only for that drama to end. She thought it was absurd to pretend that China's real government was in Taiwan rather than Peking. At the same time she found it equally silly for rich movie actresses to come back from a holiday guided tour of selected Chinese communes to hail that way of life as so much finer and more fulfilling than anything America offered. The life of a slave in the pre-Civil War South, she suggested, could be made to sound care-free, mutually supportive, and free of degrading competition.

Conway grinned at her. "I thought you were supposed to be the empty-headed mannequin."

"Who said so?" she retorted.

"It doesn't matter. Obviously, they don't know you."

"Neither do you."

"No," Conway replied, "but I intend to."

Remembering that bold promise, Conway thought of Herb Greenberg's phone call, resisting it, not wanting to rehearse the details of the criminal justice history Greenberg had read to him.

But there was no escaping them—or the unanswered questions they raised about the woman who was now his wife.

Herb Greenberg arrived at City Hall shortly after one o'clock. When he saw the pileup of visitors in Conway's outer office he sought out Kenny Nance. They exchanged laconic jokes about the lot of the working press. Greenberg was a sad-eyed man in his fifties, good enough in Nance's opinion to work for one of the prestigious *Times* newspapers in New York or Los Angeles. He once said he worked for the Hollister *Times* because he preferred

living in a city where kids could safely wait on a street corner for the school bus and neighbors still spoke to one another. Greenberg showed Nance a sealed manila envelope.

Nance raised an eyebrow. "Important?"

"His Honor is expecting it."

"That's no answer."

"It wasn't supposed to be," Greenberg said amiably. But his eyes were, if anything, sadder than usual.

"The way you're standing there waving that thing, I get the impression you want to see him."

"I've always said you were a quick one."

Conway was saying good-bye to Larry Hurtz, the ACLU lawyer, and Nance ushered Greenberg into the mayor's office through a side door as soon as Hurtz left. "He's says you're expecting him. Okay?"

Conway nodded.

"You want me to stick around?" Nance asked hopefully.

"No, Kenny. Thanks." He offered no explanation. That reticence—and the hard knot that appeared in Conway's jaw line as he spoke—increased Nance's curiosity.

When they were alone Greenberg silently handed the mayor the manila envelope. Conway stared at it for a moment before he ripped it open and extracted a smaller, windowed white envelope. Through the window he read Greenberg's name and the address of the *Times*. The envelope had been opened. Conway withdrew a computerized criminal history printout and stared at it without speaking.

When Conway looked up, Greenberg winced at the pain he saw in his eyes. "How did you get this?" the mayor asked.

"Came in the mail, just like that." Greenberg had a soft, gentle voice which had deceived countless people he had interviewed into underestimating him. "Addressed to me care of the *Times*. It came through the Data Center. You can see it was printed out by computer, even my name and address." He looked bemused. "Hell, I didn't even know the computer knew me."

"You're in the system," Conway said. "You're a taxpayer. A homeowner too. That's at least two files. You were in the census. You carry fire and auto and health insurance, which means you've been investigated. And life insurance. You were in the hospital last year for—gall stones, wasn't it?"

"Nice of you to remember. I can see the local files, but some

of those you mentioned aren't local. You mean they're all accessible?"

"To an authorized person." He glanced at the printout again. "Criminal justice history information is supposed to be limited to law enforcement and government agencies, but in this state that can mean anyone authorized by local laws or administrative ordinances. And their friends."

Greenberg considered this thoughtfully. "So if I had a criminal record, anyone with the right kind of clout could get it."

"Fact of life, Herb."

They did not need to say any more, and after another moment of silence Greenberg started to turn away. He had the reporter's thickness of skin and hard-won ability to suppress his personal reactions to people and events, but he was uncomfortable being any part of this nasty piece of business. Nevertheless, he swung back toward Conway. "One other little thing. That Data Center wouldn't send out any criminal record report on its own. Someone had to ask for it, I guess." When Conway nodded slowly, Greenberg asked, "Any idea who?"

"No."

"You could make a guess or two."

"I could, but I won't."

Greenberg nodded. Conway hadn't asked for anything, he thought. He liked that about the young mayor. Still, something else had to be said. "Like I told you on the phone, I won't use it. Not unless..." He hesitated. It didn't come easy, even after thirty years. "If it goes out to the other media, TV and all, we'll have to say something."

"You kept a copy, I suppose."

"I did, but nobody else has seen it, and nobody will."

"Thanks, Herb. I won't forget this."

"Yeah, sure." He felt embarrassed. "You've got other customers waiting..."

James Conway said nothing, and the reporter left.

Promptly at two o'clock the Japanese delegation arrived at the conference room specially set up for the occasion. They were shown models of the new industrial park, land-use maps detailing service system capabilities for everything from freeways to police and fire stations, hospitals, day-care centers, fuel and water supplies, sewage and solid-waste disposal facilities, and communi-

cations. Computerized demographics covered Hollister's population, housing, income and employment data, schools, and crime statistics.

This meeting with the Sanji representatives was exploratory. The meeting progressed haltingly—only one of the Japanese spoke English, and an American agent of the firm was on hand to translate. When the Sanji delegation finally left at six o'clock, after a prolonged exchange of smiles and bows, Conway still did not know if he had made any points.

For the first time since his working day began he was alone. His glance went with reluctance to the telephone. While he hesitated, Jerry Devine, the city comptroller, popped his head through the doorway. Did Conway have a couple of minutes?

"Can't it wait, Jerry?"

"It's important."

Conway nodded and Devine entered the office. He was a small, neat man with an anxious manner and a tendency to stutter when he was excited. He sat primly on the edge of a chair opposite Conway's desk and cleared his throat nervously. "We've got a problem. I d-d-don't quite know how to put this . . . I mean, it doesn't make any sense, what this thing I-looks like . . ."

"What is it, Jerry?"

"Well . . . you know the new solid-waste conversion plant has been starting to pay for itself. It's beginning to look very good on paper." Devine's stutter vanished when he became absorbed in what he was saying. "We're taking something that was only an expense item, and we're turning it into products, especially with the paper-products division. We're beginning to get less and less resistance on the recycled paper, so we're getting more sales outside of our own needs."

Conway wondered what the comptroller was getting at. He had a way of circling around a problem cautiously. "What's the problem?" Conway prodded.

"There've been some f-foul ups in the p-p-paper division," Devine said reluctantly. "You know the plant is 90 per cent computerized, not just because of the raw materials—the solid wastes—being handled, but because the processes can be controlled better automatically. You take the paper mill, in order to get uniform thickness and quality and texture, you have to control your temperature and humidity and pressure and so on, adjusting all the time for any changes in these or the raw materials being

processed. The computer is perfect for monitoring all these controls. I mean, it never gets bored and it's not supposed to make any mistakes . . ."

Conway shifted uneasily in his chair. "What's been happening at the plant, Jerry?"

"Twice in the last week the paper line has acted up. It's programmed to turn out wrapping paper and it comes up with tissue. We're drowning in tissue paper we don't need."

Conway was silent for a moment, the sense of foreboding stronger than before. "The plant computer . . . it's linked with the RDC, isn't it?"

"That's right. I mean, the plant runs on its own as far as operations go. The plant computer is separate. It's a kind of plant manager, you might say, overseeing everything in the processing. But it's tied in with the RDC because that's where our inventory and supply program is, and the accounting files. The program in the RDC is designed to keep tabs on everything—inventories on hand, projected requirements for all city departments, outside orders, and so on. It's able to tell the processing plant's computer what we need and how much. It's all pretty automatic."

"And efficient as long as the system works as it should," Conway said thoughtfully. "Have these . . . errors . . . stopped?"

"Yes, but . . . the funny thing is, and what's worrying me, nobody has been able to find out *why* these things happened. There's been no breakdown, no change in instructions. The system was instructed to do one thing, and it did something else."

Conway stared at him. The Data Center again. What the hell was going on?

"What I don't like," Jerry Devine said unhappily, "if it could happen twice on short runs . . . what's to stop it from happening again on a longer run? What if it started to turn out a mountain of crazy quilt cardboard boxes? We'd have to shut the whole plant down!"

Kenny Nance was waiting when Jerry Devine left. It was time to leave for a speaking engagement. Nance walked down with Conway to his car and there was no chance to get to a phone.

Valid excuses—but Conway knew that he had been *finding* excuses not to make that phone call, and he didn't particularly like himself for it.

He was tied up for the next three hours. A noisy reception,

where he nursed two drinks for over an hour. A dismal banquet that featured gray roast beef, badly trimmed and hidden under thick gravy. Prolonged after-dinner introductions and, finally, his own speech.

The audience was a group of businessmen who had not been overwhelmingly on his side during the election. He felt that he had to win them over, and he had been deliberately cultivating them. "We don't always agree," he said at the end of his speech, "but that doesn't mean we don't want the same things for our community and the people living in it. And it doesn't mean that we can't work together where our interests join, and try to understand each other where they don't. What we want and what we do isn't for ourselves. It's for the people who live in Hollister today, and for those who will live here after we're put out to pasture."

The mayor's reception had been lukewarm when he was introduced to the gathering, but there was hearty applause when he sat down. There was no question about it, Kenny Nance thought; Conway communicated. He could get across, even to an unfriendly audience. They might not like everything he said, or much of what he did, but by the time he was through talking to them they liked *him*.

As he was breaking away from the banquet, Conway asked if there was a phone he could use. He made the call he had been putting off all day. "Toni? Guess who."

"Let me see. Do you suppose the mayor of this town would be calling me? What ever for?"

"You guessed right. Everything okay?"

"Everything's okay with me, but I think Mary Hartman is in real trouble."

He laughed. It was a forced laugh, and the sound made him uncomfortable.

"I thought you were going to call me earlier."

"I . . . tried to. But I had these Japanese businessmen all afternoon and then I got hung up with Jerry Devine before I could get out of the office. Since then I've been at this banquet." He paused. "They loved me."

"So do I. What time will you be home?"

He hesitated. He didn't know what to say to her—his *wife*, for God's sake. He was standing there holding the phone, struggling to find something to say, as if she were a stranger. Was she?

The question was insidious. He said, "I'm with Kenny Nance. We'll be tied up a little while longer, but . . . I won't be late."

"I'll wait up for you."

"You don't have to . . ." He broke off, wondering if she could sense the awkwardness.

Toni laughed. "I'm not doing it because I *have* to, Your Honor."

"In that case . . ." There it was again: He didn't know what to say to her. His thoughts were angry, but he tried to keep the anger out of his voice. "I'll try not to be too late."

Nance had ridden with him to the banquet and Conway was to drop him off downtown. Instead he asked, "You in a hurry, Kenny?"

"It's my night to watch Johnny Carson. Otherwise, nothing big."

"There's something I want to talk about. Let's stop at the Mill—it's on the way. I need a drink."

"You? You need a drink? What happened to the hair shirt?"

"I drink, Kenny. I even lust after other women, just like the President of the United States. Am I shocking you?"

"A little," Nance said soberly. "But I can live with it. Does Toni know?"

Conway did not answer.

In the car the mayor was silent and Nance found his thoughts drifting back to that humorous comparison between James Conway and Jimmy Carter. Hell, Conway could be President some day. He had all the ingredients.

Nance then entertained himself as he rode in silence with a vision of himself as press secretary in the White House. Would he be a Pierre Salinger, rumpled and beery? Or would he go pin-striped formal, like Ron Nessen? God forbid that he should turn into another Zeigler. It occurred to him with the fanfare of an original notion that press secretaries in his time reflected some aspect of the Presidents they served. Salinger was breezy and liberal, one of the boys. Nessen a little stiff in public. Zeigler pale and excessively defensive. What part of Conway did Nance reflect? The cynic and doubter? The man who wanted to believe? Or just another guy who drank and screwed and lusted after women he couldn't have?

Grinning, Nance let the speculation drift away as Conway turned into the crowded parking lot adjoining the Mill.

They had both forgotten that Friday night was a popular singles night at the Mill. The disco bar was the center of an electrical storm on the second floor; the lounge and restaurant below were jammed. But James Conway was recognized and a secluded booth was found in a corner of the lounge. There Kenny Nance stared at the arrest record the mayor handed to him. There was a sour taste in Nance's mouth that the beer he was drinking could not wash away.

Computerized printouts were often terse documents. The proximity of ordinary language was generally reduced to a kind of shorthand, language relying on key words or parts of words. These were commonly translated to binary form, a machine-readable language based on O's and I's, for the computer's own internal activity. The data stored in this form could be retranslated on demand into the abbreviated language of the printout Kenny Nance stared at. The problem was not an inability of computers to handle a balanced, periodic sentence structure as graceful as that of any Latin scholar—indeed, some computer programs used conventional forms of communication. The problem was one of data storage combined with the need for extremely rapid transmission.

The trouble with reducing criminal records to the minimum number of characters was that the resulting answer to a normal query against the file often appeared to say more than it did, not less. What did you make of a line that said ARREST FOR POSSESSION NARC? Narcotics, obviously. But what kind? How much? Under what circumstances?

And what of a line that read, almost prissily, ARREST MORALS CHG: CONTR TO DELINQ OF MINOR: CONV 07/05/73: PROBATION. And another: ARREST MANN ACT VIOL: 11/13/73: DISM LACK OF EVID.

"This last item shouldn't even be there," Nance pointed out. "There was an arrest, yeah, but it was dismissed. That could mean there wasn't enough evidence, or it could mean the charge was phony in the first place. Just because there was an arrest—"

"For God's sake, Kenny!"

Nance looked at Conway. He was jolted by what he saw. "Hey, wait a minute. You don't mean you buy this crap?"

"What am I supposed to think? This isn't a fake document, Kenny. This came from New York State's DCJS—their Division of Criminal Justice Services—by way of our own Data Center. I've seen enough of these reports to know what they are."

Nance exploded. "Listen, you're married to Toni, I'm not—but I know this isn't her!"

"Look at the name on top of the sheet."

"I can read—Antonia Wells. Okay, so that was her maiden name. So what? That isn't *her*, that's just a collection of letters printed out of a machine. And machines make mistakes, or the people that run them do." He glanced disgustedly at the printout. "And don't tell me it's down there on paper. I still don't believe it."

The immediate and unexpected judgment caused Conway to sit back, staring at the pudgy man opposite him. There was a candle burning under glass on the table, but the lighting was poor—deliberately so for atmosphere. But Conway did not need better light to see that Kenny Nance was more angry than shocked by what he had read.

"I don't want to believe it either," Conway said slowly. "You know that."

"*But!*" Nance said caustically. His fair-haired boy had fallen short of expectations at last, Nance thought, but in a way that could never have been anticipated. Except that it came from a shortcoming Nance *had* perceived, Conway's immunity from fear and weakness in himself, his lack of any real gut knowledge of what it was like to come up short of your own expectations, to live on the edge of disaster, to be a coward or a loser. He said, "When did you learn about this?"

"Last night. Greenberg called me at home."

"What have you done about it?"

"Nothing. What could I do? I guess I've been waiting."

"What for? The other shoe?"

"That's right. Greenberg's the only one who received this report as far as I know—yet. But if it was sent to him, it could have gone to every radio and TV station and every paper around here. Even to the wire services."

"If it had, you'd have heard. You should have told me this morning."

"Greenberg didn't get the actual report over to me until after noon."

"You still should've told me." A thought struck Nance. "Does Toni know about this?"

Conway shook his head. "No . . . I couldn't tell her. I didn't even want to see it, if you want the truth. I didn't want to think

about it. And I couldn't . . . discuss it with her."

"Why not?" Nance realized that he was pushing his luck, stepping beyond a press-information officer's role, but he couldn't keep silent. "She's your wife. You should have told her."

"Damn it, she should have told *me*!"

"If it's true."

Conway stared at him. "You're grabbing at straws, Kenny."

"It's worth it, isn't it? For a girl like that? She deserves that much."

"I thought you were supposed to be the cynic."

"I am. But there are people I like. They get the benefit of the doubt, at least until they're proven guilty."

"The woman in this record *was* found guilty," Conway said bitterly.

"That can be checked. Chief Toland could run this through the Police Teletype Network and get an answer in a hurry."

"No." Conway was emphatic. "I won't let him get hold of this. I appreciate what you're trying to say, Kenny. But until I know for certain . . ."

Listening, Kenny Nance felt a small electric charge, a tingling of warning or recognition. Was Conway thinking of his wife—or himself? He said, "I can talk to Egan at the RDC. He's the security guy I told you about. He's also out of the FBI, so he should still have contacts there if he needs them. He could check this out, and I think he'd keep his mouth shut."

"Toland wouldn't."

"I know that." It was a reasonable assumption, Nance thought, and not wanting this kind of information to be noised around was a normal reaction. It didn't *have* to mean that James Conway was worrying about his political image rather than his wife's reputation. He deserved the benefit of the doubt too.

Conway downed his drink in a gulp. ("The Boss drinks bourbon," Salinger said. "What'll you boys have?")

"Get hold of him, Kenny."

"He probably won't be there until Monday. They pretty much shut down for the weekend except for a small staff."

"They should be able to tell you where to find him. Although it'll keep, I suppose, until we find out who else gets a copy of this." Conway slumped against the back of the booth. His expression was haunted. "We were supposed to go up to Skull Mountain this weekend. Skiing. I can cancel that out—"

"Why should you?" Nance demanded. "It'll do you good. Both of you. And maybe it'll clear your head."

Conway did not miss his meaning. "You really think I'm wrong in this, don't you, Kenny?"

"What I find hard to believe," Nance said slowly, "is that you can swallow it whole without even questioning it."

But he spoke with more conviction than he felt. That was the trouble with the damned machines, he thought. It seemed a lot easier to believe in them than in people. Even someone you loved.

11 FRI FEB 4 / 07:00 PM

"Corned beef and cabbage?"

Jennifer Tyson grimaced. She had been unable to decide what to offer their guest for dinner that night, and she had asked her father for suggestions. "Not everyone likes it as much as you do."

"Well, I don't know then. I doubt young Devoto is very fussy."

"How about McDonald's hamburgers? Or some of the Colonel's chicken?"

Linus Webster smiled. "I think that would be fine, my dear."

But it wouldn't be, of course. George Devoto could have either of those choices on his own. Jenny considered crepes, a fondue, a tuna casserole that was one of her own favorites. She rejected them all. Her father was probably correct in thinking Devoto was not a party-food type. She finally settled on steaks—wincing at the cost—baked potatoes, a big salad. Also available at your friendly corner steak house, but she suspected that Devoto's budget as a lab assistant did not run to very many steak dinners.

He was late arriving. The night had turned bitter cold, the

temperatures hovering around zero, strong winds blowing the late-fallen powder snow around like icy sand.

When Devoto finally appeared at the door, bundled into a sheepskin-lined jacket and with a knitted ski cap covering most of his face, she looked with surprise at the frost clinging to his eyelashes, the cold-bitten redness of his exposed cheeks. A glance past him found no strange car in the drive or parked by the curb. "You *walked*?" she asked incredulously.

Devoto stepped inside, stamping his feet. "Walking's good for you."

"In this cold? Where is this apartment you've moved into?"

"A mile or so," Devoto said evasively. "Anyway, this isn't cold."

"Compared to what?" He shrugged out of his thick coat and hung it himself on a hook in the hall closet. "I thought Dad said you had a car."

"My roomie borrowed my wheels," he answered reluctantly. "But that doesn't matter. I like to walk."

She wondered, with sudden amusement, if George Devoto's "roomie" was a girl. Did that explain his reticence?

She left the young man with her father in the den while she prepared dinner. It was not one of her memorable triumphs. The steaks were older and tougher than they had appeared, the potatoes overdone. Only the salad consoled her; the Italian dressing had come out just right. George Devoto wolfed everything down with indifferent energy, as if it were all the same. The Colonel's chicken would have been just fine, she thought wryly, as long as there was enough of it.

The bearded guest was as laconic as usual through most of the meal, but then he loosened up and she discovered that he was not without strong opinions. Most were Standard Student Doctrine in the post-Watergate era. His catholic scorn embraced Jews and Arabs in the Middle East, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, politicians and environmentalists in the United States. Big was very definitely out—big oil and big business and even big unions. And, of course, there was nothing good to be said about the CIA and the FBI.

Half smiling as Devoto launched into a caustic excoriation of the FBI's planting of undercover agents in terrorist and protest groups, supplying the guns and bombs and encouraging what they were ostensibly dedicated to prevent, Jenny Tyson thought of

Michael Egan. He simply didn't fit the protrait Devoto was painting. Moved to a mild protest, she said, "I don't know how much of that the FBI does, but I don't think they're all like that."

"You don't know them," he retorted. She wondered how he had come by his superior knowledge, but she let the rejoinder go.

"You make generalized judgments from too small a sampling," Linus Webster said. "You know better than that, George. It's unscientific."

Because it seemed appropriate in view of Jimmy Carter's recent inauguration, she asked Devoto what he thought of the new President. Devoto said he didn't think it made any difference who sat in the Oval Office. Jenny found herself defending Carter, although her own feelings about him had been ambivalent, an uncertainty resolved just before the election because she simply could not bring herself to vote for an out-and-out conservative. "He's only been in office a few days," she pointed out. "Let's give him a chance."

"It doesn't make any difference. The big companies run the country anyway. The rest is just window dressing."

"A President can make himself felt. What about Carter giving amnesty to the draft evaders? No one else could do that. He did."

Devoto hesitated, as if he did not have a ready rejoinder. Then he sneered. "Do you really think a few words from the President are going to heal the wounds?" he demanded mockingly. "Anyway, the so-called draft evaders didn't do anything wrong to be given amnesty for. Carter's showboating, that's all. There isn't any new spirit. There's just the same old bull with a different accent."

"And you're trying hard to be fair," she answered dryly. Searching for another test, she turned closer to home. "What about Hollister? Mayor Conway isn't like all the other politicians. At least he doesn't seem to be."

"What makes you think Hollister is any different? It's just as deep a cesspool as any other place. And Mayor Conway is the piece of crap that rises to the top."

"Vulgarisms do not make an argument," Linus Webster interposed stiffly. "They're a substitute."

Devoto flushed. Checking a retort, he muttered, "Don't try to tell me about Hollister, that's all." It was as close as he could come to backing down, Jenny Tyson thought; he didn't know how to apologize.

Another angry one. She felt suddenly weary of endless combat.

In an age of "relating," in which the universal emphasis was on the importance of communicating, sharing feelings and space, the paradox was inescapable: a rising tide of skepticism and anger. Children distrusted their parents and attacked their teachers. Old people were afraid to go out at night. Women banded against men. Everyone was urged to let it all hang out, but it was the noisier emotions that lent themselves to shouting. Not the cry of love but the scream of rage. Not the joy of sharing but the fear of flying. Not the granting of space, but the stabbing middle finger.

Jenny discovered that Devoto was staring at her, oddly attentive. He had delivered most of his arguments with his head down, avoiding eye contact, as if he were addressing the table. "How did you know?" he demanded abruptly.

"Know? What, George?"

"That I was one of them. A draft dodger."

She put her cup down so quickly that coffee sloshed over the edge into the saucer. "You were *what*?"

Devoto seemed pleased by the sensation he had produced. "That's right. One of the FBI's Most Wanted."

"But . . . I never had any idea! I wasn't thinking of you at all when I mentioned amnesty." She stared at him. "Well, if you are . . . I mean, if you've been a fugitive, you *must* be grateful to Carter."

"I should be grateful for losing all those years out of my life? You've got to be kidding."

"Were you out of the country, George?" Linus Webster asked, his tone reflecting no surprise over Devoto's revelation.

"Most of the time, yeah. In Canada."

"Wasn't it dangerous for you to come back to this country early—before the amnesty?"

"Not so dangerous, Dr. Webster. They weren't really looking for me any more. I was kidding about being one of the Most Wanted."

"Still, it was a risk . . ."

Listening to them, Jenny for the first time felt sympathy for Devoto, an attempt to understand his strangeness, even a twinge of guilt. "At least it's over now," she said.

"Yeah. Okay, you're right, it's over, and that makes it easier. But don't expect gratitude."

George Devoto stayed a half hour after dinner, probably as a gesture of appeasement toward her father, Jenny thought. Then

he struggled into his heavy jacket, pulled the brightly colored ski cap over his head and trudged off into the dark.

Closing the door behind him, Jenny was aware of a surprising relief, sensing how much tension had left the house with him, how charged with anger was the very atmosphere around him.

But he was not completely insensitive, she acknowledged. He had had the grace to leave early.

Or was that because he had hated being there even more than she disliked having him?

The Intruder glanced at his watch. 10:40. Cutting it close.

He scowled at the unexpected message from the main computer at the Regional Data Center:

**UNAUTHORIZED REQUEST. PLEASE
CONFIRM IDENTIFICATION.**

So terminal security had finally been tightened. Well, they had been slow enough to tumble to the elementary possibility that someone was getting into the system between the lines. Now all of the remote terminals would be closely monitored.

But no one expected an intruder to have the proper password and user number. Smiling thinly, he typed out the numbers, then added,

ERROR ACKNOWLEDGED. END.

That admission, along with the proper credentials, might get by. It made his "unauthorized request"—he had tried to obtain more file data for the process control program of the city's solid-waste disposal plant—appear to be a routine operator error. Even if a close examination of the transaction log aroused suspicion, it was the operator who would be questioned. Let her try to explain. That would keep them busy at the Data Center for a while, looking for clues in the wrong direction.

He had used this terminal for the last time. No matter. Over the last few weeks he had greatly expanded his knowledge of the system. He had already picked out his next point of entry...

At 10:45 that Friday night Maggie Henderson reluctantly left the cafeteria and rode the elevator to the sixth floor. Her thoughts

were with Joe Martinez as she walked past the nurse's station and Ann Rysack, the duty nurse, had to call her name twice. "Maggie?" Ann looked puzzled. "Where did you come from?"

"I just got off the elevator."

"But I thought—" The nurse glanced along the corridor in the direction of the computer terminal room, which was around the corner. "I was just over that way, and I could've sworn I heard you typing away on that computer. Hey, it doesn't talk to itself, does it?"

"No. And it's not a computer, anyway, it's a terminal."

"All the same to me. I heard it, though."

"It prints out messages from the main computer. That's probably what you heard."

"Oh, yeah." Ann Rysack grinned. "As long as we don't have ghosts."

Maggie hurried along the corridor. It was probably nothing to worry about, but she was remembering the extra time charges she had received—three different occasions on which she could not account for all the activity at the terminal this past month.

She reached her office and flung the door open.

The room was empty. The terminal was silent. Her glance went quickly to the last printout. Anxiety coiled around her chest.

No message had been printed out. Ann Rysack had heard the typewriter clattering, but there was no new reading to account for it.

Maggie had received a memo that morning from the RDC about not leaving terminals unattended. She had been very careful to shut down before she went downstairs to meet Joe Martinez. Of course, the main computer at the Data Center could have activated the terminal to send her a message.

Except that there was no message.

A hurried search of the room turned up nothing amiss, but Maggie Henderson's rising apprehension was not allayed. Someone had been at her terminal while she was gone.

12 SAT FEB 5 / 10:00 AM

Kenny Nance reached Egan at his rented cottage just after ten o'clock Saturday morning. He had called earlier, but Egan had been out for a walk around the lake. Nance let that go with a shiver. "Didn't you come here from California?"

"That's right."

"I thought your blood was supposed to be thinned out."

Egan laughed.

Briefly, Nance filled in the RDC's security director on the criminal record notice received by Herb Greenberg at the *Times*. Would Egan check it out? The mayor would consider it a personal favor. It would also be interesting to know who had ordered the record up. Naturally, under the circumstances this inquiry was confidential.

Political sensitivity was not alien to Egan's FBI experience, and he had no trouble getting the drift of Nance's request. He promised to do what he could.

After he had hung up, Egan sat at the shaky wicker desk that served as a telephone stand, staring through the frosted windows toward the frozen lake. The frosting of ice, heavier around the edges of each pane of glass, acted as a frame through which the

scene looked artificial. But the sense of dislocation brought by Nance's phone call, the feeling of events going suddenly out of kilter, was even stranger than the winter fantasy glimpsed through the glass and ice.

Egan had known the sensation before. Most cops did. A musician knew it when a note didn't ring true. A scientist felt it when the forty-ninth experiment ended differently from all the others.

He made a long-distance phone call to the nearest area FBI field office. He identified himself, gave his phone number and hung up. A moment later the source of his call was confirmed when his phone rang.

The agent-in-charge of the office, with whom Egan had once worked, was not available until after the weekend. Egan explained what he wanted and left a message to have the agent call him at the Regional Data Center as soon as possible.

Afterward he could not shake the feeling that something significant was happening—that something more than coincidence was involved in the events of this past week. Too many "errors," he thought. Not routine transposing of letters or numbers, the kind of mistake anyone could make at a keyboard. Odd, inexplicable events, each one having an ugly twist, each one connected with the computer center. Unrelated except for that one link.

He heated a can of soup and sat at the plain but solid maple table in the kitchen on a stiff, uncomfortable wooden chair. At least most of the furnishings in the cottage would burn, he reflected. He wouldn't freeze to death like Arthur Prochaska, no matter how long the cold wave lasted.

He thought about Hollister's relatively young mayor—Egan's own age—and his beautiful wife. He had seen James Conway in town a couple of times, had noted pictures of his wife in the newspaper. A former model, he had read; she looked the part. The description did not impress him. Every call girl in the business called herself a model or an actress when she was picked up.

He did not speculate over the truth of the criminal record Ken Nance had briefly described. There seemed to be no reason to doubt the factual content of the printout sent to the *Times*. What bothered Egan was how and why it had come out of the RDC.

All too many people had access to criminal record information. Especially in politics, and especially in a town like Hollister, small enough for personal favors to be readily performed. Conway was a politician, and he certainly must have political enemies. That

seemed the most obvious explanation.

Except for the vague, illusory outlines of a pattern of events.

Egan rinsed out his bowl in the sink, ran water into the saucepan and cleaned it out, set both to the side of the sink to drain. While he was drying his hands on a paper towel he made his decision.

Five minutes later he was nudging the Vega along the narrow, ice-coated side road that led from the lake to the main highway.

At the same time Michael Egan was driving in from the lake, Evelyn Burton was enjoying her Weight Watchers lunch. Well, enjoying may not have been the precise word, although she was now accustomed to the limitations of her diet. And the results—she had lost fifteen pounds over the past month—were certainly worth the sacrifice.

For what?

She was becoming accustomed, too, to this inner dialogue, her need to debate an increasingly skeptical, even cynical voice. "I look and feel better," she answered the voice. "And years younger."

So who's noticing?

It all came down to that. The marriage counselor she had secretly consulted had assured her that her confusion, including the sometimes acrimonious interior debates, was normal. "We've all had our consciousness raised, whether we realize it or not," she had said. "We're questioning traditional responses and ideas more. It's a healthy thing." Evelyn Burton was not sure. She was not even certain that her consciousness had been elevated very much.

She had married Jay Burton twenty-one years ago. She had borne and raised his children. She had loved him, and she still did. Raised consciousness or not, she didn't want anyone else. Young people might regard her as a silly fool—she was not quite sure of Ms. Campbell, the marriage counselor, who was a younger woman; too young, you might think, to offer much in the way of experienced counsel—but she was fighting to save her marriage, and if that meant losing weight by dieting, firming up by going to her gym classes on Friday afternoons, changing her hair style and color, even cosmetic surgery, she was willing to do all of these things, and more.

Not that Jay's skirt-chasing was anything new. But this time was different. He was acting very strangely, refusing even to touch

her. Sometimes when she knew he had been playing around he was a more ardent lover than usual, as if to give the lie to any suspicions. Not this time. That frightened her. Perhaps this time it was serious.

Jay had gone to the trucking company offices today, even though he did not normally work Saturdays. These were not normal times. The terrible weather of the past month had stranded some of the firm's trucks in Ohio and Indiana. One of the drivers had been snowbound last week outside of Buffalo and was hospitalized with frostbite. Evelyn had not questioned Jay's need to be on top of things today.

Now you're being naïve.

While she was searching defensively for a rebuttal, there was a commotion at the front of the house. Lance, her miniature poodle, set up a furious barking. Evelyn glanced at the kitchen wall clock and managed a smile. The mailman. Lance was a tiger as long as he was safely indoors.

The dog peered past her, growling belligerently, as Evelyn opened the front door and retrieved two letters from the mailbox, shivering from the cold that sliced through the open doorway.

Both letters were addressed to Jay, and she started to put them on the tray on the hall table when the return address on one of the envelopes caught her eye. It was from Hollister County General Hospital.

Evelyn Burton felt a chill, cutting as sharply as the cold she had let into the foyer. Neither she nor Jay had been to the hospital. Why would they be receiving a bill? Had Jay hidden something from her? Was he ill? Could that explain why . . . ?

She carried the envelope into the kitchen. There, feeling guilty, her heart pounding with nervous tension over what she was doing, she held the envelope over the spout of the copper kettle. The water was still hot and it was soon steaming. In her awkwardness she scalded her fingers before the glued flap of the envelope lifted.

The sheet of paper inside the envelope was a computer printout, all capital letters with some unfamiliar abbreviations. But the gist of what it had to say was all too clear.

**SOURCE: B BULLOCK: VD PROGRAM DIRECTOR
COMMUNICABLE DISEASE CENTER HOLLISTER GH
PATIENT TREATED FOR GONORRHEA * PENICILLIN
DISCONTINUED 1/27/77 * BACILLUS IDENTIFIED AS**

*PHILIPPHINES ORIGIN * TREATMENT CONTINUING
WITH TROBICIN. END.*

For a long time Evelyn Burton sat at the dinette table in a corner of the kitchen, her tea cold and forgotten. Lance whined at the back door, scratching to be let out, but she could not move.

Many things were suddenly clear, including Jay's recent aloofness. She could even hear him justifying himself, "I was protecting you, honey. What else could I do?"

The patient's name and address were at the top of the printed sheet. She didn't know how this had happened or why the record had been sent to the house. It hardly mattered.

What did matter was that the patient was Jay Randolph Burton.

The Regional Data Center functioned around the clock, seven days a week, but night and weekend schedules were drastically reduced. There were only three people visible in the computer room when Egan arrived that Saturday afternoon.

He sought out Ted Davis, an operator cleared for confidential files, and told him what he wanted. "That's very heavy stuff," Davis said.

"It stays confidential."

"No kidding?" Davis said sardonically.

Five minutes later Egan had a copy of the printout of Toni Wells-Conway's criminal history report, which Davis had found in a journal file produced on Wednesday last, the day the report was processed through the Data Center and sent to the reporter at the *Times*. Egan had seen thousands of reports like it while he was with the Bureau, and he found nothing in it to make him doubt its authenticity.

Only one puzzle remained. Davis could find no record of anyone having requested the information from New York's Division of Criminal Justice Services—and nothing to justify sending the confidential information to a newspaperman.

13 SAT FEB 5 / 05:00 PM

Egan caught the rising note of surprise when Jennifer Tyson said, "Michael Egan?"

"I know it's late," he said. "But something's come up I thought you'd be interested in. You'll be hearing about it Monday, anyway, since it involved another computerized social error."

"Not another one." Surprise became dismay.

"Yes. Maybe I should clarify that. It doesn't seem to be so much an error as an unauthorized use of information in linked data systems."

That intrigued her, but she still hesitated.

"The thing is, I'm in town—came in to follow this up—and as long as I was here, I thought I'd see if you were busy."

He was struggling a bit, causing her to smile. The truth was she didn't have anything on, but she had been looking forward to a warm, cozy evening at home rather than braving the blustery cold night.

"If you're tied up, just say so."

"As a matter of fact, I'm not."

"How about dinner then?" Relief rang clear in Egan's voice. "You can look at it as a kind of business dinner if you want. I

really would like to pick your brains."

"I'd rather not look at it that way if you don't mind."

He laughed. "Okay. Pick you up in an hour?"

He was as good as his word and shortly after six o'clock they were sitting in a booth at Lonnie's Grill, an unpretentious steak house whose owner took pride in personally selecting and aging his meats. The place was one of her favorites, and she was delighted when Egan suggested it. She wondered how he had come to know of it so quickly, and that led her to speculate over how often he had brought others here.

Not that it mattered, but . . . she wondered.

He was an easy man to be with, as she had observed before.

He did not have the prickly ego of a David Tyson or the belligerence of Rob Greiner. Egan did not interrupt their enjoyment of good food with business and, since he apparently did not feel compelled to talk all the time, they fell into comfortable silences. Jenny found herself relaxing, enjoying herself more than she had expected.

Finally, over a welcome after-dinner brandy, Egan brought up the puzzling criminal report that had been delivered to the *Times*. Shocked, Jenny quickly matched that story with one of her own, involving a local businessman who had an erroneous drunk-driving record sent to his prospective employers.

"You mean he didn't have a drunk-driving record?"

"That's right. Maybe our mayor's wife's criminal history is false, too."

Egan was skeptical. "It certainly seemed authentic. Good God, if it is false, and someone deliberately had it sent, then we're not dealing with any good-humored practical joker." Egan shook his head. "Right now I don't know enough about those machines of yours, Jenny. I know more than I did when I came here, but I'm a long way from being an expert, or even from knowing what can be done and what can't."

"I'm an operator, Michael. I don't know the system inside out the way someone like Rob Greiner does."

"Greiner? I don't think I know him."

"That's right, he . . . he left the Center about the time you came. That is . . . he was fired. He didn't get along with Thomas."

"That I can understand." Egan's gaze was frankly curious. "A friend of yours?"

"Yes." She let it go at that.

"Well . . . in any event, I'm sure you can fill in some of my blank spaces. That is, if you don't mind shop talk on Saturday. Or being bored by obvious questions."

"You're not boring me, Michael." Did he need that kind of reassurance? She would be disappointed if he did. David, whose ego had seemed monumental, had nevertheless needed the constant support of flattery and testimonial.

Egan grinned. "Then the evening is already a success. Okay, let's start with the number one question. You asked me the other day about recent visitors to the Center. There haven't been any that can't be accounted for. Leaving that possibility out, then either someone inside the Center is playing games or there's been a series of improbable errors. Or someone *outside* had found a way to penetrate the computer system. I understand that's possible, Jenny, but is it probable?"

"Not very." She wondered if she should tell him of Greiner's conviction that it was an insider. She decided not to.

"But it could happen."

She nodded. "Hypothetically, yes."

"Okay, let's make it an hypothesis. Someone has penetrated the system and is deliberately causing errors. How would he do it? Just how vulnerable is a system like the RDC?"

"It's not all that hard to get in," Jenny answered slowly. "Although we have different levels of access. In other words, some programs—like our utility billings, for instance—aren't considered to be confidential. You wouldn't expect they would have any attraction for someone trying to circumvent the system. That's what's so crazy about Prochaska."

"Let me get this straight. If someone did penetrate the utility billings file, or another like it that's not considered sensitive, that wouldn't mean that he could get access to more confidential files at the same time, right? Like criminal justice history information, to name one we're talking about."

"That's right. Theoretically, that is."

"That's another big, iffy word."

"Well, a really clever intruder might be able to use his limited access to learn more about the system and find a way to get into other files. You see, it would be simpler if ours were a batch processing system. It isn't. We're a time-shared, on-line, multiaccess, multiprogrammed system—"

"Hold it, whoa, whoa," he said in mock despair. "I know what

some of that means, but would you mind leading me through it step by step?"

She smiled. "How did you get your job, anyway?"

"I've wondered about that myself. But that's another question."

"Oh?" The comment aroused her curiosity. "You answer that one, and I'll agree to answer the other."

"Well . . . between us, I think I was just about what our mutual boss wanted."

"Mr. Thomas?"

"Yes. The way I read him, he has a very proprietary attitude toward his computers. He wants the Center protected, so he needed a security man to see to locks and keys and alarms and so on, but he didn't want someone intruding too much on *his* terrain. So he looked around for a glorified door rattler, maybe an ex-cop who could handle external security but didn't very much about computers. And he found me."

"Do you usually underestimate yourself, Michael?"

"I'm being realistic. Does that sound like Thomas or not?"

She had to admit that it did, although the admission made her uncomfortable. It seemed to say that Thomas wanted the internal security of the computer center to be completely under *his* control. And what did that mean when strange things started to happen?

"You were about to explain a time-shared, on-line, multiprogrammed system," he prompted.

She sighed, pausing to take a sip of her brandy while she organized her thoughts. "Okay. The more complicated a system is, the more vulnerable it becomes. For instance, suppose we had a batch system with no remote terminals. To start with, that would mean you'd only have access at the system itself, not from outside. Which would eliminate all kinds of possibilities. Then, in batching, the items that are being processed aren't acted upon immediately. They're held up and collected into groups while they wait to be processed, and then that batch is run through according to a prearranged schedule. So you have the element of delay and that gives you much more control over what is going into the system at any time and what is being done in the system. But the RDC is another story. It's a time-shared system, which means that more than one user can be accessing the computer at the same time—literally sharing the time. In practice, scores of users can be sharing the time, and the computer works so fast it is able to handle them more or less simultaneously, so that no user is ever aware of being

delayed. And it's an on-line system, so any input goes right into the system while the transaction takes place. Which also means that the *new* input can even affect the transaction. Are you with me so far?"

"More or less." He smiled. It was, she thought, a rather nice slow smile whose progress you could follow from his eyes to his mouth.

"We also have all kinds of different programs," she went on, "that can be working at the same time, with different users and different levels of security. And all that if going on doesn't happen at the computer center. I mean, that's where the central processor is, and everything feeds through there, but there are scores of remote terminals all over the city with some kind of access to the system over telecommunications lines."

"How does an outside user get access from his terminal?"

"All he does is dial in. He has to give his identity number—every user has one—and the password for the file he wants to do something with. I don't want to oversimplify this, Michael, because not every user is authorized to do the same things. Some can execute a program only; they're not permitted to change it in any way or even to read it. Some have read-only access, which means they can get a display or printout of a file, but they can't do anything else. Or you might have authorization to add information to a file, but you can't read anything that's already in that file. And so on, right on up to the user who has complete access to any particular file, or group of files, or even the whole system. Nobody on the outside has that level of privilege."

"How do you control who can do what?"

"The access codes—that is, the personal identifiers and passwords—allow the computer to control things. That's part of the internal security program for the system. If you call in, the system checks your identity number and your password against the authorization list stored in the system to see what you're allowed to do. If you have those, you can get in. It's open sesame. You could even do it from a terminal outside the system."

Egan mulled this over. He had done some of his own research, so he already had some idea of the general outlines of the system. And of the risks. Jenny Tyson's description was simply making things clearer. He said, "In short, if I knew the password and identity number of an authorized user, and I had access to his terminal, I could just call the computer and pretend to be the user.

I could give the system instructions as to what I wanted to know or what I wanted to do, and as long as those instructions fell within the user's legitimate activities, the computer would comply."

"Right. It will grant access for the appropriate activity to anyone who gives the right responses at the terminal. There's no way for the computer to distinguish a legitimate user from anyone else calling in from a remote terminal, as long as the inquirer has the right access information."

"Suppose someone did manage to get at a terminal, or to wire tap a telephone line going to a terminal—"

"I didn't say anything about wire tapping."

"No, but it's possible, isn't it?"

"Yes." She regarded him coolly. "I think you know more of this than you've been pretending."

"Not really, Jenny. Believe me, you *are* helping me sort out the pieces." His glance was direct and sober. He was an easy man to believe, she thought. "Suppose our hypothetical intruder had access to a terminal. How long would it take for him to do any damage?"

She laughed outright. "You'd be surprised. I remember hearing about one incident where a company was stealing information from a rival. The thief got access to the computer three times, I think it was, had something like 500 cards punched out and fifteen pages printed out at the terminal, and the total time for all three penetrations and all that activity was less than six seconds."

Egan whistled soundlessly.

"It could happen in fractions of a second," Jenny said.

"I never realized computers were that vulnerable."

"Well now, wait a minute, Michael. I may be making it sound worse than it is. I mean, these things are possible, and they do happen, but that doesn't mean it's been happening at the RDC. And there are ways to prevent illegal access."

"Like the passwords and ID numbers. But those could be found out."

"Yes, but passwords are changed regularly. Besides, there are secondary code words. You might get into a program with one password, but you'd need a second code word to gain access to a particular file or to do certain things to it, like changing data. With some sensitive files, the computer might put any inquiry on hold while it printed out at the main console the fact that someone was calling for information. And the operator at the console would

have to approve that action before it could take place. And there are other ways. Cryptography, for instance. Files can be encrypted. And communication to a terminal can be scrambled so that anyone listening in or receiving the transmission wouldn't be able to make sense of it."

"Are many of the RDC files encrypted?"

"No," she admitted. "But it can easily be done. I guess the reason it hasn't been done is that it didn't seem necessary. We're not sure that that's true now, Michael. And besides, anything extra you do costs money."

Egan smiled at that. "And Del Thomas doesn't like to throw money around recklessly."

"You've noticed."

"He makes that hard to miss." Egan brooded a while over what Jenny had told him. Eventually his speculations brought him back to the printout of Toni Conway's criminal record. "I can see what you mean about not expecting anyone to try to tamper with a utility bill. So that program wouldn't be top secret or anything. Criminal records are something else. They're confidential. Who would have access to them?"

She thought about that briefly. "Besides law enforcement? I'm not sure. But other government agencies might. The city of Hollister is our biggest user by far. I couldn't tell you how many people might have the kind of authorization you're talking about, but it's a lot more than a handful. And if you have one person in City Hall with the right authorization, and a remote terminal, you have the risk of others knowing the necessary access code. People are careless with passwords." She recalled Greiner's scornful comment about the casual treatment of passwords and identity numbers by the operators and programmers at the Regional Data Center itself.

"So we're talking about any number of people outside the Data Center—and just about anyone on the inside," Egan said.

She looked at him quickly. She had deliberately avoided talking about the employees of the Center gaining access beyond their authorization or finding other clever ways to play the kind of games Greiner had suggested. "Which means we're no closer to knowing what's been going on than before."

"Not quite true. I know one thing for sure that I didn't know before."

"What's that?"

"If someone is tampering with the system in any of the ways we've talked about, if these things that have been happening aren't human errors or hardware failure, we know one thing about that someone. He's not your everyday man in the street."

"Why not?"

"He's a computer specialist."

They were silent for a while, Egan pensive, Jenny Tyson feeling momentarily talked out. Ted Andrews, the owner of Lonnie's Grill (had there ever been a Lonnie? she wondered), noticed them and smiled benevolently. Rob Greiner had once got into a furious argument with Andrews over a steak served on a cold plate. She supposed the restaurateur was glad to see her there with someone else.

She looked at Egan's hands. She was reminded of one of those quiz questions about what it was that a woman noticed first in a man. It depended on the man, she mused, just as it must be a little different for every woman a man stared at with interest. She had not noticed Egan's hands first, exactly, but she was very aware of them now. Square, strong, the nails filed down. And quiet. They betrayed no nervousness.

There had been little personal conversation, she reflected. No revelations. She still didn't know, for example, if he had ever been married, and if not why not. Was the evening strictly business after all? The dedicated security man working after hours, even on Saturday night? Not that she cared, but—

Get off it, dummy. Who are you trying to kid?

Okay. So she hadn't left a warm hearth on a cold night just because she was eager to talk about computers. The truth, then. Michael Egan had upset her preconceptions. The last kind of man for Jenny Tyson to be drawn to was a law-and-order type. But for some reason she found Egan attractive in a way she had not experienced since . . . David.

She tried to catalogue the reasons. Quiet, steady eyes. The slow smile. A mouth firm without being mean or tight. The strong hands. . . .

She felt a cool trickling along her spine and repressed a shiver. The ice was melting. It had been a long time. Too long. And for a while there she had been a married woman, remember? Whatever else had been wrong with David Tyson, his legendary prowess in the sack was not all talk. She was not quite ready for the nunnery, although you wouldn't know it from her social life lately.

"Take me home . . . Michael?"

"What? Oh . . . I'm sorry, Jenny. I guess I was chasing our phantom criminal."

"It's all still speculation, isn't it?" Her smile was bright as she slid from the booth, rose, retrieved her coat and searched for her gloves to be sure she didn't forget them. "Until we find some solid evidence, we don't know that there isn't some kind of hardware malfunction that will explain everything. Instead of a detective, we may only need an engineer."

"I suppose that's true . . ."

She was silent in the car as he drove her home, and Egan gradually became conscious of a subtle tension between them that hadn't been there before. What had happened? Too much shop talk? It certainly hadn't been much of an evening to be dragged out for, he thought ruefully, promising himself to make it up to her another time. That is, if she gave him the chance.

He pulled cautiously into the driveway, which consisted of two narrow tracks between high banks of snow. For an instant her touch was light on his shoulder. "Thanks for calling, Michael. That was nice." Then she had the door open and was out of the car before he could react.

He started to clamber out after her but his coat became tangled in the door latch. By the time he had freed himself she had disappeared up the short path cleared through the snow to her door. "Jenny—"

"Good night, Michael!"

Defeated, he sank back into his seat, staring after her. He had thought things were going pretty well there for a while. What in hell had he done to turn her so completely off?

14 SUN FEB 6 / 10:00 PM

James and Toni Conway had gone up to Skull Mountain Saturday morning by train. It was only the second time that winter he had been able to take time off for such an outing, and they were both exhausted after an unaccustomed afternoon on the slopes. That night they went to bed early, their room in the lodge warmed by a log fire. Almost as soon as his head hit the pillow James Conway was asleep. Toni soon drifted off.

Sunday brought freezing rain that turned into sleet. They spent much of the day in the main lounge of the resort, talking with other disappointed skiers, watching the icy storm and the few foolhardy zealots willing to go out in it. They caught the late afternoon train back to Hollister.

They arrived home tired and somewhat dispirited. They got out of wet clothes, had a drink while some frozen lasagna was heating in the microwave oven, and sat for a while watching television. Familiar, ordinary things, Toni thought. Homely activities that should have made it possible for her to push the demon of worry away.

Conway was preoccupied, quiet and withdrawn as he had been all weekend. Why? Was it those Japanese businessmen with their

factory? The threatening fuel shortage? That strange phone call Thursday night?

She told him smilingly that she was going to bed. Then she went upstairs, took a hot bath, and slipped on a nightgown. She could hear the television still on when she slid, shivering, between the cold sheets.

She waited for him.

After a while the fear she had been trying to deny crept out of the shadows.

Something was drastically wrong. Not between Conway and some foreign businessmen, a rival councilman, a constituent with a grievance.

Something had come between James and her.

Confronting a feeling of unreasoning panic, Toni faced the depth of her dependency on him, her reliance on the certainty of his love, her need for the safety of his presence.

What was happening to them?

The phone call. It had all started with that call. Or at least that was as close as she could come to pinpointing the abrupt and inexplicable change in him. After all, hadn't they made love that evening? Everything had been right between them then. She would have sensed any breach or barrier. She had always known when it was right, even since that first time . . .

That first time had been an astonishment.

She had grown up as Antonia Wells in Provo, Utah, convinced that she was both ugly and stupid, truths drummed into her by her mother from the time the girl was old enough to understand them. Betty Ann Wells took out the failure of her marriage on its only visible product—Toni's father had long ago departed for warmer climes—but her harsh judgments were corroborated for Toni by the evidence of her mirror and her mediocre grades in school.

During her teens she endured a run of Twiggy jokes that left her permanently self-conscious about her slim, unrounded figure. Boys ignored her and she took refuge in a cool indifference. Then, somewhere around her eighteenth year, something happened. A face that had been merely bony revealed an exotic angularity. Her skin was flawless, her eyes huge and vulnerable. Clothes fell beautifully around her slender body, and she moved with an unconscious grace.

A photographer spotted her by chance on her junior college campus. Three months after the camera clicked on a candid shot

of Toni coming down the library steps, she was working in New York as a model, starting at a hundred dollars an hour.

Her career, which lasted three years, still seemed to her a fantasy. The unhappiness of her childhood and the poor estimate of herself she shared with her mother were far more real. She had come along, she reasoned, when odd-looking women were temporarily in vogue, just as ugly men were the fashion in movie heroes.

At the peak of her brief career, when she was twenty-two and not yet an overly familiar face, she met James Conway.

Toni had had several brief and unsuccessful affairs, the first with a football player in senior high who had joked about being unable to find anything when he fumbled around under her sweater. In New York, there had been a bisexual photographer who enjoyed hurting her, and several men eager to prove they could get a cover girl between the sheets. None of these men had made any attempt to find out who lived inside that beautiful skin, and in time Toni withdrew further into her icy shell. In the world in which she was living there didn't seem to be any other kinds of men. Besides, she was greatly in demand as a model and her work exhausted her. By the end of a day of being pushed around, bullied, shouted at and tormented under hot lights by indifferent cameramen, production assistants and advertising stars, she wanted to do nothing but escape to her tiny apartment and rest. She slept a lot—alone.

If James Conway thought she was beautiful when they first met on one of her rare evenings out, it was a long time before she heard him say so. He went past it, digging beneath the surface for her ideas and opinions and emotions, forcing her to articulate convictions she had acquired without ever having to express them. He was ten years older than she, and she quickly learned that he had an aggressive interest in politics, having dropped out of a New York law firm to return to graduate school at Columbia, where he was studying political science. She was soon caught up in the fervor of his political ideas and aspirations. Intense about everything, he was stubbornly convinced that the only way to improve the system was to jump into it feet first.

James Conway helped Toni to crack open some doors through which she caught unexpected glimpses of herself and what she might really be. Their deepening relationship was exciting—but it also frightened her. She still did not believe in herself.

They dated a half-dozen times before he took her one night to

his apartment. She had known this was inevitable, but she was apprehensive, certain that he would be disappointed with her small breasts, her bony hips, her inability to respond in bed. Conway was surprised to find that she expected to be hurt while anticipating nothing in the way of her own pleasure.

He made love to her slowly, gently. He did not find it necessary to try to arouse her by using the words her few lovers had thrown at her as aphrodisiacs, words her mother had screamed at her so often that they were forever associated in her mind with hatred and anger. Once, laughing, Conway quoted Andrew Marvell, and he did seem to take a thousand years to admire, with eyes and hands and mouth, each part of her. He took such obvious pleasure in this exploration that, for the first time in her life, during a strange and wonderful hour when she gradually awakened to real desire, she actually *felt* beautiful. . . .

What had changed him?

Given rein, her active imagination conjured up a hundred questions, as many possible answers. Her mind jerked away from them reflexively. There was no way to confront them. She felt herself at the edge of an abyss, unable to see what lay beyond, frightened and helpless, a grown woman discovering that a lonely girl still lived inside her.

He watched the security patrol move away from him. Although the campus patrols were supposed to be randomly scheduled, avoiding any set pattern that might be charted, he had observed a predictable routine in the coverage. No one would return to the area of the science buildings for at least a half hour. Longer, probably, because the guard on this particular shift had been stopping around nine o'clock each night for an extra cup of coffee and a few minutes out of the cold.

The guard disappeared around the corner of a building. Time to move.

He crossed an open stretch of campus quickly and melted into the shadow of the Chemistry Building. Standing in the recessed entry, he peered back the way he had come. The snow made it easy to see anyone in the open, but it also made the pockets of shadow black, more impenetrable.

He waited until he was certain that no one had noticed him.

He had had his own key made to the building. Security was nominal for many of the older buildings on campus, especially the

science buildings. Too many professors and researchers worked at odd hours, early or late, and they resented having their freedom of access limited by alarms or monitored by hidden television cameras. They had had their way. Anyone with a key could simply walk in.

The building was silent. He moved purposefully down the stairs to the basement level. Corridor lights were left on permanently and he had no problem seeing where he was going. His goal was a junction box in a utility closet.

He had found the box a month ago and he had spent the intervening weeks secretly studying it, identifying the various lines and cables. Instead of using dedicated lines for each of the remote terminals connected to the Regional Data Center, the telephone company's linemen had taken advantage of the convenience and economy of multiplying. This meant that the communications lines terminated at several parallel junction boxes on their way to and from the Data Center. One of these he had found in the basement of the Chemistry Building.

He had been in no hurry to attempt a wire tap as long as he was able to gain access to the terminal at the county hospital. That was no longer safe.

At the junction box he worked quickly, without hesitation. He made two bridges. At one end was the drop for one of the city's remote terminals. At the other was the connection to the main frame computer at the Data Center.

In the middle was a carefully selected telephone line.

A competent telephone repairman would instantly recognize the tampering, but for the brief period he intended to use this tap, he had to gamble that no repairman would be looking.

And even if that happened, it would be only a temporary setback. He himself would not be in danger. There was no way the wiretap could point to him. The telephone line was not his.

He left the building the same way he had entered. He had been inside for less than five minutes. As he stepped outside the cold sliced against the raw nerve of an infected tooth, but his teeth remained bared in a savage grin. . . .

15 MON FEB 7 / 11:00 AM

The only thing unusual about the beginning of spring registration day at Hollister University was that all available parking spaces on campus were quickly filled. Cars spilled over onto neighboring streets in surprising numbers. There seemed to be a great many hopeful new students making sure they arrived early.

By ten o'clock the assistant registrar had an inkling that something was wrong and his worry showed. The possibility that suggested itself to him was simply too preposterous to consider seriously—but he did. He fended off questions from the harried clerk trying to cope with the long lines of young people presenting their official permits to register. The long lines would taper off soon, he kept saying. Anyway, there was nothing to do but process the registration forms; anyone to whom a permit had been mailed was accepted. That was all there was to it.

In the main assembly hall in the Administration Building the long queues built up quickly. Some of the prospective students, short on patience, began to act unruly. The hall was filled with a rising volume of sound, much louder than normal even for registration, as if the whole babble were being amplified on 8-track stereo to accommodate ears deadened by too many years of listening to loud music.

Shortly after ten-fifteen that morning, when the improbable

lines reached all the way across the big hall and folded back on themselves, adding to the crowding and confusion, one of the counselors began pinning some printed notices to a large bulletin board. A half-circle of students quickly gathered before the board. "What's going on?" a girl on the fringe of the crowd asked, peering at the board. It was at an awkward distance, too near for her to read with the top part of her lenses, too far for the close-up lower lenses. "Those are the computer printouts of the class lists," another youth answered. "Those classes are all filled up."

"How can they be full when so many of us haven't registered yet?"

"I don't know. I mean, I never seen it like this before. Damn it, I was supposed to be in Hendricks' Consumer Economics this semester. It was full at ten o'clock!"

Across the room at one of the long registration tables, a counselor sounded embattled as he tried to explain the inexplicable. "The computer processes the permits to register," he said to a querulous registrant. "It handles the registration contracts and class assignments. Computer listings take possible class sizes into account. We don't accept more applicants than we know there is room for."

"Okay, so what about me, man?" The student waved a fistful of forms. "I was accepted—I'm supposed to be in. So how come you're tellin' me I'm not?"

"Well . . . frankly I don't have all the answers myself. The fact is that all of your courses are filled. All I can do is put you down as an alternate."

"Wait a minute. I mean, that's my permit to register, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"You only accept enough applicants for the openings you got, so you don't even send me one of those things unless there's an opening, right?"

"That's the way it's supposed to work . . ." The counselor was losing his hair, and he tried to cover up the fact by drawing some thin strands from low on his temple across the top of his skull. When he put his hand to his head he felt the dampness of perspiration. The thin hairs adhered to his scalp. "It seems there's been some kind of mix-up . . . a computer error. We have accepted more applicants than we have room for. I don't know how it could happen . . ."

The crowd around the bulletin board had been growing more

demonstrative. Some of them began stamping their feet in a pounding rhythm. Others took up the tactic. Through the great din in the room an angry undercurrent was audible.

A student at one of the registration tables began to shout. The harassed counselor lost his temper. He shouted back. The student, a sharp-faced young man, threw out bony elbows, waving his arms and yelling.

A uniformed security guard trotted across the hall toward the commotion. When he reached the angry registrant he had to raise his voice to be heard. "What's the trouble here?"

Sharp Face shouted, his voice high and thin and shrill, "Get your hands off me!"

The muscular security guard gripped his arm more tightly. Sharp Face struggled to pull away. He was thin and not very tall, but he was as hard to grip as a live trout. "Take it easy, son!" the guard barked, his face turning red.

"Easy!" Sharp Face lashed out with one foot. His kick caught the guard in the shin. He wrenched free as the guard swore in pain. Angrily the guard lunged after him. Another student got in the way and was shoved aside.

Suddenly there were others pushing back at the guard and yelling obscenities. He wore no gun, but there was a long club attached to his belt. A fist grazed his head in a wild swing. The club slipped into the guard's hand. He swung it in a short, solid, backhand blow...

The melee around the bulletin boards exploded. One of the moderators came stumbling out of the crowd, pushed off balance. His hip struck the edge of a table, which skidded across the tile floor. Students tore sheets of paper from the bulletin boards.

Two other security men were closing in from opposite sides of the hall. One of them carried a two-way radio, talking into it as he ran.

"Calm down, please!" The balding counselor tried vainly to make himself heard above the pandemonium.

A tall student with the build of an athlete slapped both hands under the rim of a registration table and heaved upward. The table flipped high. The counselor tried to dodge back out of the way but he tripped against his chair and fell to the floor. Papers spilled everywhere.

The athlete felt a hand on his shoulder, spinning him around. He pivoted in balance, his body in beautiful control, his left fist already driving toward a security guard's face.

. . .

"Egan?" Tom Ames's voice was urgent.

"What have you got, Tom?" Michael Egan said crisply.

"We've got a riot on our hands."

"You need help?"

"You better keep your people where they are. This thing could come your way."

"How about the police? I know you don't like to have to call them on campus, but—"

"They're on their way," Ames said. "Mike, this looks like some kind of computer foul-up from what I've heard, so they may come after you. Watch your doors."

"I read you."

"Ten-four."

The security officer on the console that morning was a youngster named Riskind. He was one of the new breed of security people, college-trained and with no practical law-enforcement experience. He was the first replacement Egan had hired, choosing him over a fifty-five-year-old retired police officer. He had felt that if there was any place in security that called for someone young, quick reacting, flexible, it was a computer center located at a university. Well, this was as good a time as any to find out it he had made a good choice.

"Seal the computer room," he said to Riskind. "Condition yellow."

Riskind did not hesitate. "Yes, sir," he said, as he punched two buttons on his console. A program had been written for the computer allowing it to take over complete access control during emergencies. The first button Riskind punched activated the automatic access-control system at stage yellow for the computer room. The second automatically locked all of the outer doors to the building. Both instructions were now subject only to direct control from the security console.

One of the monitor cameras in the main lobby faced the glass doors of the entrance. Watching the bank of screens, Egan could see no trouble coming his way yet. He wondered what was happening in the Administration Building. Tom Ames was not the kind of cop who got into a flap prematurely. If he said he had a riot going, it was not a minor squabble.

Del Thomas was on the intercom. "Egan, what's going on? Why are the doors locked?"

"Trouble next door, Mr. Thomas. A student riot."

"Riot?" There was a short pause. "Are you sure you're not overreacting, Egan?"

"I'd rather do that than get caught—"

"Here they come, sir!" Riskind said.

"I'll get back to you," Egan snapped at Thomas before cutting him off.

His emergency team was already on its way to the lobby, responding to the yellow alert. "We'll go to red," Egan said, "But let me clear the lobby first. I'm going up front."

"Yes, sir."

The youngster was doing okay, Egan thought as he went out the door. He had responded instantly to his orders, and he hadn't asked a stupid question yet. Usually it took more experience to learn how much time could be wasted answering needless questions—or just asking them.

Egan reached the lobby just as a vanguard of students raced up the steps outside and piled into the outer doors. The doors were glass, but they were a half-inch thick, reinforced with an inner layer of clear plastic sheeting. They were set in heavy steel frames and moved in steel tracks embedded in the concrete floor. Normally the doors slid open on signal from electric pressure mats under the floor, or, with the pressure devices switched off, on signal from the lobby guard's desk. Now they could only open on command from the central console.

The doors looked fragile, but they weren't. As the shouting mass of students surged against them, the doors held.

Egan read the anger in the students' faces, heard it in the rising clamor outside. He wondered what computer problem had triggered it.

A number of employees of the data center were in the lobby, gaping at the outer doors. The receptionist was on her feet, hugging her arms, her pretty face pale. "You'll be safer in the corridor," Egan told her calmly. He addressed the others in the lobby. "We're sealing off the corridors. You'll all be better off inside."

His quiet authority had its effect, and in seconds the lobby was clear. "Go to red," Egan told the desk guard, and the command was passed along to Riskind at the console. The doors separating the lobby from the interior of the building slid shut and locked.

As you moved inward in the computer center from the outer perimeter, you moved closer to the computer room—and security

escalated. The corridor barriers were solid steel. If the students did manage to break through the main doors into the lobby, they would get no further.

Inside the lobby they would face Egan and his emergency team of four armed guards. That didn't seem like many to confront a mob, but they were more a visible deterrent than anything else. The building itself, its defensive systems fully activated and controlled by the programmed brain at its core, was its own best protector.

There was a short period of tense silence in the lobby, broken only by the muted yelling of the mob outside and the pounding on the doors. Something flew out of the crowd and smashed against the thick glass. Some students ducked away as the object shattered and bits of glass flew like shrapnel.

The desk guard was monitoring the central console. "The police are on campus, sir!" he called out.

Egan nodded, still watching the doors. It had not been a planned demonstration, he thought, or they would have been ready with something more than a beer bottle. They would have had a bomb or a Molotov cocktail.

The mob outside the computer center doors began to break up, at first slowly, then in confusion, fanning out away from the entrance, spilling down the steps and running in every direction. Beyond them a police car raced into view and braked hard. Doors opened and blue uniforms piled out. Another black-and-white appeared, the peel of its siren following it.

Relaxing, Egan spoke to the guard at his desk. "Back to stage yellow," he said. "Open the front doors, but keep them on manual. Nobody in or out without ID."

As quickly as it had started, it was over. Egan felt the adrenalin still pumping, the sharp edge of excitement. It was a good feeling, a kind of high. Afterward you sometimes questioned why if felt good when what brought that feeling was almost always trouble, or the threat of danger. But he had come to understand that it was a natural response of the organism. The feeling in itself was neither good nor bad. It was essential, a survival mechanism. For any kind of cop it went with the territory.

"Three men in the lobby until we stand down," Egan ordered the emergency team. He looked across at the desk guard. "I'm going out."

He knew he was not needed outside, but he wanted to reach

Tom Ames quickly. Ames's words had made the riot his business. A computer foul-up, he had said. Could mean anything. Michael Egan had to know.

Once, while living in California, Egan had driven along Colorado Boulevard on the morning after the New Year's Day Rose Parade. The street was like a disaster area. Bottles, discarded cans, paper, debris of all kinds, a lost shoe or a torn T-shirt, used condoms, broken boxes and a welter of newspapers and crumbled paper bags littered the street and sidewalks. It was as if there had been a giant picnic attended by a million people, who had all left their refuse behind. Which was pretty much what had happened.

Standing in the confusion of the registration center in the Administration Building, Egan remembered that morning drive, the sense of amazement at the amount of litter people left behind.

The rioting students had dispersed. A few appeared to be in the custody of police or security guards. Some had cuts and bruises. A uniformed guard was bleeding from a deep gash in his forehead. Another was being helped into a waiting ambulance.

Debris was everywhere. Papers on the floor in confusion. Pages torn from the bulletin boards and thrown aside, one of the boards ripped down. A bonfire had been started with crumpled printouts of some kind. The foam extinguishing agent used to put out the fire had added its contribution to the mess. Tables and chairs were overturned, some of them smashed or broken. Several windows were broken, including one of the big plate glass windows in the lobby.

Egan found Tom Ames conferring with a police sergeant. As soon as he was free Ames joined Egan.

"All quiet?" Egan asked.

"It's over," Ames said wearily.

"Anyone badly hurt?"

"I've got one guard with a broken collarbone. The rest are just banged up or bleeding a little. No students in the hospital, thank God." The statement was made without irony.

"What started it, Tom?"

"They're still running that down in the registrar's office. You better check with them. Some kind of mix-up on registration. What it comes down to, it seems, is that too many kids were accepted, far more than could actually be registered. There were hard feelings, one thing led to another, and..." Ames shrugged. There

was helpless resignation in the gesture. It said that's the way kids are now. If they don't get what they want, they go out of control.

"I thought we were through with all that," Egan said. "It's been quiet the last few years."

"It hasn't been up front on the TV, but things haven't been all that quiet," Ames said. "Campuses have been calmer, that's true. The kids seem more serious. Maybe they're just more realistic, or maybe it's just that we don't have the war to set things off. But trouble isn't that far away. It doesn't take much to produce a blowup like this morning. Don't ask me why it's like that, Mike. Maybe it's TV. Maybe they don't know what patience is any more. They want everything right now, just push a button. I don't know. You watch people when they get stuck in a five-minute traffic jam—nice ordinary people. They turn into animals. So it isn't just the kids. Sergeant Warneke—he's the one I was just talking to—says the police are running into funny things because of this winter. The cold's lasted so long it's eating at everybody the same way a heat wave does. Beats people down until they start to go a little crazy."

"How much do you think the fact that computers were involved in this mix-up had to do with the thing getting out of hand?"

Ames looked at him speculatively. "They didn't get in your place, did they?"

"No, but they tried."

"That's good. The damage here looks worse than it is, but that doesn't make it any nicer." Ames shook his head as he thought about Egan's question. "It's like those kids are afraid everything is out of their control. They can't do anything about what happens to them, and I can see where they might blame the computers for some of that. They're a symbol, anyway. They're running the show now, and when they foul up what do you do?"

"Maybe you blow you stack."

"That's about it, Mike. That's about it."

A few minutes later Egan left the building. The registrar had confirmed Ames's report that there had been a computer error involving registration permits mailed out to applicants. Instead of acceptances being mailed out only to those who had been approved, it appeared that every single applicant had received the same notice. Everyone had been accepted.

Returning to the Data Center, Egan found two messages waiting

for him in the security office. One was from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The other was from Jennifer Tyson.

He hesitated. Jenny might have more information than he did about the registration foul-up. It went with the pattern of errors developing over this past week. But Egan wanted to know what the FBI had learned in response to his request before he talked to Jenny.

He put in the call to the FBI field office. The agent in charge was friendly but businesslike. He couldn't understand what Egan's query had been about. When Egan hung up a few minutes later, he was also speculative.

He sat in thoughtful silence, replaying the end of the brief and surprising conversation.

"You wanted the criminal history of Toni Conway, right? Maiden name Antonia Wells, Provo, Utah, modeling career in New York, now married to your mayor in Hollister. That the lady?"

"Yes. What do you have?"

"Nothing," the FBI agent said.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. Hell, what's there to be sure about? If she had a record, it would be on file. I ran the name through New York, and just out of curiosity through the NCIC in Washington, just to see if we had anything in the Bureau's files on her. I don't know who gave you a bad tip, Egan, but you can take it from me. The lady is clean. Never been arrested, never been in jail. That what you wanted to hear?"

It was what the mayor would be glad to hear, Egan thought.

He tried to put a damper on his growing excitement, wanting to be sure he wasn't letting his thoughts run too fast. But the gut feeling was there, the conviction that he had locked onto something solid.

He called Jenny Tyson at her desk in the computer room. "Can you talk a minute?"

"Yes—I called you."

"I know. I was over at the Administration Building. And I talked to the registrar. I think we can agree on what this new incident means."

"I'm sure, Michael, but they're working on it here now. MacAdam and the others think it's probably a hardware problem, a breakdown somewhere. I don't."

"Neither do I. And not just because of what happened this

morning at registration. I've got another reason." He told her about the FBI's investigation of Toni Conway's criminal record. "It's definite. She has no record."

"That's just like Mr. Lambert—the salesman I told you about. It happened the same with him. When the query went through us, there was a false report generated. When it was checked directly through the police teletype, without going through the RDC, it turned out that he didn't have a drunk driving record. What apparently happened is that two records requested through us at the same time were transposed." She paused. "The problem is here, Michael. At the Center."

"Agreed. But we're going to have to convince Thomas. I'd like you to back me up when I go to him, Jenny."

"What are you going to tell him?"

"What we both know. That we've got an intruder."

PART TWO

TAKEOVER

16 TUES FEB 8 / 09:45 AM

Elinor Crane received her bill from Grayson's Department Store on Monday but she did not get around to opening the envelope until the following day, when she sat down at the small Italian Provincial desk in her living room to catch up on a small pile of bills. The desk was a lovely piece, kidney-shaped, finished in natural fruitwood with an inset leather top and brushed gold accents. Elinor had placed it just to the left of the big bay window, facing into the room so that she could sit with the light coming over her shoulder. Knowing this picture was attractive, she sometimes had guests ushered into the room to find her there at her desk, looking up and smiling, a quickly arranged stack of bills and correspondence before her. The only worry she had on these occasions was Emma, the maid, who sometimes had trouble keeping a straight face or a silent tongue.

Elinor frowned delicately at the Grayson bill. Really, it was getting so it was hard to tell where your money went any more. A hundred and forty-three dollars! What in heaven's name could that be for?

She had been to Grayson's early in January for the white sale. Was that all? No, toward the end of the month she had had to go in for a skin-care consultation and some of the new Estée Lauder

cosmetics. But that was it. Surely she hadn't spent nearly a hundred and fifty dollars. And Henry had not bought anything from Grayson's in that amount.

She shuffled through the slick folders included with the bill. All seemed to be advertisements for various special offers. Really, it was a shame they didn't send you the original sales slips any more, or at least copies of them, so you could know just what it was you had purchased. Now all she received was this computerized billing, and who could make any sense of it?

Elinor sighed. Grayson's must be right, of course. Shaking her head and frowning—a habit that was producing a new, unexpected and unwanted wrinkle in her forehead—she wrote out the check to Grayson's, placed it in the return envelope along with the top portion of the statement, and sealed the envelope.

She picked up the next bill on the stack, this one from one of the oil companies, and opened the envelope. Really, she thought, there was no end to inflation.

The complaint calls began to come into Grayson's in some volume Tuesday morning. There had been a couple of calls Monday afternoon by irate customers insisting that they had been billed for items they had never bought, but such complaints were not uncommon. On Tuesday, however, the telephone lines were busy with similar calls. By noon it was necessary to transfer one of the regular operators to help handle the flood of complaints. And there were long lines at each of the payment windows.

Early in the afternoon a report reached the desk of the supervisor in Accounts Receivable. Nearly a thousand of Grayson's regular thirty-day account customers had received the wrong monthly statements. All of the names were in the same alphabet group—from A up through H. This meant that the records in question all came from the same data file. And it clearly indicated trouble.

Shortly after three o'clock that afternoon Michael Egan and Jennifer Tyson emerged from Del Thomas's office at the Regional Data Center.

"How about some coffee?" Egan suggested.

Tight-lipped she glared at him. "I'd like to throw some right in . . ." Baffled, she could not come up with a target commensurate with her wrath. "He wasn't even *listening*."

"Maybe we didn't say the right things."

Her temper flared. "Don't be so damned reasonable. My God,

you certainly gave up easily. You don't even seem mad."

"That wouldn't get me anywhere with Thomas."

He touched her arm and steered her in the direction of the elevators. He could feel the tension, the momentary resistance, before she yielded. They did not speak in the elevator.

The cafeteria held a scattering of RDC employees on their afternoon coffee break. Del Thomas had consented to the brief meeting after lunch—probably, Egan speculated, because he had enough other matters scheduled so that he could plausibly cut their discussion short.

Jenny had been holding her anger in check. When they found a table she said, "Thomas is more interested in having you keep his parking lots cleared of snow than he is in the possibility that somebody is misusing his precious computer system." She paused, her gaze almost hostile, suppressed anger shifting from Thomas toward a nearer target. "How can you be so calm? Don't you really care?"

"Inside I'm seething."

"That does it!" She banged her cup down, spilling coffee into the saucer. "If I'd known you thought it was all a joke—"

"Take it easy," Egan said. "I wasn't really joking. But it was obvious we weren't getting anywhere with Thomas, and my blowing my stack—or making him blow his—wasn't going to help. He has to be convinced."

"You're just too darned rational for your own good, Mr. Egan."

"And you wear your heart on your sleeve, Mrs. Tyson."

There was silence for a moment. Carefully she folded a paper napkin into a small square and set it under her cup to soak up the spilled coffee in the saucer. "I'm not sure I like that last remark."

"I didn't mean it the way it might have sounded." He had sounded flippant, Egan realized, and the comment had seemed to go beyond the shared problem with Thomas into areas more personal.

The meeting with the director had gone badly from the start. As Jenny Tyson said, Thomas had turned aside their discussion of the recent series of perplexing errors to complain at length about the snow in the parking lot. Two employees had locked fenders at quitting time on Monday, and Thomas wanted to know if Egan had written an accident report. He pointed out that it was the third such accident in the last two weeks. Egan patiently reminded him that the parking lot was assigned to the Data Center by the university, which was responsible for its maintenance. Including

clearing away the snow. That was not exactly a security responsibility.

"Accidents are," Thomas snapped back. It turned out that his car had been one of those damaged the previous week.

"I'll talk to the maintenance people," Egan said. "The weather has been the problem for the last month. The natives tell me this hasn't been our usual winter."

"Mr. Thomas, we came to talk about the riot yesterday," Jenny Tyson cut in, her tone suggesting that the question of who should shovel the snow in the parking lot was not worthy of discussion. "That, and the other errors—"

"I'm aware of why this meeting was suggested. I would gather, Mrs. Tyson, that you are here to, ah, provide Mr. Egan with moral support?"

Egan answered for her. "I asked her to be here because of her familiarity with quality control. And because we had already discussed some of the problems. We're both agreed that what's been happening the past week or so is more than coincidence."

"I see. You've discussed this and you're agreed. I'm surprised you felt any need to involve me at all." The sarcasm was as unexpected as it was blunt.

"I—didn't mean to imply anything like that."

"No? Mr. Egan, I take it you would hardly object if I were to suggest that computers are not your particular area of expertise."

"It's my job to notice potential security problems wherever they are. I think there's a strong possibility of a security violation involved in some of these incidents, if not all of them."

"The problems have not escaped my notice. I've had the registrar and the bursar and the vice-president of the university on the phone. Not to mention reporters. The point is, Egan, that these incidents, as you call them, *are* being investigated. By the proper people. That investigation belongs in the computer room, not the security office. That's the only way problems involving the system can be dealt with, as Mrs. Tyson should know." He ceased stroking his mustache to hold up a hand, silencing Jenny's protest. "With reference to that registration problem yesterday, for example, we have to look at the hard copies and then go back to primary memory and take a dump of that file. We have to go over it to see if there's anything there that could explain what happened. We have to find out who had access to the file and for how long. We need to know if there were any interruptions or errors in transmission or malfunctioning of equipment. This is already being done, and I can

assure you we've found not the slightest trace of your hypothetical intruder. There is no evidence of improper instructions or program changes."

"If he's as clever as we think," Jenny Tyson said, "he wouldn't make it easy to find his changes."

"That's pure conjecture."

"There's nothing conjectural about the mayor's wife's criminal record being sent to the newspaper—a record that doesn't even exist! And she's not the only case of that kind."

"For heaven's sake, why would anyone deliberately manufacture spurious records when they were certain to be found to be false? Why, for that matter, would anyone want to deliberately have improper notices of registration acceptance mailed to hundreds of students? Who could possibly gain by any of these things? The registration mix-up can't even reasonably be regarded as sabotage. No one could predict that the students would behave like a bunch of animals."

Egan did not argue the point, although he thought that it might very well have been possible to predict student reaction, if not the actual riot. "They could be bad jokes," he suggested.

"Indeed. So cleverly carried out as to leave no trace. Really, Mrs. Tyson, you at least should know better."

"But if there's even the remotest possibility—"

"Then we'll find it. But I can assure you we won't discover any such thing. Instead of looking for what is reasonably plausible, you're grasping at the wildest improbabilities. The fact is that these are not security violations. They're communications problems, and given time we'll learn the cause. We'll find out what happened and why and how. We're very good at that, Egan. The computer system itself makes us good at it. In the meanwhile, as far as I'm concerned, there is no reason even to suspect malicious intent."

"I can think of some reasons," Egan said quietly. "And they scare me."

"This isn't a science-fiction movie! There are no mad scientists in this computer center, I can assure you. There aren't even any bad apples since we got rid of Greiner." He glanced at Jenny Tyson as he said this. "What we do have is a very well-trained staff of dedicated people. Spreading stories like the one you're suggesting can do nothing but bring discredit and harm to them and to this Center. And I will not allow that. Do I make myself clear?"

He had made himself clear and the meeting ended shortly thereafter. In total retreat, Egan thought disgustedly. He wondered if Jenny Tyson was right. Maybe he should have fought harder.

Watching him, Jenny felt some of her anger evaporating. He wasn't the enemy. She realized suddenly that she was angry with him for being what she had previously liked best about him—calm, in control, not flying off the handle at the slightest provocation. Not a David Tyson or a Rob Greiner, she had told herself. Well, she couldn't very well have it both ways.

"I'm sorry, Michael. I make it sound as if you're to blame because Thomas is being so . . . protective."

"It's his territory. That makes it a natural reaction. And the problem is he's so concerned with protecting his prerogatives that he's blinding himself to the possible threat. I'm not sure how to get around that. Yet."

"Michael . . . the other night you said something about why you were hired. You said it was *because* you didn't know anything about computers—that that was what Thomas wanted. You don't think . . . that is, that he could have a special reason for not wanting a computer security specialist around. I keep remembering that he got rid of Rob Greiner, too. He was our best systems analyst."

Egan shook his head. "Forget it. The RDC means too much to Thomas. He'd have no motive for doing what can only damage the Center. Just the opposite is true."

"But you've thought about it."

He didn't try to evade the question or her probing gaze. "It was one of the first questions I asked."

"What about me? Did you ever wonder about me?"

"I've asked myself a lot of questions about you, Jenny. That isn't one of them."

Okay, she thought, so you were fishing and he told you what you wanted to hear.

But she was pleased.

Then he shattered her pleasure with his next remark. "But I've been wondering about someone else. His name keeps coming up. You know who I mean, don't you?"

She knew instantly, but she still asked. "Who?"

"Rob Greiner."

Greiner moodily regarded the silent telephone on his desk, contemplating what he might do to get even with Ma Bell for

failing to bring any business his way. Call Tokyo maybe? Without paying?

The trouble was he didn't know anyone in Tokyo.

He could call Gerta in Berlin. What time was it there now? Hell, she was either asleep or balling some visiting Yank. It was the middle of the night there. He conjured up an image of big, soft-breasted Gerta riding hard, the bed springs squeaking furiously, and abruptly banished the thought with a grimace.

Great. The Wizard of the Computer is reduced to afternoon fantasies. While he sits by his phone waiting for someone to call.

In the beginning he had done well enough as a computer consultant to encourage him to rent an office and hire a secretary. He had had to let her go just before Christmas—old Scrooge himself—because he could no longer afford to pay her salary. Now he had an answering device hooked up to the phone to take messages when he was out. It did not record many.

Immediately after he left the Regional Data Center there had been enough interest to convince him that he couldn't miss. A lot of people in the computer business knew him and what he could do. Referrals were sure to come. Damn it, *nobody* knew more about computers than he did.

The weather turned bad in December and, as if on signal, the interest in Greiner Consultants fell. In January the weather was worse, business was bad everywhere, and his own business sank out of sight. He might just as well have gone to Florida to lie in the sun—except that the sun wasn't shining there either.

He could get some work patching up communications problems caused by the lousy weather, but he wasn't any Wichita lineman. That wasn't the answer.

The answer, he reflected sourly, was to get the hell out of Hollister. It looked like a dying town anyway, and for him it was already dead. He could go where the action was, to some bigger city on the move and on the make—Houston or Dallas, maybe. It was as simple as that.

He thought of Jenny Tyson's plea for him to give thought to the crisis at the Regional Data Center. If he had still been working at the Center, *he* would have been the one assigned to dig into those so-called errors. Even without the assignment he would have made it his project. The main processor there was his baby, a beautiful machine. He knew her as a man knows a mistress of many years. He could respond to her every mood, every subtle

hint of temperament, every sign of trouble. He would not have tolerated anyone mistreating her. Violating her. Not that he couldn't enjoy computer technicians' games, but the RDC was different. *His* mistress. No one else was supposed to play around with her.

The Regional Data Center was one reason he had not yet brought himself to the point of leaving Hollister for good. Jenny Tyson was another. He was reluctant to sever his last connection with either. The truth was that he had been happy at the RDC. If he had been able to get along with Del Thomas, he never would have left.

But that was the ultimate *if*. He simply couldn't do things Thomas's way. He liked to work unfettered, to keep things loose. He stayed nights when he felt like it, worked through the weekend if a problem involved him. Sometimes he would put in two or three days in a row without leaving the Center, working around the clock without sleep, then go home and sack out for two days. He did not count the hours he worked, but he knew that he had probably worked overtime three weeks out of every four, extra time for which he had not been paid and had never asked to be paid. He did his job and he did it well—but that was not enough for Del Thomas. No, that petty bastard was a clock watcher, a by-the-book tyrant for whom schedules mattered more than performance. When Greiner refused to toe the line, punch in and out, tug his forelock and say, "Yes, sir," he had to go.

So now he was paying for his ego trip.

The telephone rang.

Greiner stared at the instrument without moving. Don't answer it, he told himself. You've probably won a free dancing lesson at Fred Astaire's Studios. Or Ma Bell is short-handed again.

In the end he could not ignore the remote possibility that the call might be a real one. Business for Greiner Consultants. On the sixth ring he picked up the phone.

The call was from Grayson's Department Store. Grayson's had a problem in accounts receivable, involving the computerized billing program. Was Greiner available? Immediately?

"Hell, yes," Greiner said, not bothering to dissemble. "You want to tell me about it?"

"Not on the phone. Why don't you come over here? That is, if you're not tied up—?"

"So I'll cut myself loose," Greiner said cheerfully, his mood rapidly brightening. How could he let Grayson's down when he

had not yet paid for the new suit he purchased in November to impress his clients?

When he hung up a faint smile lingered on his lips. Should he tell Jenny Tyson about stumbling onto the big Computer Connection? The RDC would have something more to think about when they learned that the mounting list of computer horrors was not exclusive.

At the dinner hour that evening the laboratory was deserted. He had waited until he assured himself that everyone had left. Then he let himself in.

His penetration of the RDC was entering a new phase.

The phase just completed had been even more successful than he had hoped. While he had ready access to the terminal at the hospital he had found ways to exceed the operator's authorization, using her limited write-only access to browse, testing the responses he received from the central processor to his various probes. Getting into the university's administrative program had admittedly been a lucky chance, but not all luck. It was amazing how much you could accomplish simply by tricking the system into acting in your behalf. If you lacked authorization to get into a particular file but another user had it, often all you needed was that user's identity number. Even without that it was sometimes possible to decoy the system into supplying the data you needed through one ruse or another. It was a very obedient servant. If you asked a logical question, it would seek to provide a logical answer. And in the course of that search it might inadvertently provide the information for further questions, further answers.

Getting a page of the city's Computer Regulated Traffic Control program had not even been luck. The page had been there for the asking, left behind by a previous user. And one thing led to another. He now knew when the CRTC was updated each evening, and he had obtained the identity numbers for the program.

The system did not question him when he requested access with permission to write. He identified the page number he wanted and inserted a single, temporary, user-controlled change, effective immediately....

Dick Popolano placed the frozen body of the black cockapoo in the left side of the Humane Society truck, a chamber separated from the cages on the other side reserved for live animals. On many of his runs this past month, he reflected glumly, he had had to use the "live" side of the truck for the dead bodies he picked up. The relentless snow and sub-zero cold had been hard on everyone, but hardest of all on stray animals, the lost and abandoned friends of man.

No one among the general public had any real idea how many there were. Few were even interested. Average good citizens lacked any feeling of responsibility, as far as Popolano was concerned. They allowed their pets to run free, casually breeding, bringing more and more potential strays into a world where there was no longer any place for them.

Over six thousand strays a month were put to death out in Los Angeles, Popolano had read in the Humane Society *Bulletin*. That added up to nearly 75,000 a year "humanely destroyed," in the euphemism adopted by the Society. In one city. And that total did not take into account the legions who starved in the hills, fell prey to sickness or more predatory animals, or came down into the city

to dodge traffic and, sooner or later, to be scraped off the pavement.

It had been a bad day all around for Dick Popolano, who was a licensed animal regulation officer and loved animals of every description, an attitude that was not necessarily a requirement or even a common characteristic of animal regulation officers. He had been out in the truck most of the day answering calls. Because the Hollister Shelter was underbudgeted and understaffed, there was not much the drivers could do but answer specific complaints and requests for assistance. It was now after six o'clock, and Popolano was working on his own time. Wearily he checked his list. One more stop and that was it for the day.

The dog was young, maybe a year or so old, a collie-cross. A lot of collie him by the look of that thick winter coat and the long muzzle, but not a purebred. He greeted Dick like a long lost friend.

"I fed him," the woman said. She was gray-haired, shivering from the cold as she stood in her doorway, anxious that Popolano would understand. "He's been hanging around here for about three days, and I could see he was real hungry, so I fed him. He's such a nice dog. I'd keep him if I could, but my husband's sick and I'm out working during the day. And anyway the landlord doesn't allow dogs. It's right in the lease."

"I understand," Popolano said. Maybe this time it was true.

"Will you find a home for him, do you think? He's such a sweet dog."

Popolano hesitated. It was a bad time of the year for placing strays. A great many people came in to get a dog or a cat or even a rabbit for the kids in December, but after Christmas there was little demand for quite a while into the new year. Spring and early summer were active times, but inevitably July and August followed—the vacation season—and the same people who had been so eager to acquire a pet in the spring brought them in to the Shelter to get rid of them, simply because they wouldn't pay the cost of boarding them while on vacation.

People. You wouldn't believe what they could callously inflict on helpless creatures if you didn't see it every day.

"He's a friendly fella," Popolano said, scrubbing the dog's head behind the ears. "We'll do our best to place him."

Popolano heard a squawk from the two-way radio in the truck and glanced apprehensively in that direction. It had been a long day and he was beat.

"I can see he likes you," the woman in the doorway said, as if she were reluctant to let the dog go. "He really would make somebody a wonderful dog."

"Someone didn't think so," Popolano said, suddenly impatient, weary of pretending. Seeing the confusion on the woman's face, he regretted the lapse. He forced a tired smile and said, "Don't worry about him. Somebody's sure to like him."

If anyone came.

He went back to the truck with the dog, lifted it into one of the cages and secured the latch. It offered no resistance. It wore an old flea collar, he noted. No name tag, nothing to identify the owner, whose concern apparently ended with controlling parasites.

Popolano swung the truck around and headed back across town toward the Shelter. He wondered what the call had been on the radio, but it was not repeated and he did not call in to inquire. George Hawley must have got it, he thought gratefully. Otherwise the office would be calling again.

After a few blocks he cut over to Third Street, which was now one-way and had regulated traffic signals. If you drove a steady thirty miles an hour, and if the traffic wasn't too heavy, you could make it all the way across town without stopping. Some of the streets were fairly clear of snow and ice, but there were still stretches of hardpack. The fewer times Popolano had to stop on treacherous surfaces, with a truckload of animals bouncing and sliding around in their cages behind him, the better he liked it.

There were six youngsters packed into the Saab. It was a venerable two-cycle, three-cylinder putt-putt, free-wheeling and front-wheel-drive. It was built to accommodate four with comfort, five in a pinch. Bud Packer grinned as he skidded around the corner coming off Forest Drive onto Hill Street, drifting into a slide but knowing the front-wheel-drive would pull him out of it.

"Hey, man, you tryin' to cream us all?" Jack Hurley cried from the back seat. Bud Packer felt Julie's grip tighten on his arm in fright.

But the Saab predictably came out of the skid with its front snow tires biting in, and Bud's grin broadened as he started down Hill Street. "You think that was scary?" he taunted Hurley over his shoulder. "Get ready for a toboggan ride!"

"Bud, no! Please!" Julie Kramer pleaded. But the others were laughing and jeering, and in the back seat Jean Towns was gig-

gling—although that might have had less to do with the ride down Hill than with the way she was packed into the small back seat with three guys.

The car picked up speed quickly going down the steep street, and even Bud Packer felt a tickle at the back of his neck, a thrill of risk. But he was a good driver. He knew the little car and what it could do. All he had to do was time the light at Renaldo and it would be clear sailing. He had made the run dozens of times. If he caught the green at Renaldo he could also time the light at Third Street, coming out of the chute at the bottom of the hill.

Someone backed out of his driveway onto Hill. Bud Packer saw the back-up lights in time and swerved sharply. The little car rocked and the girls both squealed, and even Jack Hurley whooped as Bud flung the Saab to the left and instantly back to the right, clearing the big Buick coming out of the driveway by a foot. There was a moment of sailing on the slick surface of the street—man, was it slippery some places—but then the Saab was back on track.

Bud saw the light at Renaldo, just ahead, glowing red, but it turned.

He was doing fifty miles an hour when he went through the intersection, and if he held it just there he would make the light at the bottom of the hill. No sweat. All he had to worry about was a black-and-white showing up unexpectedly. But there was nothing worrisome in the rear view mirror, nothing ahead.

Nothing to worry about at all. Clear sailing all the way.

On Third Street heading east, Dick Popolano was surprised when a traffic signal unexpectedly changed and he had to brake faster and harder than he wanted. What the hell—he had been right at thirty miles an hour and these lights were timed, part of the city's computer-regulated traffic program. As a regular driver for the Humane Society, Popolano had made it a point to read the booklet put out by the city on the program.

Grumbling, feeling the day's fatigue settling right between his shoulder blades, he started up again when the signal changed to green. The truck's wheels spun briefly before they started rolling. He drove more cautiously and, sure enough, a couple of blocks further on he was stopped by another light. The whole pattern seemed to be off.

When he approached Hill he was only doing twenty-five, but then the green light seemed to hold longer than usual and he saw

that he was going to get lucky. He entered the intersection on the green, not even a warning yellow, but he waited until the last second to make sure before stepping down on the accelerator.

He was cruising through on the green when he heard the high thin beeping of another car's horn.

The impact of the collision was like a bomb exploding. An instant later there was a second explosion and a geyser of flame lit up the intersection like hellish day.

The Saab was a sturdily built small car, but it weighed around two thousand pounds, and the truck into which it smashed broadside weighed two-and-a-half tons. The smaller car, its front end crushed and the engine driven back into the passenger compartment, bounced off the truck, careened across the intersection, hit the curb and flipped over.

The truck veered left, out of control, and piled into the brick wall of the Simmons Furniture Warehouse. It burst into flames.

After a brief eruption of chaotic sound—of crashing and grinding metal, explosion and gushing fire—there was an interval of awful silence. Then other, smaller sounds were heard.

One dog, trapped in the burning truck, kept screaming. The sound was high-pitched, hair-raisingly like a human scream.

A girl lay on the sidewalk, moaning steadily. She was Julie Kramer. She had been thrown clear when the passenger door of the Saab burst open on impact.

One other passenger in the crowded small car was alive. Miraculously, like the chance survivor overlooked by a tornado, Jack Hurley had been ejected from the back seat. He sobbed uncontrollably as he sat by the curb, staring at the ball of fire enveloping the cab of the truck directly in front of him.

Dick Popolano was pinned inside the cab, impaled on the steering column.

In less than a minute the first police car arrived, its siren's wail dropping into a wail as it skidded to a stop. As the doors fell open a dog yelped and dodged away from the car. It started up the street, limping badly, looking back once over its shoulder.

Ham Reagan, one of the responding police officers, saw the dog. It looked like a collie, he thought. It kept on running.

Reagan turned his attention to the fire-limned scene in the intersection, and for a moment he shut his eyes. But the sounds continued to assault him in his self-imposed darkness—the moaning and sobbing of the survivors, the spitting of the fire, the high

scream of a trapped animal being burned to death.

The brake marks on the slick pavement told their own story. Reagan confirmed it through the halting story told by Jack Hurley, one of only two survivors. He said the driver of the Saab, Bud Packer, had tried to use his brakes at the last minute, but he was traveling at fifty miles an hour, and the street at the bottom of the hill was a skating rink.

The traffic light, Jack Hurley repeated over and over, had not changed when it was supposed to.

18 WED FEB 9 / 10:00 AM

Kenny Nance telephoned James Conway about the problem with the Computer Regulated Traffic Control program at his home early Wednesday morning. By the time the mayor got to his office a full report was on his desk.

The program had been malfunctioning between six and seven o'clock Tuesday evening. In the first confusion it was not clear exactly what had happened. The traffic signals continued to function, but their timing had been scrambled. It was later established that the problem existed in only one grid of the traffic program pattern.

During the one-hour period that ended at seven, a total of fourteen accidents were recorded in that one grid, which included the area of Third and Hill streets. During the same period there were only six recorded traffic accidents for all five remaining grids in the city.

Conway read the report through a second time before he reached for the mug of coffee his secretary placed on his desk. Kenny Nance lit a cigarette—his fourth that morning, or was it the fifth?

He was supposed to smoke only six all morning if he was going to keep his smoking down as he had promised Sally—and watched the mayor in silence. He read the grim expression on Conway's face accurately.

Conway looked up. "What's happening, Kenny? What the hell is going on?"

"Don't ask me. I can't even work one of those pocket calculators, the kind housewives take to the supemarket to add up their shopping lists. Don't ask me to figure out the Regional Data Center."

"You do all right figuring the odds in your head at the track." Conway was trying to keep it light, as if they could thus reassure each other that the world had not tilted overnight.

Kenny Nance shrugged. "You want the truth? I'm a hunch player. I spend two hours figuring the odds every which way, the track record and the kind of company every horse has been keeping, and the weight of the jockeys and the five-pound bug this hot-riding apprentice has. And when I'm all through I bet on the date of my mother's birthday or the horse's name." He sighed. "I'm a helluva handicapper, Jim. But I'm a lousy bettor."

They were both silent for a moment before Conway said, "I smell real trouble, Kenny."

"Yeah, it has a smell all right."

Conway punched through to his secretary, June Wilbeck. "June, get me Del Thomas at the Data Center." While he waited Conway said, "I should say something publicly about those kids in that wreck at the bottom of Hill."

"I wouldn't make a statement," Nance argued. "You'd have to say they shouldn't have been racing down the hill. Better leave that alone."

"I could call or write the parents."

"Make it a letter. If the press picks up on the fact that we've had another computer program error that got those kids killed, and the Humane Society driver, you're gonna get less and less popular around here. I wouldn't mind having those letters on file."

Conway shook his head. "You're a pragmatic son-of-a-bitch, Kenny. Sometimes you sound downright cold-blooded."

"Listen, you're not to blame for what happened last night. So don't start blaming yourself. You said the Data Center would be good for this city, and it has been. It still is. Some crazy foul-up doesn't change—"

Conway waved him silent as his call came through. "Thomas? This is the mayor. I imagine you were expecting to hear from me." Conway's tone was dry. "What the hell happened last night?"

"We're looking into it," Thomas said. "These things happen."

"Damn it, they're not supposed to happen!"

"Yes, of course," Thomas said stiffly. "We're investigating it, sir, I can assure you. The system is working fine now."

"Can you also assure me it'll be working fine at six o'clock tonight? And tomorrow night? All I've been getting for the last week, it seems to me, is promises and assurances."

"We're doing the best we can." Thomas was on the defensive, and his protest was lame. He's scared too, Conway thought. He said, "Is that what I'm supposed to tell the parents of those four young people who were killed at the foot of Hill Street last night? For God's sake, Thomas, how could that traffic program be changed without anyone over there knowing?"

"We're . . . trying to find out. Of course, we could shut down completely. Then we could go through the whole system."

"Just how do you propose to have this city function while you're doing that?"

Thomas had no answer. We can't go back, Conway thought, and you know it as well as I do. We're committed to the data system. For utilities and other services. Traffic control. Fire and police response systems. The routing of supplies. Inventories. Payroll. Public records. And so on through the labyrinth of electronic data banks, the files and programs that now monitored and controlled the very life of the city. Once the machinery was completely turned on, you couldn't turn it off without courting disaster.

Conway wondered how the other cities that had received HUD grants for total information systems were faring. One was down in Texas—Wichita Falls. The other was somewhere in the South. Charlotte? Yes, that was it. Both cities had had federal grants for their data systems approved in 1970. Were they as far along in implementing their systems as Hollister? And as vulnerable? Had they encountered security problems as Los Angeles had—and who knew how many other cities?

HUD-supported cities were not the only ones plunging into the new age of technological promise. Conway remembered talking at a mayor's conference to the city manager of a Colorado town of only 7,000 people. The town had set up its own computer center. It was being used by the city, the county, a hospital, the

school and water districts—even a local business—to handle everything from hospital records to tax rolls, utility bills, taxes, the city payroll. For financially strapped local governments the promise of reduced costs, fewer personnel, faster service was irresistible. To one degree or another, it was being embraced everywhere.

Each system was unique, of course. HUD's grant requirements had specified involvement of a local university and a software manufacturer as well as the city concerned. In Hollister's case that meant Hollister University and ICI, which had supplied both hardware and software for the system. But in spite of individual differences and various manufacturers' claims, it seemed unlikely that any municipal data system was more secure than Hollister's. Even the federal government's data systems were under fire for lack of security . . .

Conway felt a sudden, irrational fear that he had made a deadly mistake. He had trusted the machines too much, and it was not only his personal fate that had been risked but that of the city he had sworn to serve.

He shook off the fear with a feeling of anger. Superstition, he thought. Haven't you got over that yet?

"Your Honor? Mr. Conway, are you still there?"

Time to let up a little, Conway thought. Thomas was fraying around the edges, and panic wouldn't help. "I'm here, Del. Listen, I want to know what you find out as soon as you have anything. Anything at all, even a guess. In the meanwhile, if you get any reporters around there, no statements. If you have to, you can confirm a temporary problem in the traffic-control program last night, but everything is functioning normally now. That's the key word. Normal. I don't want any wild rumors or speculation if we can help it. Understood?"

"Of course." Thomas rang off with relief, and Conway turned to stare at Kenny Nance. "Well?"

"You've got no other way to go."

Conway sighed, swiveled his chair around to look out the window at his city. There was some blue visible in the sky behind patchy clouds. It didn't look like snow, at least for today. The weather forecast was for a day or so of clearer weather before another storm threatened. The respite should have meant a lifting of spirits, for himself and for everyone else who had been battered by this long hard winter. But Conway could not shake a feeling

of foreboding. Too many unexplained errors. Too many bizarre incidents, like Toni's supposed criminal record. No real harm done there, thank God, but how could such a thing happen? For others, the damage was not temporary, a brief nightmare from which you awakened. . . .

"That Humane Society driver . . . was he married, Kenny?"

"Yes."

Conway was silent, continuing to stare out over the city. It certainly looked normal enough this morning. It did not appear threatened. He said, "You remember that quote I used in the speech when we took office? The one from Thomas Paine?"

"Yeah, I remember. 'We have it in our power to build the world all over again.' I liked it."

"It could go the other way, Kenny." Conway swung slowly around to face the PR man. "We could tear it down overnight, without even knowing how it was happening or what went wrong. Is that what I've made possible?"

"Better you should be asking than Jay Burton," Nance said.

"But that's just what he will be asking, isn't it? Him, and that driver's wife and children, and all those bewildered parents. What the hell am I supposed to tell them when I don't know myself?"

For once Kenny Nance didn't know what to say.

At the Regional Data Center's security office, Egan completed a short briefing of Riskind. The young security officer said, "You really think something funny is going on in the computer room? That it's one of our people?"

"I'm not assuming anything, but it's one possibility. In any investigation you can make hypotheses, but you can't let yourself get locked into them. They're only working scenarios, one way of looking at things. You have to look for other ways." He paused. Pedantic, he thought. Sounded as if he was giving a lecture. It was as much a mistake to talk down to a new man as it was to assume that he knew the fundamentals of his job. "I just have a gut feeling that we're not dealing with a series of machine errors. We're dealing with an individual, and sooner or later we're going to find out who he is. One of the first steps is to clear innocent people. That's really what you'll be doing with these background investigations. I hope we don't find anything wrong, but we have to look."

Riskind seemed sobered by his responsibility. It was one thing

to investigate strangers, another thing entirely to start snooping into the lives of people you knew. On Egan's instructions Riskind had compiled a list of all present and recent RDC employees, going back twelve months. Background information had been reviewed on each one. No one was excepted—not even Del Thomas.

"Everyone at the Center was screened, to different levels depending on his job, when he was hired. But those checks were routine; something could have been missed. I want a closer look," Egan said. "We don't have time to send a whole team into the field for personal interviews in every case. You'll have to use the telephone. People will say more when you talk to them, even on the phone, than they will put in a letter these days. I want you to make sure you talk to someone who knew each of these people at his last place of employment. It's getting so employers won't say anything other than, yes, so-and-so worked here. But find out whatever you can." He paused, staring at the video picture of the computer room.

"In something like this, the most logical possibility is that someone on the inside is guilty, for whatever reason. Let's look for something in his or her background. Maybe we'll find a reason for all this."

"It's a long list," Riskind said, looking at the stack of profile sheets. "That's a lot of checking."

"That's only the beginning. When we're finished with them, then we start looking at every operator in every city department, and every user who has access to a remote terminal connected to the Data Center."

Riskind whistled softly.

Grinning, Egan said, "Now you find out what being an investigator is all about."

When Riskind left, Egan pondered what he was doing. Del Thomas would hit the roof if he found out. So why was he sticking his neck out?

He thought about his brief conversation with Carl MacAdam, Thomas's bright young assistant. He knew that he was putting MacAdam on the spot when he approached him, and he hadn't expected too much. It had simply seemed worth a try.

"You have to understand something, Egan," MacAdam had said carefully. "Del Thomas is an excellent administrator. He doesn't get involved in the technical end of things any more."

"What does that mean exactly, Carl? Are you telling me he's out of touch?"

"It means just what I said. Thomas is able to get things done. That's what he's there for, and that's textbook management: getting things done through others. He doesn't have to do all the work himself."

"Does he know this system and what can go wrong with it? That's what I really need to know. We have a conflict here—"

"I know about your argument with Thomas." MacAdam would not be stampeded. A slender, handsome young man with a full head of blonde curls, he seemed more mature than his youthful looks would have suggested. Like Thomas, he wore a mustache, but unlike the director he never seemed to touch it. MacAdam was not a nervous young man, Egan thought. He was very sure of himself. Cool.

"Then you know about the problems that are bothering me," Egan said.

MacAdam did not answer him directly. Instead he said, "Thomas was a top systems designer in the early days, a real innovator. On first and second generation systems he built a national reputation. But you don't stay at one level, Egan. You move up if you're good enough."

"That's twenty years ago, if I've got my timetable straight. A lot of things have happened in your field in twenty years."

MacAdam's gaze was bland. "The machines have got smaller and faster."

"Even I know there's more to it than that," Egan said. "Look, Carl, something's going on here, and Thomas won't admit it. Maybe he doesn't want to admit that someone could be screwing up the system. Maybe he has good administrative reasons for not admitting it. But you're closer to the technical side of things. You must know what's happening. If you talked to him—"

"You're asking me to do something I can't do."

"But if there is an intruder..." Egan paused. MacAdam was obviously loyal. Thomas was the man who had hired him, the man who had made him an assistant, the man who could help him climb the corporate ladder in a hurry. MacAdam struck Egan as a young man in a hurry. Changing his tack, Egan said, "If this trouble is real, you're not doing Thomas any favors by ignoring it."

"We're looking into it. If we find anything, you'll know it."

"Who'll tell me," Egan asked dryly. "You or Thomas?"

MacAdam smiled thinly. "Thomas calls the shots, Egan. That's the way it is."

MacAdam was a realist. Why not emulate him and play it safe?

Why not sit back and stay out of the line of fire? Egan had had an occasional taste of what it meant to step out of line with some of his superiors at the Bureau, where people who got out of step seldom stayed around for long. Wasn't that lesson enough?

Egan could hear his father saying, "How many times do you need to be told?" That was not the only legacy Joseph Egan had left his son. An authoritarian man, rigid, narrowly religious, Joseph Egan had made his son suspicious of inflexibility. But he had also taught him honesty, respect for the rights of others, a sense of duty and honor. Not much charity, Egan thought, but a way for people to get along with each other that fell short of love. Egan suspected that his own motivation for joining the FBI as a young man had much to do with an effort to live up to his inherited view of responsibility.

He shook himself. The code was still inbred. He could not ignore what he believed to be his job no matter what the personal risks. The Regional Data Center, in his opinion, was in trouble. It was under siege as surely as if a terrorist were inside the computer room with a gun.

19 WED FEB 9 / 07:30 PM

After catching a quick bite to eat in a coffee shop, Rob Greiner drove over to the Webster's house. His mind busy with the steps he should take with regard to the billing errors at Grayson's, he did not phone ahead. The possibility that his unannounced arrival might be inconvenient did not occur to him.

There had been a period when he was a frequent casual visitor at the house. It surprised him a little to realize that the last time

he had dropped by without an invitation was during the holidays. Since then he and Jenny had been out to dinner a couple of times, but that was all.

Their relationship had changed. Why? Because he wasn't doing so well? No, Greiner admitted grudgingly to himself. They had simply been closer while he was also working for the Data Center. As for their "relationship," it had never got off the ground. They were . . . friends.

David Tyson had a lot to answer for, Greiner thought, if the bastard ever came crawling out of a Vietnam rice paddy to announce, "I'm alive!"

But Greiner did not believe in miracles or in retribution in the hereafter. In Tyson's case, retribution just seemed like a good idea. The world was full of women, Greiner thought, who had been left emotionally crippled by men like David Tyson, unwilling or afraid to risk a repeat performance.

Jenny Tyson looked startled when she opened the door. Greiner wondered if the reaction went beyond surprise. Did she have another visitor? The security guy, for instance? But after that instant of hesitation she said, "Rob? For heaven's sake, come in!"

And after that it was like old times. Linus Webster was in the den, where he and Jenny had been having coffee. Pouring Greiner a cup, she said with a laugh, "Enjoy it while you can. The price is up again."

"Maybe it will become a true after-dinner drink," Webster suggested. "What have you been up to, Rob? We haven't seen so much of you lately."

"That's Jenny's fault. Anyway, I've been—busy." Greiner's smile was sardonic, marking the private joke.

"The consulting business is good then? You're doing better? You were discouraged the last time we talked about it, I remember, when you had to let your secretary go."

"It hasn't got any better."

"I'm sorry to hear that." The old man's eyes were shrewdly appraising. He's probably wondering if you've got what it takes to succeed on your own, Greiner thought. But Webster said, "I don't suppose the weather has been any help this past month."

"There are lots of excuses. How about your own project, sir?" Linus Webster was one of the few men alive Greiner could address as 'sir' without resentment. "Have you finished your model?"

"Hardly finished, but progressing, Rob. Progressing."

Greiner was familiar with Linus Webster's current project, which involved designing a new mathematical model of the giant electrical grid complex interconnecting the various power sources around the country, for which the physics professor had received government grants as well as a contract with the power industry. The problem had always interested Greiner because of its inevitable dependence on electronic data processing, not just for information input but also for rapid handling of the complex and difficult multiple-differential equations that interplayed with each other. Webster's "model" had to include all possible parameters for the electrical system throughout the United States—the changing distribution of power because of varying needs at different times of the days and in various geographical areas; the emergencies and crises that occurred daily in generation, distribution and usage involving manipulation of the system to meet any demand; the necessity to keep track of all this to insure that power suppliers were paid for the energy they supplied; the variances in costs to different consumers; and the added complications that came because power was derived from coal, gas, oil, hydroelectric and atomic energy. Equations had to be written to solve each segment of the problem and its influence on the other segments. Without access to computers, Webster would have been working a lifetime on the equations.

While Webster talked about his model with enthusiasm, Greiner sipped his coffee and relaxed, enjoying the warmth of the room and the house, aware of Jenny listening quietly, sensing the familiar details of this house he had always liked. He heard the chime of the big grandfather clock in the hallway announcing the half hour, the scratching of Jenny's cat as it sharpened its nails on a corner of the sofa, the snapping and spitting of the fire in the stone fireplace.

He had always found the appeal of the house inexplicable. It came from such commonplace objects. Books everywhere, of course. A scattering of antiques that seemed to have been selected at random. Flecks of color in cushions and draperies, a Tiffany lamp, an ikon, a pre-Columbian figure. And pictures on every table, covering every wall. Jenny's mother had been a saver of family pictures, preserved in assorted frames of every size and type. There were photographs of Linus and Anna Webster, of Jenny at various stages in her life, including her wedding picture with David Tyson, of Jenny's older cousin, Phyllis, with her hus-

band and three children. It was all so conventional and ordinary that Greiner knew he should have felt scornful or at the very least amused. Instead, he found it the most comfortable house he had ever known. When he spent an evening there he found himself envying those who lived in it, without understanding why.

Watching, listening and occasionally joining in the polite talk, Jenny Tyson wondered what had brought Greiner here tonight. Had he come up with some thoughts on the Data Center's series of mishaps?

He was staring at her. "That's why I stopped by, Jenny."

"What? I'm sorry, I didn't hear—"

"I've been doing some consulting work over at Grayson's Department Store. They've been having some problems."

"Oh? What kind of problems?" She was not really interested in Grayson's problems right now.

"Uh uh." Greiner smiled faintly. "First you tell me what's been happening over at your place. More of the same, I hear."

Jenny nodded glumly. She mentioned the student riot, which he knew about, and the erroneous criminal record attributed to the mayor's wife, which was news to Greiner. Then she explained about the temporary failure in the computerized traffic-control program the previous night, resulting in a rash of accidents.

"I read about the massacre on Hill Street. There wasn't anything in the paper about the traffic signals not working."

"The signals were working. They just weren't on the regular pattern. My guess is those kids had the lights timed for what they were used to when they raced down that hill. And when the signal didn't change on schedule..."

"My dear, you didn't say anything about that before!" Linus Webster exclaimed.

"I thought... you had enough on your mind."

"Too much to care about what has been troubling you?"

She looked at him in surprise. "I didn't mean that. Anyway, we're not supposed to talk about what's been happening outside the Center."

"Del Thomas's edict?" Greiner guessed.

"Naturally."

"What's being done? What does Thomas say?"

"We can't convince him this is really a serious threat to the Center. He still insists that it's a hardware malfunction, even if it's an unusual one—we may have to call in the manufacturer's

engineers, he says. Michael and I have tried to make him see—"

"Michael?"

"Michael Egan—you remember, the new security director."

"Oh, yeah," he said dryly. "Michael."

"Don't be silly, Rob. We . . . we just happen to agree on this, that's all."

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single agreement."

"Oh stop it." But there was color in her cheeks, causing Greiner to resent Michael Egan even more. "Anyway, we tried to convince Thomas, but he wouldn't listen. He as much as told Michael to stay out of it, that it wasn't his problem. My God, if this isn't a security problem, I don't know what is! But Thomas doesn't want any interference. He has to do it his way."

"That sounds familiar." Greiner regarded her thoughtfully. "I wonder . . ."

"What?"

"Grayson's. I told you they had a problem."

This time she quickened with interest. "They've had something like these other incidents?"

Greiner explained what had happened at the store. Nearly a thousand charge customers' records had been scrambled, all stored on the same magnetic disk. "It's a primitive system," Greiner said. "Not the equipment but the way they use it. They use it like a glorified adding machine. There's no documentation at all. Half the time they rely on the programmer's memory of what he did. They've got one programmer doing nothing all day but patch up the accounts receivable—every day. That's where this problem came up, of course, but he's always done that. Usually it's just a mistake here or there, somebody hits the wrong key. But this is different. The trouble is it's hard to pin down what happened. There's no real security there at all. Anyone in their computer room can make program changes—even design changes, if you can believe that—on his own hook, without having to clear it with anyone. There's almost no supervision, and they even took on a couple of extra people for Christmas. A couple of data clerks. Nobody really knows who they were or whether they were reliable. The store probably didn't even check on them. They hardly ever do for temporary help. And both men were let go after Christmas, so they're long gone."

"Grayson's must be insane."

"Yeah. You'd be surprised how many successful businesses are run that way. Don't ask me how." Greiner chewed his upper lip, catching stray long strands of his mustache. "At first I wondered if somebody actually pulled off the sabotage bit with a magnet. It's *possible* to scramble magnetic media that way, even though it's not very probable. But it doesn't look like that was it. It looks more like the kind of stunt the RDC has been running into."

"But surely that's just coincidence," Linus Webster broke in. "Isn't the Grayson's system autonomous? You can't tie the two problems together just because they happened about the same time."

"Grayson's has its own system," Greiner agreed. "And errors in computers aren't so rare that you couldn't have a coincidence of two systems running into strange problems at the same time. Still... it *is* a coincidence."

"Rob, why don't *you* talk to Del Thomas about this," Jenny urged. "He might listen to you."

Greiner's expression became instantly stubborn. "Thomas doesn't give a damn what I think." He paused, savoring his bitterness, then relented when he saw the concern in Jenny's eyes. "But just for you, Jenny, I'll let you know what I come up with at Grayson's. At least I can shut their whole system down temporarily if I have to. Too bad you can't do that at the Center."

"Why can't they do that?" Linus Webster asked. "That sounds like the only sensible thing to do if this situation continues."

Greiner shook his head. "It's a unique system. The computer was built for the RDC. There's no backup yet. They're working on a companion system, at least they were when I was still there, but they don't have it yet." He paused, looking at Jenny soberly. "You want to know what I think. Well, I've stopped thinking it's someone on the inside. Too much has happened. This isn't fun and games. You've got an intruder from the outside, and whoever it is *knows* you can't shut down. If he's penetrated the whole system, he's got this city by the short hairs!"

Returning to his apartment, he hastily collected what he needed for this night's mission. On his way out again, he had reached the foot of the stairs when the door on his right suddenly opened and Norma Hooper emerged from her apartment. They both stopped.

Why was she staring at him that way? Did she guess? Did it show in his face? Could she read the truth in his eyes?

Angrily he shook off the impression. Norma Hooper looked as if she wanted to retreat, but there was no room in the narrow hallway. He took the last step down that brought him face to face with her and forced a smile. "Evening, Miss Hooper. Going out?"

"Well, I . . . yes, I was just . . ."

She was frightened. Of him? Or of the world in general? It had to be the latter. There was a pinched quality to her, not only in the tight, anxious eyes but in her body. He had often seen her walking along the sidewalk with her minced, careful steps, everything contained, pinched inward to ward off any possible penetration of her shell. Had she ever known any intimacy? Had she ever made love? It seemed absurdly unlikely. There would have been some mark, some evidence of softening, some change, an opening out . . .

Another spasm of anger, but this time he had looked away in time, hiding it. Hiding, too, the tears. Oh my God, he thought, seven years! Seven years and I still can't bear thinking about her that way. I still remember every minute of it, everything about her, everything that happened.

His voice was calm. "Can I give you a ride? I was just going out myself."

"No . . . no, thank you. I'm just going to the store. It's not far, and I . . . I like to walk."

She turned hastily toward the front door, jerked it open, fled down the walk. From the doorway he watched her hurry away. No, he thought, she had seen nothing. Love was impossible to conceal, but hatred was easier to dissemble, and he had had years of practice. Even murder could hide behind a smile.

It was the first time that day he had allowed the word to surface in his mind, but he did not flinch from it. He had not planned or directly caused those joy-riding kids to crash. He had only made it possible. And he had always known that some would be hurt as he carried out his plan. That had been inevitable, even necessary. Otherwise, they would never be terrified enough to believe him.

No, they had brought it on themselves. No one was innocent.

He closed the door and went down the path to the street, covering two of Norma Hooper's tidy steps with one of his.

20 WED FEB 9 / 08:00 PM

The main school building of Henry Adams Public High School in Hollister was an old but solid structure. Its classrooms were supplemented by two "temporary" frame buildings which had actually been in use for the past fifteen years. In successive recent elections school bonds that would have paid for the construction of a permanent addition had been defeated.

In a corner of a first-floor classroom in one of the temporary frame buildings a wastepaper basket had been overturned. The pile of debris was larger than the contents of one basket. It had been soaked with gasoline.

A long piece of string stretched across the floor away from the pile of paper. It was ordinary package-wrapping string. One end of the string burned slowly.

Where the string reached the pile of trash it was tied around a plain white letter-size envelope. The contents of the envelope bulged. They were separated into two parts by the string at the center of the envelope. On one side were the contents of a half a tube of hair cream. On the other side were some ordinary chlorine tablets.

The improvised fuse took nearly fifteen minutes to reach the

envelope. When the pressure around the center of the envelope was released as the string burned away, the two separate chemical elements were allowed to come together.

There was a small explosion. It was followed almost instantaneously by a fiery blast as the saturated pile of debris burst into flames.

The classroom was a repository of natural fuels, and the violence of the flare-up enabled the fire to gain a strong start before enough heat reached the ceiling-mounted detector to cause an electrical connection to close, triggering the fire alarm.

Although the city of Hollister now had a computerized fire response program, the alarm at Henry Adams High was a local bell. With a security custodian in residence, living in a mobile home at the edge of the school grounds just beyond the practice football field, the school board had voted against the extra expense of a central alarm system or a direct connection to the fire department's communications center.

The hammering of the bell brought the custodian, an elderly man, running out of his mobile home. He knew the alarm had to come from one of the school buildings. No smoke or flames were visible in the main building—but the frame structures were out of his line of sight.

He ran almost the entire length of the snow-covered football field, puffing and laboring, before he was in a position to see the fire. Then he had to run all the way back to the mobile home.

He stumbled into his quarters on trembling legs, gasping for breath. Panic pushed him. Too much time had already been lost. The emergency fire telephone number was taped to his telephone. He grabbed the phone and began to dial.

This time he used the wire tap.

System hackers had all kinds of fun and games, most of which were well known to the computer science students he had cultivated. A brilliant, reckless student named Olsen had explained how a piggyback entry worked. "It's simple. You insert another computer into a communications line between a remote terminal and the main frame computer. What you do is have your mini-computer, or whatever it is you're using, fool the remote operator into thinking that he's communicating with the central processor. You acknowledge his access and accept his message. Maybe you confirm it and wait until he logs off. If necessary, you can just

relay the messages back and forth—but you can also change them. If what you want to do is get into the system to do whatever it is you want, what you do, essentially, is ride piggyback on the remote user's communication. Of course, you've got to have some equipment to bring it off, and you've got to find a way to tap the line."

The message from the remote terminal operator at the fire department communications center to the Regional Data Center was sent at 9:13 P.M. It was addressed to the Automated Fire Response Program.

The Intruder intercepted the message. Playing the role of the central processor, he acknowledged the message, using the laboratory minicomputer. The message reported a fire at the Henry Adams School at 1313 McKinney Road in Fire Zone 6. The computer program was designed to route the proper available units to the fire area automatically.

When the operator signed off, the Intruder transmitted the message to the RDC, using the same entry code he had just received. He made only two small changes. The address became 3113 McKinney Road, in Fire Zone 9. Any inspection of the log later would reveal only a transposition of numbers in the one instance, a common error in the other.

He logged off, shut down the minicomputer and left the building. There was no one about. He went directly to the basement of the adjoining Chemistry Building and removed the bridges he had installed in the junction box.

He was in his car, leaving the campus, when he heard the distant wail of the fire engines.

21 WED FEB 9 / 10:00 PM

Michael Egan seldom received any telephone calls in the cottage at Lake Terry, and if it hadn't been for the necessity to be on emergency call from the Data Center, he would willingly have done without a phone. He wondered if that was a symptom of retreat.

The phone rang twice that Wednesday night.

The first caller, from California, was Joan Wellman. She had phoned only once before since he left Los Angeles, to wish him a Happy New Year. He had not called her, and she reminded him of the fact. "There didn't seem much point, Joan."

"Still pouting?"

He smiled at the phone. "You still don't understand."

"But of course I do. You're the one who didn't understand *me*." It was an old argument, always pointless and now even more so. He did not pick up his cue, so she said, "You were right about Howard, of course. He's . . . moved out."

"I'm sorry."

"Why should you be?" She laughed brightly. "After all, you never thought he should be here in the first place."

Egan said nothing to that. It was Howard who had brought matters to a head with them. But if it hadn't been Howard, Egan

knew now, it would have been someone else.

They had gone together for more than three years, almost inseparable, a couple. Egan had taken it for granted that eventually they would be married. His assignment in Los Angeles was the first one that had let him remain in one place long enough to have the luck to find and develop a relationship with a woman. His parents, who lived in Pontiac, Michigan, and had been looking forward for years to becoming grandparents, were delighted. After a while they became, like Egan himself, puzzled. When were he and Joan going to be married? Was something wrong? Every time Egan brought the subject up, Joan put him off with teasing and laughter.

For someone trained in investigation, he had not been very observant—he was apparently the last among their circle of friends to find out that she was sleeping with Howard Simpson, among others. Egan felt stupid and angry and betrayed. The revelation about Simpson came during a time of turmoil at the Bureau, which was facing charges of illegal activities. All of a sudden Egan's whole world was overturned. He had been living what he regarded as an orderly, sensible, purposeful life; overnight he learned that nothing was what it seemed to be.

The surprising fact was that, although Joan did not want to give up Howard and the freedom to have other men, she was more eager to keep Egan than ever. She even proposed that he move in with her at last—along with Howard. "You'll love him, Michael—really you will. You must let him do your portfolio, he's very good at what he does."

"So I gather."

"Now don't pout, darling." She sighed. "It's a different world, Michael, now. This isn't Pontiac circa 1930 any more. People need more than one relationship. I think it would work out—I really do."

"I'm not built that way."

"Oh Michael, I didn't mean . . ." Her laughter dissolved into hysteria. "Oh my God, I didn't for a minute mean . . . oh Michael, not a real *ménage à trois*. I didn't mean that. I know you too well for that." The hysteria gradually subsided. "Howard, on the other hand, I wouldn't put it past him, the bastard. He's an admirer of yours—you know those Polaroid snaps I took of you?"

Egan was deeply angry then. The pictures had been a private joke, personal celebration of their sensuality.

"Are you there, Michael?" Her voice sounded surprisingly young over the telephone.

"Yes."

"I wish you hadn't left L.A. Do you want to know something funny, Michael? Something really funny? I mean, funny-peculiar and funny-*funny*, too." A brief pause. "It's never been as good with Howard since you left. Now can you explain that?"

"You like variety."

"Don't be nasty, darling. The truth of the matter is that Howard just isn't... *substantial* enough. He's beautiful, and when I had you that was all Howard needed to be. Does that make any sense at all? It sounds as if it does."

"I think the word you used before was dull."

"You know I didn't mean that exactly, except that you were being very up-tight about everything, all Puritan ethic and resentful. Anyway... Howard's moved out on me." Joan suddenly sounded more childish than before, her tone wistful, asking for sympathy. "I'd like to see you, Michael."

"I don't think that's such a great idea, Joan."

"I'm going to be in New York next month. Can't I call you? That wouldn't be so far to come, would it?" She didn't want to come to Hollister, Egan thought. She wanted to meet him in New York at the Hilton or in a good restaurant. On her own ground. She had dazzled him once, and she wanted to believe that she could do it again.

She probably could, Egan thought. He discovered that he could smile about it. "Call me," he said. "If I can get away, I will."

"Oh, that's wonderful!"

"But come alone," he added dryly.

"You bastard." She chuckled. "I think I'm still in love with you."

"That'll have to be your cross."

Moment later she rang off, and Egan examined the fact that he no longer felt anger when he heard her voice, nor much of anything else. They might have been happier, he mused, if he had discovered earlier that it was a mistake to feel anything too deeply about Joan, or to expect her to care deeply.

But he was pleased with himself.

He mixed himself a drink and settled down to read. The novel involved a complicated triangle in which the hero was involved with his mother-in-law, and neither seemed to feel more than a

passing twinge of guilt with regard to the wife-daughter. Was this the new, freer world Joan had spoken of? Was he really that far out of touch?

He found himself unable to concentrate, his thoughts drifting. And they turned not to Joan Wellman but to Jennifer Tyson. He wondered at just what point she had helped him to realize that he was no longer in love with Joan—if he ever had been.

He turned back to the novel, reading until his eyes tired. He went to bed early.

The second telephone call woke him shortly before midnight. He groped out of sleep and stumbled across the room to the wicker desk where he kept the phone. In the darkness he knocked the instrument off the desk and swore softly.

"Egan?"

The peremptory greeting was clearly audible. Who the hell was calling him at this hour? He fumbled around on the floor, found the phone, picked it up. "This is Egan."

"Jim Conway. The mayor," Conway added, making the explanation sound both modest and unnecessary.

"Yes, sir." Egan was awake now, responding to an inner alarm.

"I'm sorry to call at this hour." There was a pause, giving Egan the time to say "No complaint, sir." Then Conway said, "I understand you live out by the lake."

"That's right."

"Cold there this time of year. What time do you get to work in the morning?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Can you meet me at my office at seven?"

"Certainly, sir." Conway didn't waste words, he thought.

"Good." The mayor sounded as if he were going to hang up and Egan spoke quickly. "Has something happened? Something I should know about?"

There was a brief pause before Conway said, "We've had another foul-up in one of the city's computer programs. This one makes my hair stand on end." Tersely he explained about the school fire and the automatic routing of responding fire units to the wrong location. "I've talked to your director, Del Thomas, and he still seems unconvinced that these incidents are being deliberately caused. Kenny Nance tells me you don't agree. Is that right, Egan?"

Thomas wouldn't like it, Egan thought, but he did not hesitate. "I think there's an intruder."

A silence. "An intruder?"

"Yes, sir."

"That makes it sound more real. I almost wish I hadn't asked." Conway gave a short, mirthless laugh. "See you at seven, Egan, in my office. I'll have coffee ready. Go back to sleep. I hope you can."

He hung up, leaving Egan staring at the silent phone.

Egan lay back on the rumpled bed, wide awake, his thoughts tracking back from the mayor's words over the incidents of the past ten days, beginning with the discovery of Arthur Prochaska's death.

The Intruder was not yet visible, but he was there. His image was becoming a little clearer, like the shapes in the dark room slowly acquiring edges, degrees of blackness, formalized contours.

At first the Intruder had been flexing his muscles. Showing off. Prochaska's death—if that was part of the sequence of events at all—must have been an accident. The other early incidents had been almost playful, the malicious games that might be dreamed up by someone clever and vindictive.

That had changed. Now the Intruder had blood on his hands.

Each new disaster became less attributable to accident. Tragedy became more predictable. The Intruder knew his power now. He knew how dangerous it was, but this knowledge had not made him more cautious. It had made him reckless.

Egan wondered if the Intruder was quite sane now. He was no longer content to sully reputations. Now he shattered lives. There appeared to be a clear escalation in the consequences of his actions. Deliberately tampering with traffic signals or programming a fire unit to go to the wrong location seemed more sadistic—a more open acceptance of disaster—than anything that had gone before.

Where is he taking us? Egan was absolutely convinced that the question had to be asked. What is he building up to?

And—the ultimate question, the most baffling and as yet unanswerable—why?

22 THURS FEB 10 / 07:00 AM

Egan arrived at City Hall shortly before seven. The building, which dated back to the twenties, was cheerless and gray on this overcast morning. There was a security guard at the entrance to the main lobby. Egan exchanged small talk with the guard, an elderly man who seemed a throwback to the era when all that was needed was someone to go around at night to make sure that doors were locked and lights turned off. Except for the age difference, about what Del Thomas figured he was hiring for the Regional Data Center, Egan reminded himself.

Hiring elderly custodians was fine as long as most of society was willing to play by some kind of rules, conveniently ignoring the fact that the old man was hardly capable of defending himself, much less protecting property. But the era of gentlemen's agreements was as obsolete as this building. Most violent crime was committed by the young, and they didn't abide by any anachronistic code. Maybe because we didn't teach them that rules mattered, Egan reflected. We told them to release their hostilities and to scribble on the walls if they wanted. So now there wasn't an untouched wall in sight—and one day the old custodian might be found lying in a pool of his own blood, while everyone stood

around shaking their heads in bewilderment, wondering what kind of monsters we had spawned.

Egan shook his head, admonishing himself as he entered the echoing silence of the City Hall. He was beginning to sound middle-aged. And he was forgetting that what threatened the city of Hollister right now did not fit comfortably into any of the FBI's categories of crime statistics.

He found James Conway waiting for him in his office. Not having met the mayor before, Egan observed him with curiosity. He saw a lean, almost ascetic-looking man of his own age, wide awake in spite of the early hour. Conway welcomed him with a grin that was unexpectedly boyish. "Glad you could come, Egan. Have some coffee? You know Kenny Nance, don't you?"

Egan greeted the mayor's amiably rumpled press aide. Conway waited only long enough for Egan to accept coffee in a white plastic cup before he asked, "Have you given some thought to what I told you last night?"

Egan nodded. "I don't know any more than you told me, but it fits into the pattern."

"It gets worse. We lost two buildings in that fire—one third of the classrooms for the school. The fire units were delayed over a half hour getting to the scene." Conway eyed Egan sharply. "You still stick to your belief that an intruder is responsible?"

Conway liked to challenge people, Egan thought. "I'm sure of it. I'm no computer expert, but this thing has a feel to it. Call him whatever you like, but I'd stake my job on the fact that we're dealing with one man—a new kind of computer criminal."

"You might be risking just that. Your boss should be here in a few minutes, and as you know he doesn't agree with you." Egan showed his surprise—not over Del Thomas's opinion, but over the news of his imminent arrival. Conway did not give him time to dwell on the announcement. "Suppose you're right, Egan, and there is an intruder. Do you think he meant to harm anyone last night? Before you answer, I should tell you the preliminary indication is arson. The fire was probably set deliberately."

"A couple of days ago I'd have said no," Egan answered thoughtfully. "Up until Tuesday night everything that has happened could have been put down to a warped sense of humor. But people died when that traffic-control pattern was changed—and the Intruder still went ahead with last night's fire." He paused, troubled by something. "You said arson."

"We'll know when the investigators get through, but I'm told that's what it looks like. A window was broken in—probably earlier in the evening when the watchman was putting out a trash fire."

"That makes this incident different from all the others," Egan pointed out. "All we've had before this was some invisible force rigging things behind the scenes. But arson is something else. That means he was there, at that school, lighting a match. That's a different kind of crime."

"And a different kind of criminal? What about the fire-response system malfunctioning? That's still another computer problem."

"I know, and that's what convinces me it's the work of the same man, the one I call the Intruder. He might have had a special reason to start that fire. Maybe it was the only way he could be sure of getting the results he wanted. It's either that, or..."

"Out with it," Conway said. "You don't seem to me the kind of man who's afraid to say what he thinks."

Egan bristled, caught himself. Conway was testing again. "He could be going into a new phase," Egan said. "I don't pretend to understand him. I don't know his motives, what got him started. But I do know this. Even he couldn't have predicted how he would react to every incident, especially that carnage Tuesday night on Hill Street. Whatever he was after in the beginning, that could be changing. He must have this... this enormous feeling of power, the knowledge that he can make us all jump through hoops." Egan paused. "He's getting more arrogant. He's willing to let us see a little more of him. He doesn't care if we know he's there. I don't like it. I get the feeling..."

Conway and Nance both stared at him in silence.

"He's building toward something. This whole thing has been orchestrated. And what's happened so far may be a picnic compared to what's ahead...."

In addition to Egan, Conway and Nance, the police chief was on hand for the mayor's early morning council of war, joined by Del Thomas and Carl MacAdam from the Regional Data Center. Thomas's face reddened as he listened to Conway's summary of the problems which had apparently originated in the Data Center over the past two weeks. Thomas had not liked being ordered downtown at this hour of the morning, and he had liked it even less when he found Egan there before him. When Conway men-

tioned the possibility of an intruder, Thomas interrupted angrily. "Egan and I have already discussed his theory. I can only repeat what I've told him. What we're looking at here are errors, not the activities of some master criminal."

"I'm inclined to agree with Egan."

"On what evidence?" Thomas snapped. "This is no reflection on Egan or you, Your Honor, but neither of you is qualified to make that judgment. I deeply regret that Egan has seen fit, over my explicit objections, to make his notion of an intruder a matter of public concern."

"It isn't public," Conway said. "And it isn't going to be. Whatever we have to discuss stays in this room. I'm sure I don't have to make that any clearer. The last thing this city needs right now is some scare headline about our whole computer network breaking down—or being deliberately manipulated into errors." He paused, looking from Thomas to Egan, assessing the RDC director's resentment. He decided to try to get Egan off the hook if possible. "Egan didn't volunteer his opinion. I asked for it, for the same reason I asked the rest of you to be here. I need some hard answers. Too many unexplained things continue to happen, each one worse than the last. If Egan is right, then this city is under seige. It's time we faced up to that. And even if Egan is wrong, if what's been happening can be explained in some other plausible way, then we'd damned well better find out what that explanation is and do something about it before panic really sets in." He regarded Thomas with a cool gaze that made the director uncomfortable in spite of his advantage in years. "We're not talking about routine errors, Del. We're talking about libelous communications, including a false criminal record attributed to my wife. We're talking about a man freezing to death because of a mistake in his utility bill. We're talking about five people killed in a car crash, and a school burning down. We're talking about a student riot that could have been a lot worse than it was. I trust you don't regard such matters as everyday occurrences."

"Well, no, of course not—"

"Then we're in agreement," the mayor said smoothly. "Whatever is necessary to investigate these incidents, it has to be done as quickly and as quietly as possible."

"We *are* investigating these problems," Thomas insisted, more red-faced than before. "Ask Carl here." But Thomas did not give his quiet assistant time to answer. "What I'm trying to tell you is

that there simply isn't any evidence that anyone has penetrated the system and is causing these errors."

"Looks to me like we don't have evidence of anything," Chief Toland said. "If you ask me—and nobody's seen fit to do that up to now even though this could be a police matter—if you ask me all we have here is a handful of errors coming out of these computers. What I understand, there might be a couple dozen of those kind of errors every week. There's nothing so unusual about it. It looks to me like the whole country's conspiracy happy—no offense, Your Honor, but that's the way I see it. A few strange things happen that maybe aren't even so strange, and right away we're hunting around for the conspirators when maybe all it is is a couple of wires got crossed or the wrong buttons were pushed. Like I say, no offense, but that's the way it shapes up to me."

A surprised silence greeted Toland's rambling commentary. Egan wondered if the chief had his back up because the mayor had bypassed him in checking on his wife's supposed criminal record.

"I don't think anyone is suggesting a conspiracy," Conway said. "But there certainly seems to be enough here to justify a real investigation."

Del Thomas tugged furiously at one end of his mustache. "It's an internal RDC problem," he said, struggling to control his anger. "We'll investigate the computer system ourselves. We're the only ones who *can* do it."

"That's not good enough." Conway's gaze was a cool challenge, and there was no mistaking the intimidating authority in his tone. "No offense, as our police chief says, but we can't sit around and wait while you go through the system looking for a hardware or software problem that may not exist. Egan tells me he's already started a personnel investigation. I want that to go ahead as quickly as possible." A raised palm warded off Thomas's protest. "I'm not accusing anyone at the Data Center of anything—yet. But there doesn't seem to be much doubt that someone working with the computer system, someone who has access to it and a knowledge of how the system works, would be the most likely candidate to be playing tricks with the system. Now what else can we do?" He looked suddenly at MacAdam. "What are you doing at the RDC?"

MacAdam hesitated, cleared his throat, glanced at Thomas, who nodded. A loyal man, Egan thought—or just a cautious one.

He would say what Thomas wanted him to say and, unless something jumped up and bit him, he would find what Thomas wanted him to find. MacAdam said, "We're going through each of these programs where there's been a problem. Unfortunately, we can't shut the whole system down, but we can look at individual files and programs. You have to understand something about this system, Mr. Mayor. Logging every activity that takes place in a system as big as this one is complex and, well, expensive. It takes time and it requires memory space. So what we've had in the past has been selective logging. We've used what we call measurement logs, for instance, that tell us when there's any significant departure from normal activity."

"Spot checking," Conway suggested.

"Well, yes, you could call it that. But what we're doing now is complete logging of every transaction that takes place, and of every access by every user. We don't think there is any so-called intruder, but we're not simply blinding ourselves to the possibility. We're logging every mismatch of user or terminal identification, every mistake in the use of passwords or lockwords, every unauthorized request for data or processing. Most of those are user errors, understand. They don't mean someone is looking for a way to penetrate the system. But at least we'll have a record we can trace down in every case."

"What you're saying is, even if there has been penetration of the computer system before this, it couldn't happen now?"

"Not without our knowing it. Unless, of course . . ."

"Unless what?" Conway snapped.

"Well . . . unless the operating system itself has been penetrated."

There was a long pause. Then Conway said slowly, "Is that possible?"

Del Thomas intervened. "Of course it's possible," he said testily. "If you have a vivid imagination, almost anything is possible."

"That fire last night wasn't imaginary," Conway said coldly. "Let me ask something else. If the operating system *has* been penetrated, is there anything at all we can do to shut the Intruder off?"

Thomas hesitated, seemingly reluctant to answer. Finally he said, "We have a fresh, verified copy of the operating system we keep as a backup. It's kept under double lock—no one person can open the safe—so there's no way it could have been tampered

with. We can't afford to shut down the system for long—damn it, Conway, you know that!—but we might be able to shut down long enough to load the new copy of the OS. We'd lock out all the terminals and peripheral equipment, then reconnect them one by one after they're checked out."

"Del, that's perfect!" Conway exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me this before? How long would it take?" he went on eagerly. "When could you do it?"

"It's going to be expensive," Thomas protested.

"Never mind that—I'll take the responsibility. The city's budget is going to be a lot worse off if we don't stop these incidents. So what kind of a time frame are we looking at? I know there'll be complaints, but how bad will it be?"

Del Thomas appeared unhappy, but there was nothing he could do but go along. He glared at MacAdam, as if blaming him for bringing up the worst case possibility of a compromised operating system. At last he said, "We can work tonight, loading the fresh system. And this is a three-day holiday weekend coming up, so traffic will be light. We should be able to start reconnecting the terminals and peripherals tomorrow. If we don't run into too many problems, we might be able to be back in full operation by Monday."

Conway grinned, more relaxed than he had been since the meeting began. "Do it, Del. Get onto it right away. If there is an intruder, and he tries anything else, he'll be in for a surprise!"

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Like any good public relations man, Kenny Nance was known for having his ear to the ground. He was sensitive to the nuances of public moods, alert to the stray remark, the idle rumor, the whispered confidence. That Thursday morning, following the mayor's emergency meeting, Nance sensed for the first time that a general feeling of uneasiness was beginning to surface in Hollister.

After the meeting broke up Nance went out for breakfast, feeling guilty as he did so. He was supposed to be on a diet. His authorized breakfast consisted of grapefruit, a thin slice of wheat toast and coffee. But he had eaten that at six o'clock—up early in order to be downtown before seven—and by nine he was starving. He compromised by ordering a short stack instead of the full order of pancakes, telling himself that, the way things were going for Hollister, he would either work it off or worry it off.

He lit a cigarette while he waited for his order, thus compounding his guilt. His consciousness filtered the stray coffee shop talk.

A man talking about the high school fire sounded excited. Two buildings had been gutted, he said, because the fire engines had gone racing off to hell-and-gone on the wrong side of town. Some-

one else claimed to have heard that the police showed up too late to do anything about that accident at the foot of Hill Street Tuesday night because police department computers gave them the wrong location. A waitress, pouring coffee refills along the counter, said that a lot of funny things had been happening around town lately. One of the counter regulars declared that there were too many computers around; the machines were taking over everything. His companion insisted the weather was to blame for strange happenings. He had heard there was a new ice age already on the way, and this winter was a good example. It was making everyone a little uptight from being cooped up so much. "It's what they used to call cabin fever in the old days. You start imagining things."

Kenny Nance was thoughtful on his way back to the office. In the elevator at City Hall he heard a stranger speculating about computer failures at the Data Center. A young woman carrying a paperback historical romance said she had seen a movie in which the girl was attacked by a computer that fell for her. Everyone on the elevator laughed.

Nance's phone was busy all morning, his office crowded with reporters. Nance fielded their questions patiently. Most of them circled around the heart of the matter, as if even the press was uneasy, afraid of the answers it sought. Had there been any other failures with the fire department's response system? None that Nance knew of. What about the accident on Hill Street? That was a computerized traffic program foul-up, right? There had been a temporary shutdown of the automated system, Nance said, but the signals were functioning, exactly as they always had before the computer-controlled program went into effect. Had Nance heard about people receiving tax notices meant for others? No, he said emphatically. He was sure it had not happened. (Not yet, he thought.) What about that riot at the university? Was it true the students had broken into the computer center? No, it wasn't true. The trouble had been in the registration hall in another building. Had the mayor heard anything from the Sanji representatives? Had the Japanese raised questions about the city's computer problems? Nothing had been heard from them, Nance said. Mayor Conway was optimistic that Hollister would be selected for the Sanji plant site.

The reporters were skeptical. The feeling of malaise was pervasive.

At lunch James Conway showed no surprise over the spreading rumors about the Data Center's problems. "It's the mystique of the computer. There was a story recently about an Englishman who stole some computer files and tried to sell them back to the company he stole from. He wanted a half million, I think it was. If that case had involved ordinary files, it would have been a local scandal. As it was, it hit all the wire services."

"We're lucky what's been happening here hasn't hit the headlines," Nance said. "But it's coming. Today's *Times* concentrates on the arson angle at the school. But the media people sniff something more. They just haven't asked all the right questions in the right places yet. I think Herb Greenberg knows we're in trouble, but he's the one typewriter jockey in town who won't go off half-cocked, trying to spice up the news at eleven." Nance paused. "He's also the only one who asked me what that meeting was about this morning."

"He gets up early." Conway turned reflective. "We've got a strange thing going with computers. Sort of a love-hate relationship. There's an affinity, a sense of this brain being related to our own. But that means there's also rivalry. A feeling of being threatened. Like all those fears about computers taking away our jobs. We're all aware that a lot of what we do computerized machinery can do better."

"It's already happening in the newspaper business."

"I know. But the point is that we have to learn to understand and get along with computers—with the whole new technology—because that's what the future is, Kenny. We can't change it by running the wagons into a circle. We need that technology to cope with today's world, and tomorrow's even more. So the answer isn't to fight it but to learn to use it. That's what I've been trying to do here in Hollister." Conway paused. "You know there are people who believe we're going to destroy ourselves with our own technology, but there are others—people just as brilliant—who say we're going to get along with the machines by becoming more like machines ourselves."

"I can't say I like that idea."

Conway smiled. "There are other men in this world right now who are working to build machines that will educate themselves and will even have their own children. Think about that, Kenny! Sure, it's scary, but it doesn't have to be. It can be stunning, marvelous, mind-bending!" He sobered abruptly. "It's when the

machines start to mess us around that it gets to be panic time. There was a man in prison not long ago who committed suicide because of a computer error regarding his parole status. That's the kind of thing I'm afraid of, Kenny. Overreaction. Panic because we're dealing with something we don't fully comprehend. That's what we've got to head off." Conway fell silent again, signaled the waitress for a coffee refill, waited until she left before he glanced again at Nance. "What did you think about what Thomas and MacAdam said? Do you believe they've got this Intruder stopped?"

"I think *they* believe it."

"I hope they're right. I hate to think of that son-of-a-bitch sitting in some coffee shop somewhere, right now, figuring out what the hell he's going to do to us next."

The call from Karen Anderson of Channel 7 came shortly after three o'clock. She had received a tip and wanted to know if the mayor cared to comment.

"What kind of tip?" Kenny Nance asked.

"Well . . . I don't want anyone else to get this . . ."

"You'll have to do better than that. You know I'm not giving away your trade secrets, not if they're legitimate."

"You're sweet, Kenny."

"Sure I am." Karen Anderson was a woman of whom another TV reporter had told Nance, "I'd hate to tangle with her in a dark alley, but she's got a great pair of knockers." When she had to put up with that kind of crap on the job, Nance thought, you had to overlook a little belligerence. "What is it, Karen?"

She sighed, giving in reluctantly. "If you want the truth, I received a copy of James Conway's arrest record."

"Oh no!"

"Can I quote you?"

Nance began an automatic denial that any such record existed. Habitual caution stopped him. Could he be certain that this was another fake, like Toni Conway's record? "What's it about, honey?" he growled, making the question a joke. "Moral turpitude?"

Karen Anderson laughed. "You have a dirty mind, Kenny. I bet you know all about it anyway. Do I get a statement from hizzoner? On the air if he wants it."

"Why don't you let me ask him? I'll get back to you."

"It's getting late for tonight's six o'clock news," Anderson pointed out, politeness veiling the threat.

"I said I'd get back to you."

"Okay, Kenny. Just ask him if . . . Youngstown means anything to him."

Nance waited until Conway was free and went into his office. Conway looked up from his desk and said, "What is it this time, Kenny?"

"You know?"

"I can see it in your face."

"You won't believe this, but . . . Anderson at Channel 7 says she got a copy of another arrest record. Yours."

Conway stared at him. "Did she say what it was about?"

Nance shook his head. "It's not rape or murder, or she wouldn't even have asked. She's offered to give you a chance to comment on camera . . . and she mentioned Youngstown. Shall I tell her you're tied up?"

To Kenny Nance's surprise, Conway grinned. "Youngstown! That has to be the real thing! Hell yes, Kenny, set it up. Tell her I'll be there at the studio. We'll do it live."

"Live?" Nance almost shouted.

"In living color. Don't worry, Kenny—this is just what we need. If Thomas can get that computer system cleaned up, and I can shut off some of this hysteria, we can stop this whole business cold!"

Herb Greenberg was writing the third in a four-part series on the energy crisis. In the third article he had shifted from a discussion of national problems to the impact of a fuel shortage on Hollister. The subject lacked the visceral quality of, say, a series on New York's Son of Sam, and Greenberg was aware that the moment the breezes whispered of spring his warnings would quickly be forgotten. Still, the crisis was real, and it needed to be discussed.

Hollister's other crisis, he thought, was still only a rumor, a spreading contagion of doubt and uncertainty.

"Greenberg?"

The journalist looked up from his typewriter, irritated at the distraction. "What now?"

"A lady out front to see you." The copy boy grinned. "She could be one of 'Charlie's Angels.' I mean, dream stuff."

Greenberg sighed. As he shut off the Olympia and trudged out of the city room he wondered how long it had been since he stopped getting excited over the prospect of a beautiful woman asking to see him.

She was waiting in the reception area by the elevators. Greenberg recognized her instantly. "Mrs. Conway!"

"You're Mr. Greenberg?"

"That's right. What can I do for you?" Her photographs didn't do her justice, he thought. The impact of a truly beautiful woman, like that of a charismatic man, was much stronger in the flesh.

"My husband says you can be trusted."

Greenberg smiled. "That's nice to hear, but it's not always a good sign when a politician praises a reporter. What is it you wanted to see me about?"

She glanced around the reception room. She was nervous, he suspected, although the general impression of elegant poise made nervousness seem alien, an affliction of lesser creatures. She had not been in too much of a hurry to see him to fail to select the right shoes to match her fawn-colored Gucci handbag. "Is there some place where we can talk?"

"Private, you mean?"

She was relieved. "Yes."

"I don't have my own office, but there's nobody around right now. We can go back to my desk. You'd be surprised how lonely it can be there."

Back at his desk he swung slowly in his swivel chair while Toni Conway perched gracefully on the edge of the wooden chair he had pulled up for her. "What is it, Mrs. Conway?" he asked gently.

"I don't know where to begin..."

"You know what they say—at the beginning."

Her eyes met his, searching. Seemingly satisfied, she did not hedge. "I'd like to see that arrest record that was sent to you—the one that was supposed to be about me."

"Well, I don't know..." Reggie, the copy boy, was hanging around, ogling the visitor. Greenberg waved him away. "The mayor told you about it?"

"Yes. But he... he was so angry about it that he destroyed the copy you gave him. He never showed it to me, and he couldn't remember all the details."

"Maybe that's best, Mrs. Conway. We know it was a mistake. Something like that is better if it's left buried."

She smiled. "Wouldn't you be curious, Mr. Greenberg, if something like that was said about you? Even if it were proved false?"

"I suppose I would."

"I'm curious, too. Everyone else seems to know what was in that record." Her tone was light, amused. "Since I was the sup-

posed subject, I think I have more right to see it than anyone."

"I wouldn't want Mr. Conway to think—"

"Oh, I told him I was going to ask you about it. Jim thought you might have destroyed your copy, too, once it was proved in error. Did you, Mr. Greenberg?"

He hesitated an instant too long, and he saw that she knew it. She was quick, Cool and quick, he thought; as the feminists were saying these days, not just another pretty face. But she was not as casual about her request as she pretended. Her fingers were too busy, plucking off her gloves finger by finger, smoothing the fine leather absently. Greenberg felt himself on the spot, and he was troubled.

"You still have it," she said. It was not a question.

"Yes, but . . ."

"It's important to me, Mr. Greenberg. I can't tell you why, except that . . . if I'm going to have to defend myself against such accusations, I need to know what was said."

"You don't have to defend yourself, Mrs. Conway. Nobody believed that report."

"Then there's no harm in my seeing it, is there?"

He didn't like it. He wished that she hadn't come to him, or that the mayor himself had asked for a copy after destroying his own. He wished that he could have told her honestly that he no longer had the report, and he cursed his habit of saving everything that even remotely resembled a story. But he had a strong sense of fairness, and he could not argue with her claim that she had a right to know what she had been accused of, as much right as anyone accused in a court of law.

"I wish I didn't have it any more," he said slowly. "And I'm going to get rid of it."

"But you'll let me read it first?"

Reluctantly Greenberg nodded. He knew exactly where the envelope was, in a folder at the very back of his file drawer, well out of the way of any casual prying. He retrieved it, extracted the photocopy of the computer printout from the envelope and handed it to Toni Conway without comment.

She was also silent as she read the report. He watched her eyes shift with each line, saw the slight widening of the eyes as she reacted to what she read. But that was the only visible reaction. She had spent too many hours before the cameras, he supposed, hiding her own emotions behind those she had to feign.

Quietly she folded the sheet of paper and stared down at it for a moment. "May I have this, Mr. Greenberg?"

"Let me get rid of it, Mrs. Conway."

She did not protest. When she handed it back to him he thought her fingers trembled slightly, but then she was smiling at him, her eyes amused. "Not a pretty picture, is it?"

"No, ma'am."

She stood. "Thank you, Mr. Greenberg. It . . . it was important to me, as I said."

"I hope I didn't do the wrong thing." He felt awkward as he faced her. She was *too* cool, he thought. She should have shown some anger.

"You didn't do anything wrong. You were very kind and . . . fair." She had found his weakness unerringly. "No, please, I can find my way out. And . . . thank you again."

Then she was gone, moving quickly along the aisle toward the end of the long city room, followed by every pair of eyes remaining at this quiet dinner hour. Greenberg suddenly doubted that James Conway knew she had intended to ask him about the report. In showing it to her, he wondered what he had done.

It was hot in the small studio, but James Conway seemed cool, smiling easily as Karen Anderson spoke. Her tone was sharp and skeptical, the sound of a tough reporter who would not be put off. The post-Watergate sound had become a new badge of the press. "You're familiar with this transcript I'm holding, Mr. Mayor? It's an arrest record."

"I think so."

"You don't seem surprised. I take it that means there is no question about its authenticity?"

"Why don't you read it?" Conway suggested. "So your audience will know what we're talking about."

If she was surprised, she was not thrown off stride. She found the right camera instantly and looked directly into it, establishing eye contact with her viewers and a sense of immediacy. She was able to read the report on a scanner behind the cameras without seeming to break that contact. "SUBJECT: JAMES GARFIELD CONWAY / ARRESTED DISORDERLY CONDUCT / SENTENCED 3 MONTHS YOUNGSTOWN COUNTY JAIL / SENTENCE SUSPENDED / PLACED ON PROBATION." She glanced at Conway. "Would you like to comment, Your Honor?"

"I would, yes. As long as this has come up, I think the people certainly have a right to the whole story. I think this is a good time to say something about criminal justice files, especially those that are retained in data banks. And what I'm about to say applies to any criminal data bank, in our own state as well as others and even the national record systems, like the FBI's National Crime Information Center. An arrest record always goes on file. What does not always get into that file is the aftermath. Not all persons arrested for a crime are guilty of that crime, as you know, Karen."

"But you were found guilty, isn't that correct?"

"Of what?"

"Disorderly conduct," she snapped, thinking that he was being too smug about the whole thing.

"I was arrested during a civil rights demonstration," Conway said, emulating the reporter by looking directly into the camera. "Along with about two dozen other students. That was during a turbulent period. The charge was disorderly conduct because the authorities who made the mass arrests had nothing else to use as a label. That's one of the points I'd like to make about criminal records: It is absolutely essential that they be complete. Just to say that a person was arrested for a crime is not enough. We need to be very careful about what is put into any criminal record and what is missing. Otherwise we risk making our record systems records of injustice, not justice. I believe it's also vital that no arrest record remain in any such file when the supposed criminal is found innocent. Several proposals along this line have been introduced in Congress in recent years, and I support the principle absolutely—not just because of the record you've quoted, but because it is manifestly unjust to brand anyone with the stigma of a criminal record when that person has been found innocent."

"But your record doesn't fall into that group," Karen Anderson pointed out. She was eyeing the mayor warily now. He had been too eager for this interview.

"My conviction was reversed on appeal, along with those of the other demonstrators. The appeals court found that Youngstown authorities had overreacted to a lawful demonstration—that, in fact, our constitutional right to free speech guaranteed under the First Amendment had been violated. So you see, that criminal record is true as far as it goes, and ultimately completely false. It shows only the arrest and conviction, and says nothing about the later appeal and reversal. That is unfortunately true of a great

many criminal history files." Conway paused. Then came his sudden, boyish smile. "Under the circumstances, I can hardly be accused of a Watergate-style cover-up. Given the demographics of Hollister's voters, especially the large numbers of young voters at the university, I imagine that any publication of this incident would have won me more votes than it would have cost. For that reason, I appreciate this opportunity to set the record straight once and for all, so that we can all get on with the very real problems that face us here in Hollister."

The anchorwoman's gaze was chilly, but she matched Conway's smile, picked up on his last words, and asked, "What problems in particular, Mayor Conway? In one minute."

"This winter, and the fuel shortage, have been a very severe strain on our city—on each of us as private citizens as well as on business and government. And there have been rumors and stories about the city's problems—problems recently with the Regional Data Center, for instance. And since I've taken time this evening to point out at least one of the problems that can arise from huge government data files, I would like to take just another moment to remind your viewers that, on balance, such systems work for us, not against us. They make it possible for our government agencies, like law enforcement as an example, to function more efficiently at lower cost. Errors do occur. There are holes in the data systems that should be closed, procedures that need to be examined and watched very critically. But in the end we need this new technology. This is a unique period in our history, when we are beginning to recognize the limitations of our environment and our social structures. But that does not mean it's a time for fear or anxiety. We *can* solve our problems, and the ingenuity of our best minds, our finest scientists and engineers, is an enormous asset, not a liability." Abruptly Conway broke off. His grin was almost sheepish. "I didn't mean to give a speech, Karen, but you know politicians."

"Thank you, Your Honor." Karen Anderson's smile was for her viewers now, and it was warmer. "And now . . . a station break. We'll be back with more news after these messages."

As Conway started to leave, Karen Anderson said, "You set me up for that."

"I wanted to make a point because I think it's important. Besides," he added with a smile, "you still got your scoop."

When the mayor joined Kenny Nance, Nance squeezed his arm and chuckled. "You son-of-a-bitch! Why didn't you tell me?"

"You'd have told me not to do it."

"I probably would have at that." For an instant Nance looked worried. "She won't forget it." Then he began to chuckle again, shaking his head. "You'll pay, one way or another, but by God I think it was worth it!"

"I wasn't just showboating, Kenny. I don't pretend our situation isn't serious. I was able to talk myself out of this situation, just by luck. But that doesn't explain where the copy of my arrest record came from and how it got to Anderson." Conway was no longer smiling. "All I'm doing is buying some time, Kenny. And I still wonder how much of it we have left. This thing isn't over, in spite of what Del Thomas and his assistant said this morning. What I tried to do tonight was to . . . to defuse one incident. If I could make one of them go away, maybe the others won't look like it's time for Panicsville. But we're getting closer to that, Kenny—too damned close."

Conway called home from the studio but, surprisingly, there was no answer. The phone had also gone unanswered when he telephoned before the interview.

When he arrived home a half hour later the garage was empty. Conway drove only the city-owned compact; Toni used their own small station wagon, and it was gone.

The house was also empty, silent. Puzzled, he checked the kitchen, thinking that she might have run out to the store. But there was no evidence of meal preparations. In itself that was not unusual, since his hours were so erratic that Toni often waited until she heard from him, or until he actually arrived, before starting to cook a meal. But where was she?

He found the note their upstairs bedroom, propped up on the dresser before their wedding photograph. The note read:

Dearest Jim,

I'm sorry to do this like this, but I don't know any other way. You see, I went to see Mr. Greenberg and he showed me a copy of that sick report that was supposed to be about me. Don't blame him—I told him you said it was all right.

Now I understand why you've been so distant. I thought maybe I had bad breath or psoriasis or something and you

wouldn't tell me. Now I see that you had a problem, believing all those things about me. This past weekend you got over it, sort of, and I appreciate it, but you didn't really come on like gangbusters either, so I guess you were still a little turned off.

So you see, I've got to think this out by myself. I can't do it here. I wish you could have asked me straight out, but like you say, wishes don't build bridges.

Please don't try to find me or worry about me. I suppose that's silly to say, because you will worry, won't you? But I'm all right, I really am. I just have to work this out by myself, to see where we are.

Love,
Toni

The tone of the note, almost flippant, did not conceal the hurt behind the words.

Conway sat on the edge of the bed, bleakly observing the signs of her hasty departure: the open drawers of the dresser, the slacks suit which had slipped from its hanger to the floor of the closet and was left where it had fallen. That wasn't like her. She had a compulsive thing about caring for her clothes, a carryover from her modeling days. The crumpled suit was a mark of her anguish.

He felt the bite of answering pain. The emptiness of the house enveloped him like something physical, not merely an absence but a change in the very atmosphere.

How could he have believed that filth about her even for a moment?

He wondered where she was now. In some lousy motel room? He rose, answering the impulse to pursue her. She couldn't be hard to find.

But that was not what she wanted. Or needed. He was thinking of himself again, *his* need. Hers was to be alone.

He could only wait. Wait and wonder when—or even if—she would be back.

25 FRI FEB 11 / 01:00 PM

Because Friday was the designated Lincoln's Birthday holiday, Jenny Tyson was at home when Rob Greiner called around one o'clock. "Did you know about it?" he demanded. "Did good old Michael brief you?"

"Brief me on what? What are you talking about, Rob?"

"Are you sure you didn't know about it?"

"How can I tell you whether I knew about something when you won't say what it is?"

He told her in blunt, angry terms. That morning, as he returned to his apartment after breakfast at a nearby pancake house, a police squad car had been parked outside. One officer was in the car. He followed Greiner into the building, where his partner was waiting in the hallway. "One in front and one behind," Greiner said sarcastically, "in case the desperado made a break for it." The officers had politely but firmly asked him to accompany them. "I wanted to know what in hell for. They wouldn't say—only that Police Chief John Storm-trooper Toland wanted to talk to me. I wasn't exactly arrested, understand. They didn't read me my rights or any crap like that. But they made it damned clear I was to go with them, one way or another."

Sharing his outrage, Jenny cried, "Why? Did they say why?"

"For questioning, right? I was wanted for questioning about what's been happening at the Data Center!"

Jenny's sympathy was diluted somewhat by disappointment. He had suspected *her*—and Michael Egan. She said, "Michael didn't have anything to do with this, Rob."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

Greiner was silent a moment, his anger blunted. "You sound sure of him."

"I'm sure of this much. If Michael Egan wanted to talk to you, he would have done it himself. He wouldn't have had the police do his dirty work any more than I would."

"I didn't really think you did."

"You said it," she commented. But she was familiar with Greiner's angers. The nearest object or person was always in danger of being caught in the line of fire. "I'm sorry it happened, Rob," she said truthfully. "I simply don't understand. Why would Chief Toland pick on you?"

"That's easy. He had to get my name from somebody—he's not smart enough to get it on his own. And there's one person who'd be quick to feed me to the pigs. One person who really might believe I'd rip off the system."

"Del Thomas," she said without thinking. Of course. Thomas had never forgiven Greiner for the way he told the director off when he was fired. Thomas had been arguing against the idea that the RDC was the object of a planned, systematic attack, but if something had finally changed his mind he was quite capable of suspecting Greiner—and of bypassing his own security chief to go directly to the police.

Ironically, there had been a honeymoon period when Del Thomas had actually seemed indulgent toward Greiner's maverick ways, even professing amused tolerance. When Thomas's attitude changed, Greiner had insisted that someone—he never said who—had sabotaged his standing with the RDC's director. Eventually, Greiner came to realize that the break had been inevitable. The problem was with Thomas himself.

"How bad was it?" she asked quietly. "I know how you must have felt, being pulled in like a . . . a criminal. But how did it go?"

"How do you think? It didn't go anywhere."

"But what happened? Toland couldn't arrest you or anything like that. He had to let you go."

"Yeah. He knew that and I knew it. So he just went through the motions of asking questions. I don't think he's really sold that there is an intruder. He thinks computers are always making mistakes." Greiner paused. "If I were the one who's been messing around with the RDC, Toland's the last one who could find it out. All he knows is how to lean on you. You're supposed to be so scared you'll start running off at the mouth. As soon as he started talking about computers, he *knew* he was in way over his head. I told him what he could do."

"Smart," Jenny said.

"I wasn't trying to be smart." He paused. "I knew it had to be Thomas feeding garbage to Toland, but I never really thought you were in on it. Although I'll admit I wasn't sure about your Michael."

"He's not *my* Michael. We just happen to agree on what's been happening at the Center, that's all."

"Yeah, sure. Listen, hon, if you don't know yet how your voice changes when you talk about him, don't expect me to tell you."

Startled, she felt an immediate impulse to deny what he was implying, dismayed that she could have been so obvious. Did Egan find her equally transparent? Or did it take someone on the outside, someone like Greiner who knew her well enough to catch unconscious vibrations? "I guess you just did," she said soberly. "Tell me, that is."

"Yeah, I did, didn't I?" Silence then, and she had a momentary feeling of being closer to Greiner than they had ever been. He had been able to look into a secret part of her, a place she had thought carefully hidden. "I don't know him—I don't even want to—but he's a lucky bastard."

"Rob, I want you to talk to Michael."

Greiner snorted. "We've got nothing to talk about. What do you want us to do—compare notes?"

"Don't be nasty."

"Okay, okay, I didn't mean that."

"I want you to talk to him about the computer system. You can help, Rob—I know you can!"

The silence that followed her plea lengthened until she started to repeat it. Then, his tone flat and final, he said, "After what Thomas pulled, I hope they never find out who's been screwing the system. If I knew who it was, I'd sent him a singing telegram."

"You don't mean that, Rob."

"Yeah, I mean it. If you get the chance, tell Thomas for me. And you can tell Michael, too. I hope the whole Data Center sinks, and I hope Thomas goes under with it."

Egan did not answer his home phone. When Jenny called the security office at the Data Center, the officer on duty, Adams, could not tell her where or how to reach him. He had been in his office that morning but had left before noon. "If he checks in, I'll give him a message, Mrs. Tyson. That's all I can do."

"Would you do that, please? Just . . . tell him I called."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll tell him."

It did not surprise her that Egan was working through the holiday. What surprised and unsettled her was how nervous she had been while dialing his number. What are you letting yourself in for? she thought shakily. One dinner date and a couple of coffee klatches, and it's butterfly time. You're not ready for this, remember? David might still be alive.

But she was not in love with David Tyson—that was over long before he went to Vietnam. Only the awful uncertainty about his survival had kept her tied to his memory and his name, wearing the bracelet on her wrist as if it were a modern version of a chastity belt, one that kept her free of involvement, free of risk.

That's what Limbo is supposed to be, she remembered. A pleasant enough place, except that there is no love there. And the souls who go there are lost forever.

26 FRI FEB '11 / 05:00 PM

"I thought you might be testing the model this afternoon." George Devoto said, his disappointment plain. "I mean, now that every thing's ready."

"No, George. The Data Center people disconnected all terminals last night."

"Disconnected?"

"It's a temporary thing." Linus Webster reminded himself that he had promised Jenny he would be circumspect about what was happening at the RDC. "Some kind of audit, I suppose. We'll be put back on line, of course, but it probably won't be before Monday."

"Yeah, well . . . I'd just like to see how the program works."

Linus Webster gave his young assistant a distracted smile. "Impatient, George? That's something you learn to guard against in this line of work. Don't worry about your program. I'll start challenging the model with real data Monday morning."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't sound so disappointed, George. Anything we could do today, we can do better Monday. We'll be receiving data on real problems from the power companies next week, and we will be able to observe a more valid pattern if we begin with the first day of a normal week."

George Devoto did not respond.

27 SAT FEB 12 / 03:00 PM

Halfway to the lake that Saturday afternoon Jennifer Tyson began to admit her serious misgivings to herself. But she was uncertain which was more responsible for her jittery feeling, the swift intensification of the storm or the prospect of finding Michael Egan at his cottage.

She had telephoned several times that morning without success. Finally she called the operator and learned that the line was down. During the night the combination of below-zero cold and strong winds had popped telephone lines all around Hollister and its environs. Disappointment sharpened her frustration. She had been unable to reach Egan all day Friday. He hadn't called. Obviously, she told herself, he hadn't got the message she left at the Data Center.

Of course, Egan might still be out of town. Doing what? Pursuing his investigations? Or . . . something more personal?

He wasn't married, but that didn't mean he was celibate. That would have startled her far more than the discovery that he was sleeping with a waitress over in Mt. Washington.

Get off it, she admonished herself scornfully. The important thing is you should talk to him as soon as possible. He would want to know what Del Thomas and the police chief were up to.

Her father had retreated to his den after lunch. Jenny found herself with time on her hands. Shopping done for the next week, washing and drying done, dishwasher full. The house did not need cleaning. Her father had had a cleaning woman come in every Thursday while he was living alone. When Jenny returned and found a job at the Data Center, she had agreed with Linus Webster's insistence that Ethel continue to come in once a week to do the heavy housework. While Jenny didn't believe this was necessary, she was uncertain how well she and her father would get along and how long she would be staying. Ethel was slow and careless about out-of-the-way corners, but she was honest and reliable about showing up each Thursday. That made her a prize.

Lake Terry was not all that far out of town, Jenny speculated. The threatened new storm had not yet materialized. In fact, the night's gusting winds had died down considerably, and the temperature on the thermometer just outside the kitchen door had climbed to five above.

If Egan weren't home, at least she would have had some fresh air, a pleasant drive. And if he was there . . .

If he was there, what? she asked herself now, fighting the wheel as a vicious gust of wind rocked the moving car. The snow lashed malevolently at the windshield. It was now coming down heavily, as if the storm had waited only long enough for her to get out on the road. And what was she going to say when she pulled up at Egan's cottage in the middle of a blizzard? Oh, hi, Michael. I was just out for a drive and thought I'd stop by.

She ought to turn back. The impulse to come out in the first place had been impulsive. With the storm moving in so suddenly, it now looked foolhardy.

But then the side road leading to the lake appeared on her left, the sign almost completely obscured by the driving snow. After an instant's hesitation she found herself turning onto the road and driving toward the lake as if she had no will of her own.

She began to hope that Egan was away, the cottage empty. But the prospect of the drive back to town offered no comfort. Her windshield wipers and defroster were struggling to keep ice and snow off the glass. Visibility was down to a few yards.

Out of the white gloom a small dark house appeared, half-hidden by trees, then another. Through a rent in the snow curtain the flat, frozen expanse of the lake was visible for an instant, then gone as quickly as the snap of a shutter.

More nervous than ever, she drove at a cautious crawl, wondering how in the world she was going to manage to turn around and get safely back to the highway.

Number 14 appeared, a small sign on a mailbox beside the road. She could not read the name on the box, but it was probably that of the cottage's owners, not Egan. She turned into a gravel driveway and pulled up.

The garage door was closed. She could not see if his car was there.

The butterflies were beating their soft wings in her stomach again. She wanted to flee. Then she saw him—first a face at a window, then a figure bounding down the steps toward her. Opening the car door, he reached in to switch off the ignition. "You've got to be crazy coming out in this," he exclaimed, "but I'm glad you did!"

In that moment her nervousness vanished.

The Franklin stove glowed cheerfully. Jenny Tyson felt pleasantly baked by its warmth. "It came on so suddenly," she explained for the third or fourth time. "It's unbelievable. There must be three or four inches of snow since I got here."

"Looks like you're stuck for a while," Egan said with a grin. "I'm happy to report there are two steaks in the fridge."

"Oh, no—"

"Oh, yes," he said firmly. "You're not going back out in that storm—not until it stops. How about more wine?"

"Well . . ." It was a good white California wine, not too sweet. She gave in, holding out her glass. Her glowing smile contradicted the momentary hesitation. There was no use pretending that she was unhappy with the turn of events.

She had told Egan about Greiner's angry phone call. Then he had surprised her by revealing that he hoped to enlist Greiner's help directly—and that he had had Greiner's background cleared through the regional FBI office. "That's where I was yesterday," Egan said. "Talking to an old buddy over there."

"Is the FBI going to become involved in investigating the Intruder?"

He shook his head. "Not directly, but they're interested. As of now we can't prove there's been any violation of federal law that would permit the Bureau to come in officially. But they'll cooperate insofar as they can, and if something *does* happen that

makes it a federal case . . ." Egan paused, not wanting to invite more disaster. "Anyway, I guess I'd better give Greiner until Monday to cool off before I try to talk to him."

Jenny wasn't very sanguine about the chances of getting Greiner to cooperate, but she agreed that it was worth a try.

When Egan had refilled her glass she picked up on their conversation about the FBI. He had commented on how it felt to be back in the familiar Bureau setting. "Did you feel like you'd want to be back there?"

"No—that's over."

"I don't know," she mused. "You being with the FBI so long, it seems to me like a priest or clergyman tending the flock, preaching the Gospel, when he doesn't even believe in God."

Egan's reaction was quick. "Spoken like a true media follower."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She bridled, resentment reacting to his resentment. "That I don't know what I'm talking about?"

He shrugged. "How much do you really know about the Bureau? I mean, besides Efrem Zimbalist on TV? That show had about as much to do with being an FBI man as Karl Malden or Telly Savalas have to do with cops. Television's version of the FBI was a comic strip, but it was good PR. That's why the Old Man loved it. But the current media witch hunt—this exaggerated cynicism about everyone and every organization in the government—is just as silly, just as unrealistic."

"I don't think I appreciate being called both a media follower and silly."

"I don't really mean you," he apologized with a rueful grin. "I guess I'm touchy on that subject. The funny thing is, I think most of the reporters and commentators who have jumped on this anti-FBI and anti-CIA bandwagon know better. They're riding a good horse, that's all."

"You have to admit your Bureau has pulled some dubious stunts we're only learning about lately."

His grin broadened. "You lured me into that trap once. Not twice."

She regarded him with a tolerant smile, amused by the discovery that it was so easy to get a rise out of him. We all have our buttons, she thought, and one of his was labeled "FBI." She said, "It really bothers you, doesn't it? All the criticism."

"I was part of the Bureau for ten years. I wouldn't have stayed

that long if I didn't believe in what we were trying to do."

"And what was that?"

He hesitated. "To . . . control the predators. At least to build a few fences around them."

"You know what you are, Michael Egan? You're a genuine, four-cornered square."

"So are you." He said it with a smile.

"Now you're just trying to get even."

"No. I simply get a different reading on what a square is. Most of this country is square, and that includes much of what's good about it. No, don't laugh yet. It's the square who join the FBI, you're right about that. They also join the army when the country's at war. A lot of them go to church on Sunday, and most of them vote in the elections. A good share of those who laugh at square don't bother to vote, and they sure as hell wouldn't do anything so stupid as to die for their country. Arlington Cemetery is full of squares."

"You said I was a square, and I wouldn't relish being in Arlington Cemetery."

"Nobody relishes it."

"Well . . . I wouldn't have fought in Vietnam."

"Vietnam was a problem for squares and non-squares," Egan agreed. "Although that wasn't so clear in the beginning. There weren't so many against it even in the mid-sixties, including most of those who now talk as if they were. But let's get back to you."

"Yes, let's."

"Squares have a respect for . . . tradition. The social contract. The agreement we make to respect each other's life, liberty, property. Respect for all the things that make society work—and it doesn't work with everyone doing his own thing without regard to others. Squares work for a living, and they know it's tough to work for a living. They may not like it, but they do the best they can with what's open to them. They usually won't be found at Esalen or in an est seminar or into any other group thrill—they probably can't afford it, anyway. And they don't have a shrink because they need the money for Jenny's braces. They might dream about being like O.J. or Kareem or Robert Redford, but when they realize it's a dream they don't jump off the bridge, because then who'd pay the rent and buy the groceries and keep up the deposits in the college fund for the kids? They know that real life involves some compromise and some pain, that people you love get sick and die. They also know you can't improve society by tearing the

whole structure down and starting all over, throwing out everything we've learned over thousands of years of trying. There's a tribal memory that tells them how hard it was to get this far."

"I still don't recognize me. Only . . . partly."

"You respect people. You work for a living. You come home to stay with your father when he's getting old and you think he needs you. You worry about another old man you never even knew because you think it's possible that if you had done your job better he might still be alive. You care about what you do, giving it your best shot. Very square."

Jenny Tyson was silent, digesting this, resisting much of it. She thought of herself as liberal, and liberal didn't go with being square. But she *had* come home when her father was ill. She didn't believe in sponging off others. She couldn't accept Rob Greiner's argument that nobody owed anyone anything. Maybe the problem was semantic. "Square" meant too many things to mean anything.

"There's one thing you don't know about me, one thing that doesn't fit your definition."

"What's that?"

"I walked out on a man who was on his way to Vietnam. A true square—that realist you mentioned—would have stuck it out regardless, wouldn't she?"

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Then tell me something else about you. Where you came from, how you got here."

She smiled, then laughed outright at an errant thought. "You know, you're right about my growing up in a square box. Mt. Airy, Pennsylvania, was the place. That was before my father got a professorship at Purdue and we moved there. Believe me, I was the original pompom girl. I was runner-up for Homecoming Queen my senior year in high school. How's that for traditional values?"

"I would have voted you queen."

"Uh huh. Squares always vote. Let's see, what else fits? I loved the Beatles, but they were rebels. I loved music, really, and that included dancing. The only thing is I never could figure out why I could get dates for the dances and things easily enough, but I usually didn't get asked out a second time. I really believed everyone else in school was a virgin too. I finally heard what they called me, all those class studs. Jenny-tease." She paused, embarrassed.

"Why am I telling you all this?"

"I'm listening."

The humor faded from her eyes as she regarded him with something like skepticism. "That was the good part. I got married when I was a junior in college. My mother and father were both against it, but they were too nice or too flabbergasted with the younger generation to make a big fuss. They just looked sad at the wedding. We had one of those *in* weddings of the sixties. We read poetry to each other and my best friend played the guitar, and a priest David knew read our vows. He was a defrocked priest or something like that, a leader in the war protest demonstrations. Everyone wanted him to marry them, and we had to wait an extra three weeks just to have him." She was silent a moment, looking, Egan thought, much as her parents must have looked at the wedding, sad and somewhat bewildered. "I thought everything was going to be as beautiful as that day. I guess you're right. I really was a square."

"It didn't turn out that way?"

"You ask a lot of questions, don't you? Must be that good old FBI training."

"You don't have to answer them."

"No." She realized that she was doing exactly what she had said she didn't want to do, bringing the conversation back to herself and David.

Then she found herself talking—about the marriage that began to come apart and what that failure did to her. About David's enlistment in the Air Force—he was into anything that looked interesting or exciting, and he had a civilian pilot's license. About the quarreling and the separation before he went to Southeast Asia. About the two years that went by without any direct word from him, although her parents had one letter and some friends heard from him or about him occasionally. She did not go through with the planned divorce because it didn't seem right while he was fighting in a war on the other side of the world. And when he was reported missing in action, his plane down somewhere over Vietnam, she felt herself obligated to wait. And wait . . .

She wanted Michael Egan to understand, but she was also releasing something she had kept penned up for far too long. David Tyson was dead—she had known it for a long time—but the hurt of her life with him had not yet healed. It was a green wound.

"David looked so simple on the outside. I don't mean stupid. I mean that he just *had* to be what he seemed. He was handsome and clean-cut, and he had a smile like that actor, Tony Franciosa.

He'd go through a supermarket checkout and leave the poor checker all bedazzled, dropping her groceries. There were no visible bumps or edges. He was a scratch golfer and the best halfback on the football team and all the rest of it. His grades in college weren't good—he just scraped by—but no one took that seriously. It was as if we all knew he could do better if he really *wanted* to. When we got married I was the envy of every girl I knew." Dryly she added, "It didn't take them long to find out they hadn't really been left out. The door to the candy store was still open.

"What it took me a long time to learn was that David wasn't really simple at all. He was a whole complicated male *structure*. He was Jack Armstrong—and Neil Armstrong. If you were drowning, he'd be the first one to dive in to save you because that was part of his heroic image of himself. Besides, it would be physical. David was a very physical person." She studied Egan, a mischievous smile touching her lips. "Do you want to know about the physical side of things with David?"

"No."

"No . . . you wouldn't. But it's important. At least I think it is." She paused, uncomfortable but determined. "He thought I should be . . . grateful, you know? That was to be my role. He was conferring this . . . this gift to me, this present of himself, and what else could I feel but undying gratitude? He expected a kind of hero worship. He'd want to jump on me and hammer away without so much as saying hello, and I was never, *never* supposed to say, my God, David, wait, it *hurts*." She paused. "He really felt justified in having other women. They gave him something I didn't, he was happy to tell me when the big blowup came. They were grateful. And I'm not surprised. He was a beautiful man to look at, and for a lot of women that must be enough."

She got up from the sofa where she had been sitting, punched a throw pillow into shape and tossed it down. Crossing the room to the front windows, she stood looking out at the blind white landscape. Egan watched her in silence. He resisted the urge to go to her, to turn her around, to hold her and to murmur soothing inanities as one would comfort a distressed child. She was not a child, and she was not ready to be comforted.

Jenny glanced back at him over her shoulder. "You don't have a cigarette in the house, do you? I've been trying to quit, but . . . this is one of those times."

"Sorry. I only smoke the pipe."

"You haven't been smoking it."

He shrugged and smiled. "A lot of women don't like them. The smell, you know, and clouds of smoke. My dad used to have to go out on the porch in the evenings with his pipe."

"I like the smell of a pipe."

"I'll test that a little later."

"Does that mean I have to continue the saga?"

"You stopped because you were getting angry. You don't have to go on with it, but I think it's something you want to have said, once and for all."

She looked at him closely, surprised by his perception. "I suppose so." She had to grope back to find the thread. Ah yes, David's infidelities. Why had she got started on this true confession? Perversely, the question only triggered more unburdening. "The terrible thing was that for a long time I believed there was something wrong with *me*. David said I was frigid, so that meant I was. A cold woman. I hated that, but I was sure it must be true or I wouldn't feel the way I did whenever he wanted me. David said I was a ball-breaker, and I started to believe that too. David said I was stupid, and by then I was fairly certain that was true. He simply confirmed it." She stopped again, staring intently at Egan. *Am I putting you off, darling?* Startled, she wondered when was the last time she had thought of anyone as darling. Slowly, nervously, she said, "It took me a long time to stop believing in what David said I was, to start believing in my own perception of myself. I'm on nice solid ground now, Michael Egan. I'm not sure I want to try the swamp again."

"Better safe than sorry?"

"Something like that. Yes, that's right. Does that make me a coward?"

"No. But you can't stay in one place, Jenny. Sooner or later you have to find out if there's solid ground on the other side of the swamp."

"Oh, that's clever, Mr. Egan."

"I'm not trying to be. I think what I want to say is . . . we're both old enough to take our time, not to rush things. All you really have to do is take one step at a time."

She was silent, studying him gravely. And he realized that it was time to stop talking. She couldn't take that first step by herself.

He went to her and put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her close. For a long moment he looked into her eyes. Then he

kissed the lids, one by one. Touched her nose with the tip of his finger, traced the line of her chin and of her lips. They felt dry.

When he kissed her she was tense, her mouth tight. Then, quite suddenly, it opened eagerly to his and she pressed the whole length of her body against him. His hand marveled at the deep curve at the base of her spine, the rich swelling below.

When they broke apart she was breathless, her heart pounding. "I guess I was . . . clearing away a lot of debris," she murmured. "About David, I mean."

"I know." He reached for her again but she pulled away, smiling too brightly. "Didn't I hear you say something about a couple of steaks in the fridge?"

"Are you sure that's what you want?"

"Yes . . . please be patient with me, Michael. I need . . . time."

"It's all right," he said gently. "We've got all the time in the world."

The storm had passed as suddenly as it came, leaving a night that was unreal in its clear white silence. At her car Jenny Tyson felt the pull of reluctance, half wishing that the snow had never stopped. Gutless wonder, she thought scornfully. Make up your mind what you want. You can wait a lifetime for a nice convenient storm to relieve you of the need to make a decision.

Egan walked alongside the car, guiding her safely back onto the road. "You're sure you want to drive on these roads?"

"Don't worry, I'm used to snow. And I'll be careful."

"You're a careful woman, Jenny Tyson."

"Not always," she said quickly. She felt as if she wanted to make that a pledge. *Cross my heart, darling. I'm not really a cold woman.*

Egan leaned in through the open window and kissed her—a soft, warm, undemanding kiss that stirred her deeply. When he drew back she regarded him gravely. Her heart was pounding again. What did it know that she didn't know?

"I'll stock up the refrigerator if you'll promise to come again," Egan said.

"Count on it." Then Jenny smiled. "But next time I do the cooking."

28 SUN FEB 13 / 08:00 PM

James Conway was on and off the phone that Sunday, keeping in touch with the city's maintenance department to make sure that the streets were cleared for the beginning of the work week. One of the snow plows had broken down, and he made more calls before he managed to talk an extra plow out of the mayor of neighboring Mt. Washington.

When there were no phone calls to make or answer, nothing he could do to keep busy, he faced the empty silence of his home.

Once in a while he was angry with Toni—damn it, he hadn't done anything to justify her walking out—but he could not sustain the anger. Most of the time he confronted something completely unfamiliar to him: a sense of failure and a growing fear.

That night the staccato clatter of a snow plow could be heard on the Hollister University campus, as the maintenance crew worked in darkness to clear all the walks for the opening day of classes Monday morning. Geroge Devoto listened nervously to the coughing engine in the distance, wondering if it might come back this way.

The girl was hurrying along the path at the front of the Chemistry Building, heading toward the mall, keeping to the freshly cleared walkways that would take her to the dormitories. She was

nervous about being out alone at night, and she was hurrying.

He stepped in front of her at the corner of the building. Her eyes widened. He could see little else. She had a scarf wrapped loosely around her neck so that it looped over the lower half of her face for protection against the cold. She could see no more of him; his ski mask covered most of his face, with holes only for mouth and eyes.

He raised his hand in casual greeting and stepped toward her. It was a mistake. Because of the knitted mask she could not see his smile.

The girl screamed.

He tried to reach her then to clap a hand over her mouth, but she stumbled back. "No—stay away from me!" Her hand clutched at her throat, a ridiculous gesture straight out of melodrama. "Please . . . oh my God, Help!"

Then she found the whistle dangling from a chain around her neck—the whistle Jack had given her when the campus rape scare started. It was Jack's apartment she was coming from—the rooms of John Perkins, her teacher in Victorian Lit. The hand fumbling at her throat under the scarf had not been a dramatic clutching after all.

The piercing whistle shivered along nerve endings, pulsed in his brain.

He turned and ran.

The shrill plea of the whistle pursued him. He cut to his left across an open area. The deep snow slowed his flight, but he had chosen his route by instinct. Security guards would respond quickly to the whistle, and he would be too conspicuous on the open paths. A patrol car would be on the road racing toward the mall. Foot patrols would be on the cleared walks. He went where the car could not follow him, where pursuing guards would be hampered by the snow as much as he was.

A rise cut him off from the science buildings, muted the thin scream of the girl's whistle. He ran down a slope, floundering in heavy drifts. His heart drummed wildly. His thighs were already heavy, legs dragging.

The whistle gave birth to a deeper cry—the patrol car's siren. Damn her—damn that whistle! If she was so scared, what was she doing out at night alone? She was asking for it!

He reached a narrow shoveled path and sobbed aloud with relief. Now he would leave no tracks to follow. He turned right along the walk toward the dorms.

Too late, he realized that he should not have run. He should have brazened it out. He could have dredged up a plausible reason for being where he was, and he had done nothing to the girl. He had simply panicked, routed by that whistle. It had blown reason clear out of his head.

The dorms were visible ahead. He slowed to a walk. A stitch of pain plucked at his side. He sucked in deep breaths. Cold air sliced into tortured lungs.

He heard a shout. "He's heading for the dorms! Cut him off!"

He stopped. The yell had come from the top of the slope ahead of him and off to his right. He looked around frantically. A big oak loomed over the path. He took the only gamble that seemed left to him. He jumped as far as he could from the walk into the shadow of the oak so that he would leave no damning tracks in the snow. Then he fell against the thick trunk, trembling.

From his patch of dark shadow he saw figures blundering across the top of the rise. His way to the dorms was blocked.

He had not wanted to park the van in his regular space. The lot was empty and the van would have stood out. He had parked it behind one of the men's dormitories because it was inconspicuous there, buffered by several other cars, even another van.

Now he could not reach it.

He was cut off.

But he was past the moment of panic. His mind raced. He pressed close to the thickness of the tree. It would not hide him for long in a careful search, but it gave him a moment to think.

Two new figures pushed through the drifts on the near side of the slope, heading straight toward him. They were not uniformed guards. They were students, but he had no doubt they were after him.

He did not move. Even his heart seemed to stop. He did not breathe. A puff of frosted breath would betray him.

The two students, young men breathing heavily from their run, reached the narrow path and ran past the oak tree. They did not even glance toward him.

When they were far enough away he stepped onto the path and turned back along his own tracks. The one place they wouldn't expect him was back by the science buildings. And his one possible refuge was there.

The slope seemed steeper going back, the snow deeper. He was laboring. The cold air made it hard to breathe. Snow had got inside his boots and his feet were cold, the toes like ice. Near the

crest of the rise he slipped, clawed wildly at the air and fell.

Somewhere far off there was another yell, its meaning indistinguishable. For a moment he was tempted to lie where he had fallen. He was exhausted. Not simply tired of this night's run but from all the years of yearning and angry frustration, rooted in his anxious failure with women. Damn them! They were all the same. They teased you, flaunted their sex, and then when you were ready to give them what they asked for they suddenly protested. Or screamed. Or, worst of all, laughed.

Rage drove him to his feet and through the drifts that dragged against his feet and legs like water. He stumbled onto a paved walk.

He had veered to his right as he came down the last slope. Now the Chemistry Building was off to his left. Another science building was directly ahead and he started toward it.

He heard the shouting again, closer, clearer. "Back this way! He turned back!"

And then, shrill, "There he is!"

He did not wait to look for them. He ran along the front of the dark old building, reached the far end and swung along the side. He had his glove off and the key ring in his hand when he reached the side entrance. He knew the feel of the right key by touch—he used it almost every day.

His pursuers were tumbling around a corner of the building as he slipped inside. He could not be sure whether or not they had seen him. Or whether they saw the door closing behind him. He didn't stop to find out.

He went up the stairs two and three at a time. Behind him he left a trail of wet tracks on the steps. By the time he reached the second floor the soles of his boots were drier, the marks of his footsteps quickly disappearing.

He ran on his toes along the corridor.

He was fumbling with another key in the lock of an office door when he heard them on the stairs behind him. Their voices were urgent, excited, their pounding steps menacing.

He slipped into the dark office and carefully shut the door behind him. The lock closed with a tiny snap. Then he stood motionless in the darkness, sweating under his heavy jacket and woolen shirt, his chest heaving, his legs trembling from their punishment. There was a great hammering in his chest, the drum of fear.

"Are you sure he came into this building?"

"I saw tracks on the stairs!"

"Well, there aren't any tracks here."

"That door's locked."

The office door behind which George Devoto stood shook as a hand rattled the knob. He waited helplessly, staring at the knob. He waited for the guard's key to enter the lock and turn, for the door to open.

Nothing happened. He started to breathe again. The student patrol would not have office keys.

A moment later another doorknob rattled, then another farther away. They were checking all the office and laboratory doors, every door along the corridor, to make certain that none had inadvertently been left unlocked, providing a hiding place for the fleeing rapist.

It did not occur to them that he might belong here in the Physics Building, that he carried a particular key to this particular office and laboratory.

After a while there was silence. He did not completely trust it. He didn't trust his legs any more to carry him out of the building, and he certainly didn't trust his luck any more.

He could outwait them. Wait until morning if he had to. Take no more reckless chances. Monday morning Dr. Webster would find him early at his desk. Waiting. It would not be easy, but he could do it.

He retreated from the office through another doorway into the main laboratory. He could not risk a light but he did not need one. In darkness he moved easily past familiar tables and desks, sinks and racks and cages.

He stopped, puzzled. He was near the lab's computer. His breathing was coming easier now, but there was a cramp seizing his left calf. He bent over, kneaded the hard muscle, wondering what it was that teased his senses.

He drifted closer to the computer. Enough light filtered from the windows for him to see that some copy had been printed out, a record of the last activity.

George Devoto frowned. He picked up the printout and peered at it closely in the dim light. He recognized the program for Linus Webster's power usage model. He had prepared it himself as his last task Friday afternoon.

But he had not run it through. There should have been no printout.

And something about the familiar pattern of the program puz-

zled him, something unfamiliar, elusive. It was the same, and yet . . .

He lifted his eyes from the sheet of paper. His nostrils flared as he detected what he had smelled earlier: cigarette smoke.

No one was allowed to smoke in the physics laboratory. Dr. Webster didn't allow it. No one on the staff would have dared to smoke here, even alone at night.

Someone else was here.

He heard something then, on the far side of the laboratory, faint sounds moving away from him. Moving toward the front office. He thought he saw a shadow in the doorway.

Light burst abruptly in the office. The outer door slammed open. Someone shouted urgently, "Here he is! In here! He's hiding in the lab!"

In seconds heavy steps pounded along the corridor. There were more shouts. A rush of activity in the office. George Devoto stood helpless, immobilized by shock and confusion. Who had been here in the lab? What was he doing here?

The laboratory lights bloomed, flourescent ribbons that bathed him in their full glare, a trembling figure still wearing his heavy coat, his wet boots, his ski mask. There was no escape. Devoto stared at the grim faces of the student patrol as they crowded into the lab.

Behind them in the outer office, a figure slipped into the corridor, his back visible for only an instant before he was gone.

A knot of students had already gathered outside the Physics Building. "Did you catch him?" one of them asked. The faces seemed more curious and excited than angry.

He nodded. They thought he was part of the patrol.

Unhurried now, he walked away from the building. Poor George, he thought without emotion. Poor, dumb, angry George. So angry, and yet so eager to share that anger with someone who gave him half a chance, so ready to let his shallow rage spill out if only someone would listen.

He had kept listening while George talked, encouraging him, even asking questions about his work in the physics lab, the computer he used, the project Professor Webster was working on. George told him everything. All he had to know.

And more. One night he had seen the blood on George's trousers when he returned to the apartment they had lately shared.

The next morning there was news of another coed attacked. George had been oddly relieved that someone knew. He had needed the catharsis of confession.

If only George had not picked tonight for another of his escapades! Or if, on this night of all nights, he had sought some other place to hide when he was pursued! Taking refuge in the physics laboratory, Devoto had almost discovered him. There in the lab by means of the copy he had made of George's key. Accessing the computer through use of George's identity number. Tampering with George's program. There had been nothing he could do but give the alarm...

At the edge of the campus he lingered. He had not had time to retrieve the program printout when he was interrupted at the computer by George Devoto's sudden arrival. Would he dare risk returning to the laboratory, even when the activity around the building ceased? No. Someone might still be there.

Would Dr. Webster question the printout in the morning? Would Webster detect the one small unnoticeable variation he had inserted in the sequence of instructions? Would the professor have reason to recheck the program before running it through the main frame computer at the Data Center?

The risk seemed minimal. Webster had found Devoto a reliable assistant. George had said that the physicist seldom checked on his work any more, as long as he stayed within the narrow limits assigned to him. It was this assurance that had emboldened him to act.

He had always planned to use a Trojan Horse if the opportunity could be found. He had needed access to a computer interfaced with the RDC. He had needed an innocuous piece of software, a frequently used program that would not be questioned. The routine program prepared for the series of challenges that would be made against Linus Webster's mathematical model of power usage seemed perfect. That program waited now in the minicomputer's memory bank, ready to run. He had simply replaced George Devoto's version with his own. They were identical except for one small change, a Trojan Horse whose trap door would open only when the program ran. And as soon as that happened, the secret instruction would self-destruct, erasing all evidence that it had ever existed.

He himself could not transfer the booby-trapped program to the RDC's main computer. George Devoto had not had that au-

thority. Only Webster could do it. When he did, the program would be activated at his level of access to the privilege mode, the highest level of access offered to any of the RDC's users. There the trap door would open, allowing him to penetrate the heart of the system at last.

He shivered, not with cold.

Monday. It would happen Monday. George Devoto had said that Webster would begin to run his tests then. It seemed unlikely that the shocking news awaiting him about the young assistant would delay his schedule.

Monday.

He had waited seven years. He could wait just one more day . . .

29 MON FEB 14 / 11:30 AM

Throughout Monday morning Linus Webster was receiving a flow of current data on energy usage from the Atomic Energy Commission, Consolidated Edison and various other public utilities participating in his research. His mathematical model had coped with all manner of hypothetical tests. Now it was time to challenge the model with real problems—a brownout in Lansing, Michigan; a bomb explosion knocking out a utility tower in the hills outside of Berkeley, California; an unexpected heat wave in Los Angeles; another blizzard sweeping down the eastern flank of the Rockies; and continuing freezing weather all across the Midwest and East—all occurring on the same morning and making their different demands on the nation's interdependent power system.

Locked in concentration on his project, the physicist was unaware of the excited discussion and ever wilder rumors that quickly

penetrated every other corner of the campus that morning—talk concerning Webster's young lab assistant, George Devoto.

Webster was aware only that Devoto had not shown up for work as scheduled. Considering his usual reliability and his eagerness on Friday to try out the test program, his absence was puzzling. Checking the small computer in its alcove in the lab, Webster discovered that Devoto had, in fact, verified the program in hard copy; a printout was there.

By 11:30, disgruntled, Webster had given up on his assistant for the day. At 11:33 A.M. he accessed the Regional Data Center's computer in privilege mode. The complex equations from which the physicist had constructed his model were already resident in their allotted memory space in the RDC's main computer. The system identified and cleared him, granting access at the requested level of privilege. Webster immediately activated the test program George Devoto had been working on.

As the accumulated information on energy consumption that morning began to flow from the laboratory's minicomputer to the main processor at the RDC, the test program went into its routine without a flaw.

Unnoticed, the Trojan Horse ran.

30 TUES FEB 15 / 11:00 AM

Tuesday was payday for all city employees, and Kenny Nance's check was fifty dollars short. He examined it several times in disbelief. No, he assured himself, his memory wasn't getting *that* bad. Grinning, he carried the check into James Conway's office. "Okay," he said, "I know we've got budget problems but this is too much. Why start with me?"

The expression on Conway's face stopped him. "It isn't only you, Kenny. It's every damned employee on the city payroll."

"You're kidding. No—you wouldn't kid about that."

Jerry Devine, the comptroller, burst into the office unannounced. The same disbelieving shock was in his eyes. "It's true," Devine stammered, jerking out each word as if it were a bad tooth. "It's everyone—right d-down the l-l-line. Every check is short."

"How much?"

"It's the s-same amount. Fifty dollars off each ch-check."

"How much all told?"

"Well . . . it'll c-come to—close t-to f-fifty thousand."

Conway punched through to his secretary, hitting the button hard enough to hurt his finger. "Tell the police chief I want to see him in my office. Then get me Del Thomas at the RDC. And tell them I mean *now*."

The pattern was clearer by Tuesday afternoon when Thomas arrived at the mayor's office, white-faced, his big soft body seemingly shrunk so that even his suit hung baggily. A dump had been taken of the computerized payroll program, which had run Monday night printing payroll checks that were delivered Tuesday morning. Buried in the program was an instruction directing the system to divert fifty dollars from each city employee's paycheck to accounts at three different local banks. Surprisingly, there had been no effort to hide the transfer of funds. The accounts had been opened recently in three names: Anderson, Benson and Cole.

"Maybe he figures on running through the whole alphabet before he's through," Conway said. He was not in a forgiving mood. "What about the money in those accounts?"

Thomas floundered through an embarrassed explanation. "It . . . it hasn't been touched. We . . . I've talked to the bank officials. They've called in the FBI, but . . . well, they're not sure a crime has actually been committed. Technically, that is. It appears the names on those accounts are false, but it's not a criminal offense to open a bank account under an assumed name. There's no crime until someone tries to abscond with the money. If we didn't know differently, of course, we . . . well, those incorrect deposits *could* simply be another computer error."

"But we *do* know differently," Conway said dryly. He let Thomas squirm through a long moment of silence. "You don't

have any idea how this instruction was put into the system? Or when?"

"No." The response was barely audible.

"Could it have happened *before* you shut down last Thursday? Before you put in your so-called clean operation?"

Thomas hesitated. "No. That is . . . there could be a hole in hardware, a design flaw we haven't found. But my people say no."

Conway frowned. "We get paid twice a month. Isn't the payroll being worked on all during the period between pay days? You don't leave it until the last night."

"With a computerized payroll system the basic information is already on file," Thomas explained. "It's true changes are being put in all the time. That's why the checks themselves aren't printed until the last night, so we can stay as current as possible on any changes, including overtime." He paused, avoiding Conway's unrelenting gaze. "After the new operating system was put in, we worked through the weekend checking out each individual program before it was reactivated. That includes the payroll program. This latest change could only have been made after that clearance."

"What you're saying is, since you shut down and started up again with a clean system, the Intruder has penetrated it again."

The RDC's director nodded reluctantly.

"Why were you able to find his instruction so easily?" Conway asked abruptly.

"I don't understand . . . oh. Yes, I see."

"Every other stunt he's pulled, you couldn't find out how he did it. But this one pops out of the machine the first time you ask. That tells us something, doesn't it?"

"I . . . I'm not sure." His self-confidence visibly shattered, Thomas was afraid to commit himself. There was no longer any pretense at denying the presence of an intruder.

"He *wanted* us to find it," Conway said. "He never intended to try to withdraw that money. The FBI can stake out those three banks until next Christmas, and it won't do any good. So what was he trying to tell us?"

After Taylor left, Conway briefed Kenny Nance on what had happened to his missing fifty dollars. Then he asked Nance the same question he had put to Thomas. "Why did he do it, Kenny? What's he trying to tell us?"

"A demo," Nance suggested promptly. "He's just letting us know he can do about anything he wants with the computer system. And there's no way we can stop him." Nance paused. He perceived what was in Conway's mind. "A demo doesn't mean anything unless you cash in on it."

"That's it, Kenny."

The first direct message from the Intruder confirmed Conway's fear. It appeared only on the terminal in Del Thomas's office at the Regional Data Center. Addressed to James Conway, Mayor, City of Hollister, the message was labeled TOP SECRET.

The message was displayed only once briefly, but a hard copy printout followed immediately. It read:

*DEMAND IS MADE UPON THE CITY
OF HOLLISTER
FOR PAYMENT OF INJURIES IN THE AMOUNT OF
\$5MILLION—REPEAT \$5MILLION.
INSTRUCTIONS TO FOLLOW. END.*

The second message was briefer. Unlike the first, it was accompanied by a simultaneous system crash, which shut down all activity at the Data Center for one minute with the exception of the terminal in Thomas's office. The shutdown began at four o'clock. At 04:01:01 the system began to function normally again, to the buzzing confusion of the programmers and operators on duty, who remained unaware of the cause.

Thomas called MacAdam into his office when the message appeared on the CRT display. They stared numbly at the repeated communication. It said:

*THE SYSTEM IS MINE
THE SYSTEM IS MINE
THE SYSTEM IS MINE
THE SYSTEM IS MINE
THE SYSTEM IS MINE
THE SYSTEM IS MINE*

PART THREE

MATCH

..

31 WED FEB 16 / 08:00 AM

Early Wednesday morning Egan met with Tom Ames in the campus security chief's office. He filled in the burly ex-cop on the activities of the past month which had culminated in the Intruder's takeover of the RDC.

"What can I do?" Ames asked without hesitation.

"I need extra legs," Egan said. "For instance, one of the ways to penetrate a computer system is a wire tap. That means getting at actual communications lines, or using equipment to pick up emanations from communications lines or even from the computers themselves."

"Sounds far out."

"Picking signals out of the air? I think it is in this case, but only because he'd need to be fairly close and he'd have to be more visible than he's been. We're talking about several weeks at least. It'd be hard for a truck full of gear to go unnoticed around here for that length of time."

"How about one of those painted up student vans? That might get by."

"It's possible," Egan agreed.

"I can check that out. What else?"

"I've got a chart of communications lines feeding into the Data

Center. I'd like a manual search, including every junction box on this campus, for any sign of a wire tap."

"I suppose you've run tracers on the lines. You should be able to activate a tap if you aren't dealing with some super-sophisticated CIA stuff."

"We've done that. Nothing so far. But I'm told there's a way to insert another computer into a line, and we wouldn't know it was there. That's the kind of thing I'm looking for."

"Okay," Ames said dubiously. "That it?"

Egan hesitated. This was what he really wanted. "Names," he said. "Student names, addresses, records, identifying data. Plus faculty, administrators and anyone else who's been around this campus recently."

"What are you looking for?"

"I'm not sure," Egan admitted. "But I'll know if I find it. This Intruder could be connected in some way with the university. This is where the Data Center is, and that's what he's attacking us through. Communications lines for the Center run across this campus. If you wanted to get at the computer system, what better place could you find to hide? There are twenty thousand students, a big faculty, hundreds of other people with some reason for being here. That's a lot of cover."

"Makes sense," Tom Ames said. "Which makes your Intruder my business, too. You'll get all the help I can give you."

A message from Del Thomas was waiting on Egan's desk when he returned to his office. Egan immediately called the RDC's director on the phone. "We've got something for you," Thomas said tersely.

"What is it?"

"I'm tied up for the next hour—MacAdam will fill you in."

"Can you give me some idea—"

"He's waiting for you."

A breakthrough so soon? Skepticism undermined the hope that Thomas's brief message should have awakened. It seemed too quick on the heels of the Intruder's takeover—too good to be true.

MacAdam was expecting him, but he betrayed no excitement as he greeted Egan briefly and waved him toward a chair. He was an unflappable young man, Egan thought, the perfect administrative aide for someone like Del Thomas. His office was like the man—cool, spartan, efficient, windowless. Tan metal desk and chair, the top of the desk almost bare. A three-shelf bookcase

filled with technical books. A single pale plant—carefully nurtured by his secretary, Egan guessed, under a glow lamp.

"I hope it's something good," Egan said. "I could use some good news about now."

MacAdam smiled thinly, lifting his shoulders in a deprecatory shrug. He gave the impression that the problem of the Intruder was simply another vexing programming error, a flaw in an otherwise smoothly functioning machinery. Maybe that was the way he saw it, Egan thought.

MacAdam began with a brief background explanation. He managed to sound both authoritative and indifferent. "There are checkpoints in computerized data files. These are created so that if there is a serious error or a security violation that has to be checked out, it isn't necessary to go through the entire file from the beginning. It's possible to fall back to the nearest checkpoint, since we know that all the data up to that point are uncorrupted." He raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"I'm with you so far," Egan said.

He wondered why MacAdam was overseeing the internal detective work on the computer system. The answer was not hard to find. Both Mayor Conway and Del Thomas were anxious to keep the takeover secret for as long as possible. Even the Data Center's employees would be kept in the dark about the real reason for an unusual activity—a desire the Intruder had shrewdly recognized in announcing his coup only over the terminal in Thomas's office. But MacAdam, as Thomas's assistant, had to be directly involved.

"Some of the errors we're now attributing to this Intruder involved information from other databanks," MacAdam said as he resumed his briefing. "Or misinformation in the case of the criminal histories attributed to Ralph Lambert and Mrs. Conway. There is authority in the system to request such information from other files—the city of Hollister, for example, can get arrest records on its job applicants even though those records are denied to the private sector."

Egan nodded slowly. The ready accessibility of data in the criminal justice system explained how the Intruder had managed to make erroneous transcripts appear so authentic. They were. The records simply belonged to two other people, not to Lambert or Toni Conway.

"Unfortunately we still don't know how he did it," MacAdam admitted. "Even though we didn't have full-time logging until

recently, as I explained at the mayor's meeting, the system's journal file still should have provided us with a record of any transaction from a remote terminal that was out of the ordinary." For the first time MacAdam's unruffled composure was disturbed by an expression of something like pain. Cool pain, Egan thought, if there was such a thing. "The Intruder succeeded in suppressing any evidence of his manipulations that we could find."

Egan frowned. "When Thomas called, he said you'd found something."

MacAdam's smile was irritatingly smug. "I hope you won't be disappointed, Mr. Egan."

By falling back to checkpoints in one particular file, he went on, it had been possible to establish some revealing facts. Hollister University's administrative program in the databank had clearly been penetrated on the night of Thursday, December 16, when the letters of acceptance for spring registration were processed. Normally, those letters would have been mailed earlier, MacAdam pointed out significantly, but there had been unexplained problems with the computer program that had caused several weeks of delay.

"The names of all applicants were already in the computer. But we can pinpoint the time of penetration because the input listing those who were successful applicants wasn't completed until late Thursday afternoon, around five o'clock. Any prior attempt to access the file would have been useless for the Intruder's purpose. The automated processing of the form letters and the confirmation punchcards was done later that night."

"Wait a minute," Egan interrupted. "What punchcards?"

"Along with the letter of acceptance, each applicant received a card to return, confirming the intention to register."

"If that's the case, why didn't the school know there'd been a foul-up?"

MacAdam shrugged. "They're machine-readable cards. I suppose what happened is that the clerks receiving them simply passed them along for insertion in the computer without questioning how many there were. Someone should have caught the fact that there were too many, obviously, but..."

"The Intruder must have expected someone to tumble to what was happening," Egan reflected. "He probably didn't count on a riot on registration day. All he was really after was a horrendous headache for the registrar. The riot was a bonus."

"I suppose so," MacAdam said with a trace of impatience. "To get back to what happened on December 16, the letters and

punchcards were processed beginning shortly after midnight. It's a routine activity, but that volume of typing does take time, even for a computer, so it was scheduled when other activity was light. So what we now know is this: Sometime between five o'clock in the afternoon and midnight, the system was induced to accept every application on file, rather than only those that had been approved."

Egan considered what he had heard. It might help to know that the Intruder had begun his manipulations as far back as December, and that he had acted specifically on the night of December 16, but he couldn't see how. "Is that all you've got?" he asked, his disappointment audible in his tone.

MacAdam would not be baited. His smile remained cool. He picked up several sheets of paper, tapped them neatly into line, and handed them to Egan. "If you'll study these transcripts, you'll see what else we have. We started with that specific time frame and checked out every transaction log for that time for each terminal. Even where we don't have a complete journal file, you see, we do have a record of usage. We can compare that, for instance, with normal activity at each terminal over a period of time. If there is a marked difference, up or down, that could be significant." He paused, enjoying Egan's eager attention. "We did find unusual activity at one terminal that night, so we started looking at that terminal's transactions during the past two months. Quite a few interesting things turned up—things that hadn't seemed significant before but began to look significant in relation to that one identified penetration. A higher-than-normal error rate, for instance, some undefined bit patterns to instructions on two different occasions, excessive user time-outs. And always occurring at night. You'll find it all broken down for you, including the last record of an unauthorized request on February 4. There's been nothing unusual from that terminal since that night," he added.

Egan was no longer skeptical. "Where is this terminal?"

"It's located at Hollister County General Hospital."

The young woman who was identified to Egan as the terminal's night operator did not come on duty until four in the afternoon. Egan obtained her home address from the hospital administrator's office. Maggie Henderson shared an apartment with one of the hospital's interns.

The apartment building was within walking distance of the

hospital. It might have been an auxiliary wing, Egan decided, with its modern, antiseptic, barrackslike design. Apartment 2E was one of six units opening off a common balcony.

The young man who opened the door was swarthy, black-haired, muscular. He wore a jogger's sweatsuit. He was not yet thirty, Egan guessed, but he already had very tired eyes. Paying dues in advance for tomorrow's Mercedes coupe, Wednesday four-somes at the country club, winter vacations in Bermuda.

"Mr. Martinez?"

"Whatever it is, we're not buying."

"I'm not selling. Is Miss Henderson in?"

The intern scowled. "Who are you? What do you want?" He turned belligerent. "Listen, I was up all night. Suppose you come back some other time."

"It's important that I talk to her." Egan was fishing out his ID when he heard the woman call out. "Joe? Who is it?"

Martinez stiffened when he saw the RDC Security identification card. Trying to hide his reaction, he compounded the error. Egan felt a quickening of hope.

"What's the problem?" Martinez demanded. "Maggie hasn't done anything wrong."

"I didn't say she had," Egan answered quietly. "But I think I'd better talk to her. For her own good."

"Joe?"

She was a tall, leggy young woman with a full, soft mouth and suddenly frightened eyes. She hugged a quilted pink robe tighter as if for protection.

Martinez gave ground grudgingly as Egan entered the room. He seemed uncertain of his role. "He's from the RDC," Martinez said tersely. It was meant to be a warning.

"Oh my God! Joe, I told you—" She broke off, staring at Egan. "You know, don't you?"

"Suppose you tell me," said Egan. He smiled, trying to put her more at ease. "Is that coffee I smell?"

"Yes, uh . . . would you like a cup?"

Over coffee she opened up. Whether she was reacting to Egan's friendly manner or from her own feeling of resignation, he could not be sure. She had known all along, she said, that sooner or later the RDC would find out that she had been careless about terminal security. It had only happened a few times, and only for brief periods, but she knew there would be trouble.

"You suspected that someone else might be using the terminal?"

"Yes . . . but I couldn't see why."

"Couldn't medical data be stolen?"

"Yes, but . . . what use would it be to anyone? I mean, the kind of thing we're talking about, there isn't that much there of importance. It's mostly statistics that wouldn't mean anything to anyone."

Egan did not tell her that a great many people might find medical data useful, especially if personal identities were given or could be deduced, including insurance and credit companies, employers, friends and enemies of the individuals about whom the reports were made. "Why didn't you report your suspicions?" he asked.

Maggie Henderson did not meet his eyes. "I . . . I was afraid."

"What was there to be afraid of?"

She looked at him. "My job. I thought I'd be blamed. I mean, I'd left Junior—the terminal—a few times without logging off or locking up. We're not supposed to do that."

Egan nodded. She wasn't guilty of anything worse than carelessness, he thought. And failure to report her suspicions. Under the circumstances her actions might, as she had feared, cost her her job, but she could hardly have known the repercussions of her carelessness.

And her confession did not bring Egan any closer to the Intruder, except to confirm that at some point he had probably made use of the hospital's terminal to gain access to the Data Center.

"Can you give me any idea who might have been able to make us of the terminal without your knowledge?"

"How would she know that?" Martinez demanded, breaking his hostile silence. "You got any idea how many people go in and out of that place all day and all night? Anyway, how do you know there really was anyone getting at her terminal?"

"There's some evidence that points that way. A number of password errors, for instance, that it seems unlikely Miss Henderson would have made. The number of errors went up long after last month's password was in use, and that breaks the normal pattern. And there were . . . unauthorized requests. Believe me, there's little doubt that attempts were made to use the terminal improperly." Egan smiled thinly. "Either by Miss Henderson or by someone else."

Martinez glared at him, for the moment stymied. Then he said, "Christ, what are you people making such a big deal about? I mean, so maybe somebody stole a few minutes of your precious

computer time. Is that any reason to come around here beating on people's doors like the Gestapo?"

"Joe, please . . . Mr. Egan is just doing his job."

"And he could be costing you yours!"

"That's not up to me to decide," Egan said. "But it might help if I can make a point of Maggie's cooperation."

That ended the young couple's resistance, but there was little more for Egan to learn. The hospital had no visitor-pass system. Even after normal visiting hours—most of the unexplained activities originating at the terminal had occurred well after nine o'clock—an indeterminate number of visitors could always be found in the building, friends and relatives of the seriously ill or emergency patients. There was also a large staff on night duty—doctors, interns, nurses, orderlies, clerical and maintenance people. "It's a big hospital," Joe Martinez pointed out. "Listen, you never answered my question. Why is it so important? What did this guy do?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," Egan said.

From the apartment Egan walked back to the hospital, welcoming the chance to stretch his legs and to think. This morning was cloudy and cold. The gusting winds knifed under his overcoat and his chest muscles tightened against the chill. He wondered where Joe Martinez had been jogging this morning.

It was probably around seventy degrees on the beach at Santa Monica, he thought, but strangely enough he felt no longing for warm sands and smoggy skies. It had been surprisingly easy to pack up and leave Los Angeles. It was if he had been living for five years in a plush motel, enjoying the palm trees, the swimming pool, the colorfully dressed natives and tourists. When it was time to leave, there was no trauma. Roots pulled easily out of the golden sand.

He tested the idea he had been nursing against Maggie Henderson's confession. His hope seemed less promising with each new development, in spite of what MacAdam had discovered. Now he had to consider the entire population of a busy county hospital among his suspects, and even that long list might prove useless. The Intruder might simply have walked in off the street. An anxious expression would have let him pass as a visiting relative. A white coat would have identified him as a member of the hospital staff. Or, as Egan had suggested to Tom Ames, the Intruder might have parked a well-equipped van in the parking lot

and picked up signal emanations from the terminal, recording them for later analysis and decoding.

Another question. How had the Intruder known that Maggie's terminal was sometimes left unlocked and unattended? That mysterious man in the van would have picked up on it simply by listening. Anyone working in the hospital could have known about Maggie and Joe Martinez meeting in the coffee shop whenever possible. And it might even have been a chance discovery, if the Intruder was somehow able to keep the RDC terminal at the hospital and its operator under observation for any period of time until he found an opening.

On the other hand, neither luck nor firsthand observation would have been necessary if the Intruder was an insider at the Data Center, someone able to examine records of regular transactions from various remote terminals. He might have found some evidence in those records of Maggie Henderson's carelessness, perhaps repeated gaps in her nightly transmissions that suggested she might be leaving her terminal open and unattended.

Egan shook his head in frustration. Too many possibilities were still open. The Intruder still had everything going for him—including time.

32 WED FEB 16 / 11:00 AM

James Conway's outer office was crowded all that morning. There was labor trouble at the Wilson Street warehouse. Complaints from several city departments over missing supplies—supplies that had supposedly been ordered weeks ago through the computerized inventory control system. A lawyer representing one of the victims of the Hill Street accident was threatening a suit against the cir-

A member of the school board was irate over the fire department's failure to prevent the razing of a large proportion of the classrooms at Henry Adams High. Hollister University was faced with another lawsuit over the registration foul-up: a claim of discrimination was being made, a violation of civil rights. Skeptical reporters were seeking answers to spreading rumors about problems at the Data Center.

The city was uneasy. Like a man in a dark alley looking over his shoulder. There had been an erosion of the faith that made any social contract enforceable—that made a city work. An invisible and random threat was always the most frightening. Conway thought, during a brief interval between angry visitors. Like a plague that selected its victims unpredictably and by chance. The Intruder had brought that kind of sickness and fear to the city. There had been no way to anticipate his moves, no way to protect those he had victimized.

Conway wondered if the man felt any kind of guilt or remorse. Or was he as indifferent as any deadly bacteria, any psychotic sniper on a rooftop?

He stared out the window, brooding, gazing past the rooftops of his city at an horizon as gray and threatening as a battleship—and he thought of Toni.

Where was she? What was she doing? He wondered if he should ask Nance to trace her. Nance could do it if she was still in Hollister. He had remarkable sources of information. And Conway wanted to know where she was just to reassure himself that she was okay. At the same time he couldn't risk having her think she was being watched. That might be the last straw.

He knew that he might lose her. He had let her down. In some ways she was naïve for her years. She had stepped straight from childhood into marriage, with a brief fantasy episode in between where she got to wear beautiful clothes and everyone admired her. She had believed in him with an innocent faith he had failed to return, and there now seemed to be a good chance she wouldn't be able to accept that. What scared him was that she might just say to hell with it. These days, he thought, a great many women seemed to be saying to hell with it. . . .

He shook himself. He was still mayor, and if anything his city was in worse trouble than he was. The Intruder had brought the crisis Conway had always wondered about. Now that it was here he was still unsure of himself. Events—public or private—were not always manipulable. Neither his marriage nor the fate of Hol-

lister was under his control. In each case, someone else was in command.

Was it like that in war, too? Had it been that way for his brother Larry? Did you simply do what you had to do, go through the motions you had learned because there was no other way to go? Become a hero by accident—or a coward if the opportunity to run was suddenly open to you?

The mayor's Emergency Task Force—a public relations label suggested by Kenny Nance—met in the private banquet room of an unpretentious bar and grill two blocks from City Hall. The noon hour had been chosen to give the meeting the appearance of a routine business luncheon. No curious reporters had tumbled to the urgency of the event.

"I don't quite understand why you wanted me here, Mr. Conway," Laurence Grayson said, dubiously inspecting a ham-and-cheese sandwich from a tray provided.

"You will," Conway assured the president of Grayson's department store. "Everyone here, Kenny?"

Nance surveyed the small group. It included Jay Burton of the City Council and Jerry Devine, the comptroller, Keith Simpson of the Merchants Bank, Grayson, and Michael Egan of the Regional Data Center's security office. Egan was conferring in low tones with a heavy-set, quick-eyed man who had been identified to Nance as a field agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"Full house," Nance announced.

"All right, gentlemen," Conway said, "let's get started. This meeting is informal so go right on eating—while you can."

He talked for ten minutes, calmly and quietly, trying to give a semblance of sanity to the bizarre story of the unknown Intruder's campaign against the city, culminating in his takeover of the main computer at the Data Center. After the first few minutes he spoke into an awed silence. No one was eating. Conway's last words repeated the Intruder's ransom demand. "He wants five million dollars."

Excited reaction broke around him.

"It's outrageous!" Burton shouted. "This is your doing, Conway—you and your computer system! I'm going to make damned sure you're held accountable!"

"I'm sure you will, Jay," Conway said dryly. "But that's not our immediate problem. The question is, what do we do?"

"W-we can't p-p-pay," Jerry Devine said, shocked into stut-

tering. "It would b-bankrupt us."

"Can't you shut the system down?" Laurence Grayson asked.

"That's right!" Burton cried. "Shut down. Turn off the faucets. Then let this bastard sing for his money."

Conway checked an impatient retort. He had not wanted to bring Burton in on this but it had seemed essential. Whatever decision was made, Conway would need the support of the City Council. He had to be concerned not only with the Intruder's demands but also with the problems of the city's survival after the crisis was over. "We can't shut down without making the situation public," he pointed out. "And that would be like shouting 'Fire!' in a theater. A runaway panic might be more costly and destructive than paying the ransom. Secondly, there's a high-cost factor in shutting down for any length of time. To give you an idea of those costs, I'm told that leasing a comparable system for one month would cost over a half million dollars—if such a system were available. And that doesn't even get into the question of how we would keep this city together with all of our computer-dependent systems inoperable." He paused to let that threat sink in. Then he said, "Finally, the Intruder has threatened to wipe out our entire software system—the operating system for the RDC and all of our programs and files—if we attempt to shut down. Even if we could reconstruct all the data, which is questionable, and reprogram the system from scratch, the time and costs involved would be catastrophic. And, as I said before, there would be no way to keep it quiet. I don't have to tell you what kind of chaos that would mean for this city."

"Can he do that?" Keith Simpson inquired. A man who dealt casually with huge sums of money every day, the banker seemed calmer than most of those in the room. "Can he wipe out the system just like that?"

"He can if he's in complete control," Laurence Grayson said. Quick to grasp the situation, he was also more familiar than the others with computer technology. "What about cutting off power to the RDC?"

"We thought of that," Conway answered. "Unfortunately, it's not as easy as it sounds. It seems the system can't tolerate fluctuations in line voltage—they can cause errors—so the computer is actually isolated from the utility company's power line. It relies for power on a bank of batteries that are constantly recharged by line voltage. There's no way we could cut this power off without the Intruder discovering it—and bear in mind that he would need

only seconds, even fractions of a second, to cause massive damage to the data base. He could even have programmed the system to . . . well, to self-destruct if its power source is interrupted." He paused. "In any event, cutting off the power, even if we could do it safely, would leave us with the same problems we'd have in shutting down the machines."

"Isn't there any backup for the system?" Grayson asked. "I understand this Intruder has penetrated the reserve operational program, but what about backup files? And what of comparable hardware we could use? I would have thought those provisions would have been prudent practice."

Conway sighed. For the first time his distress showed plainly. "You're right, of course, Laurence. That would normally be good practice. And we do have some backup in the way of duplicate files. Unfortunately, they would not all be current, and we could still be badly hurt by the loss of recent input that hasn't been duplicated. But the real problem there is hardware. Our system has a unique configuration. The manufacturers, ICI, have been working on our backup system, but it isn't ready yet. We didn't have our own funds to do it earlier, and HUD has been slow to give us more help. I'm sure Mr. Burton will also remember that the City Council vetoed our request for the money to create separate, dedicated systems to handle the fire-response and traffic-control programs. That's why both of those are still being run by the main system." Conway could sense the dismay among his listeners as the real gravity of the situation became clearer. "Even on a crash program, it would be many weeks—perhaps even months—before we could have a similar system in place with the same memory configuration as the present one. And the Intruder obviously knows perfectly well we don't have a backup capability. He also has to know that we'll try to rush it. We can hardly expect him to give us the time."

"You'll have to pay," Grayson said. "Under the circumstances, I'd say he's letting us off cheaply enough."

"Cheap!" Jerry Devine protested. "You call five million dollars cheap?"

"He could have demanded more," the store owner observed, "and the city would still have to pay. Stop and think for a minute. Think what he can do, manipulating the entire system at will. He's given us a few samples of what we might have in store—that school fire, for instance, and the traffic-program mix-up. It could be a lot worse. What if he shut down those two programs com-

pletely? What if he decided to scramble property and tax records? Those are in the data system. We've had a taste of what scrambled records can mean at the store recently. For all we know the same man may have been responsible. What I'm saying is, this Intruder hasn't even scratched the surface of the chaos he can produce in this city if he chooses to. And we're helpless. Five million dollars may be a small price to get him off our backs."

"Of course," Conway said slowly, "we don't know for certain that he'll stop there. He can always increase his demands, like any other blackmailer."

This pronouncement caused Jerry Devine's head to sink into his hands in a gesture of despair.

"What we're doing is buying time," Conway went on. "Until we can catch him."

"Catch him!" The surprised exclamation came from Keith Simpson. The banker glanced at the others in the room, then said, "Is that still possible?"

"It's a long shot," Conway admitted. "I don't mean that he wouldn't be caught eventually—I mean to do it in time to prevent the damage. But we haven't given up. Mr. Egan, if anyone doesn't know it yet, is the security director at the RDC. He's working on a plan to try to identify the Intruder."

"Isn't that a matter for the police?" the banker asked. "Or for the FBI?"

"Chief Toland is already at work on it, and the FBI is actively cooperating. But I think you can all understand that normal investigative methods don't stand much chance of exposing this man quickly." Conway turned to Egan with an expression of confidence he was far from feeling. "Would you tell them briefly what you have in mind, Mike?"

Faced with the need to articulate his idea, Egan was acutely aware of the innumerable "ifs" involved, the enormous odds against success. "I won't try to go into details," he said. "What I have in mind is simply to try to use computers—the Intruder's own weapon—against him. To do that I need access to a computer system that can be divorced completely from the Regional Data Center, or one that is already on its own dedicated line. And I need a computer expert to work with me. In a nutshell—and I know this sounds far out—we're going to try a nationwide search for some clue that will connect this man with Hollister in a way that might lead to identifying him. I'm talking principally about a computer search, inquiries against every data system that could

possibly provide us with some kind of a clue. As of now we have very little to go on. I'm hoping we can turn up something more."

"It's a long shot, all right," Laurence Grayson said, but there was interested speculation in his eyes. "Do you have your expert? Is it someone from the Data Center?"

Egan shook his head. "Everyone at the RDC has to be considered under suspicion. The man I have in mind is a local consultant who used to work at the Center. His name is Greiner. I believe he's already been working on your problem at Grayson's."

"And do you also have a computer system in mind?" Grayson asked shrewdly.

Yes, sir. Your system at the store."

For a moment Hollister's leading retail merchant was silent. Then he nodded. "You've got it," he said.

James Conway hid his relief. Grayson's had been a part of Hollister's life for three generations; he had counted heavily on that fact. "Thank you, Laurence," he said quickly. "Now you know why I asked you to be here."

There was a sober silence in the room. Everyone had moved past his initial incredulity to a deepening awareness that the city faced a threat more serious than any of them could have imagined. In a new age of technological dependency, terrorism had a new dimension.

"You'll make arrangements to pay, then?" the FBI man asked quietly. It was the first time he had spoken.

Conway hesitated. "The city attorney tells me I have a fairly broad authority to use the emergency fund in a crisis. And you'd certainly have to call this a crisis. I don't know how the City Council would feel..."

Everyone looked at Jay Burton. After his initial expression of outrage the councilman had been surprisingly subdued. Puzzled by this, Conway waited for another outburst. It did not come. Burton stared at him with familiar hostility, but there was something else in his eyes, an uneasiness beyond anger.

"He could ruin us," Burton said in a low voice. "He could..." He broke off, scowling. "There was something mailed to my house. A... a medical report. I don't need to go into what was in it except that it was... embarrassing. And it came out of the RDC. You can add that to your list of this Intruder's tricks," he added bitterly. "You got us into this, Conway. Now you're going to have to buy us out. There's nothing else to do. We can't let him... we can't risk what he might do."

There was an awkward moment before Conway cleared his throat. "It's settled then. I hardly need remind you that everything we've said here must remain in this room." He turned to Michael Egan. "You may be our only hope, Mike. You'd better get started."

33 WED FEB 16 / 03:00 PM

The movers arrived at Norma Hooper's apartment building in midafternoon. While they began to carry her furniture to the waiting van, she stood forlornly in the kitchen, surrounded by cardboard boxes filled with dishes, pots and pans, glassware and silverware. One small box, still open, held her carefully wrapped collection of glass and pottery horses. She would not let the movers have that box. They always broke something, she knew from experience, no matter how carefully it was packed.

The building manager had protested when she told him she was moving out. There was no reason to go, he had insisted. Neither he nor the regular occupant of 211 could be blamed for the actions of some loony. "He told me he got this George Devoto's name from the bulletin board at the university just last month. How could he have known? How could anybody know?" the manager complained. Anyway, Devoto was now in jail—and even if he got out he would never move back into this building. Norma could be assured of that.

"It doesn't matter," she had said.

She didn't really want to leave. She had lived in this apartment for nearly five years. It was home. But she couldn't sleep at night. She was afraid to go out. She found herself listening to the sounds from the upstairs apartment, which could often be heard late at

night. She was frightened, and she would not relax until she was away from this place, whose common roof she had unwittingly shared with a rapist. "It doesn't matter," she whispered to herself aloud. "I have to go."

But where would she find safety? She was alone—she would always be alone—and was there any place she could live without fear?

They were like animals strange to each other, Egan thought, unexpectedly penned inside the same cage, circling each other warily, neither friendly nor openly hostile.

The cage was a room with a computer terminal on the sixth floor of Grayson's Department Store, the executive and business offices level. Communications lines linked Grayson's computer directly with the telephone company's central station. Those lines were now being monitored against wire tapping.

"You talked to the mayor?" Egan asked.

"Yeah. Regular delegation from on high. Conway and Grayson and an FBI guy. You put together a good act, Egan. I hope it adds up to more than a show for the brass."

"You'll cooperate?"

"I said I'd listen. Look the city's paying me if I take the job. I can afford to listen. So what was the bright idea?"

For the second time that day Egan felt a reluctance to explain what he had in mind. More than any of the men on Conway's emergency team, Greiner had the experience and technical background to find any fatal weakness in the plan.

Well, if there is one you'd better find out, he told himself. He said, "I'm not a computer man, but I know some of the ways data systems can be used. And I'm aware of how many personal files exist. This country runs on records, more and more of them in computerized data banks. I was with the FBI—"

"They're one of my favorite teams."

Egan let the sarcasm go by. It wasn't important to *like* Greiner. "The point is that most cases are solved by running down information, bits and pieces that are already on record."

"I don't get it. How do we run down records on somebody who's invisible? Somebody we don't know anything about? And where do I come in? What do you need me for?"

"We use this country's databanks," Egan explained, knowing that Greiner was being deliberately obtuse. "And we look for a match. That's what you call it, isn't it? When you can pair off

different facts or link sets of data?"

"Yeah. But a match is like a love affair. It takes two." Greiner paused, scowling, as if surprised by the revealing metaphor. "You don't know a damned thing about this Intruder."

"We know a little. We've got a connection with Hollister, probably some time in the past. We've got an 'injury' of some kind—that's what the Intruder called it. We have what amounts to a vendetta against this city because of that injury. It must have been something important enough to be noticed. So that's the first place to start looking. Local records. Vial statistics. Birth, death, marriage, divorce records. School records, medical records—"

"You're forgetting something. Most of those are in the RDC now. And your boy would know it if you started digging."

"I'm aware of that. The FBI will be working with the local police on a manual search of all the local records. Some of the older files, in particular, have never been put into the Regional Data Center."

Greiner shook his head. "You still need a name to start with, and you don't have it. It took your FBI more than a year to find Patty Hearst, and they *knew* who she was. How long have we got?"

"I know, I know, it won't be easy. I don't expect anything to fall into our laps. Anyway, the local search isn't what we'll be involved with. My guess is the Intruder would have anticipated that, and he'll have covered himself. So we take what we know and start looking elsewhere. We know that he knows computers well; he has to have studied computer technology somewhere. That adds another factor. Now we have three things: a connection with Hollister, a grievance, and a computer background. For one thing, we can start making inquiries at computer schools, or anywhere in the educational system he could have studied."

Greiner slowly thumbed his straggly beard. He wasn't exactly jumping up and down with excitement, Egan thought, but at least he was still listening.

"As for names," Egan said, "we have a lot of those. Too many, but we still have to consider them all. There are the RDC people, for instance. I have security files on all of them, and recent background checks on most. Then there are the students at the university, or any of them with computer studies in their records. And there are the victims, all those who've been affected by what the Intruder had done up to now. Maybe all of them weren't random victims."

"You're really grabbing at straws."

Egan shrugged irritably. "Maybe. And maybe we won't find anything. But it's worth trying. People think they don't leave any traces of themselves, but they do—wherever they go, whatever they do. This country is a maze of record systems. On the state level there are driving records, criminal records, labor records, tax files, the Department of Corrections. This state has a centralized student information system on computer, and so do many others. Then there are non-government file systems, such as credit, insurance and medical information. And when you move up to the federal government there are hundreds of databanks. The U. S. Office of Education has a migrant student record system on computer. The Department of Justice has a civil disturbance file and an inter-departmental intelligence unit. Then there are military service records, the Veterans Administration, the FBI, the Internal Revenue Service, the Social Security Administration, the National Driver Register—"

"Hold it!" Greiner protested. "Okay, I get your point."

"The kind of search I'm talking about wouldn't even have been possible a few years ago," Egan persisted. "Try to do what I'm suggesting through searching manual records and you'd even keep my old Bureau busy for the next ten years. I'm talking about a national search, Greiner. Every databank we can query. Every question we can think of asking." He paused. "How long does it take a computer to search its own files, anyway?"

"Depends. If the data's on-line, not long. A medium-sized computer can execute about a million instructions in one second." Greiner continued to appear dubious, but Egan sensed an alertness which had not been there a few minutes ago. It was important that Greiner become intrigued with the problem. If he saw it as a challenge, Rob Greiner going one-on-one against the Intruder in a test of wit and skill, he would give it his best shot.

"What you want is a profile of this whole case," Greiner said slowly. "Everything we know about this Intruder and what he's done and who he's done it to. Every name or place or number remotely connected with what's happened. And you want me to search the whole country's data files for some kind of match?"

"That's it."

"Crazy," Greiner said. Abruptly he smiled. "I wonder if the son-of-a-bitch thought of it."

"What do you mean?"

"Why wouldn't he? I would, if I set out to terrorize a whole

town through its computer system, and then to rip off five million dollars. I'd be using an assumed identity, a name that wouldn't mean anything. And if I was going all the way, I'd have erased Robert Greiner from the record books."

"This whole idea is based on the fact that he couldn't remove every trace."

"Yeah. There are some systems he probably couldn't get into. The security gets tight in some of those big government systems. Bu the way, how do we get into all those files?"

"I'd like to make as many direct inquiries as we can, using Grayson's computer. Some of the government systems will do their own searching, if they give us anything at all. Sone of them may just say no. But this is a local government problem, which will get us cooperation in most areas. And we can also get some clearances through the FBI." He paused. "There are laws governing the release of information from some of the government databanks, but sometimes those laws can help. The Social Security Administration, for instance, won't give anything out to local agencies, even police departments. But they're authorized to release location information—like the addresses of employers—to the FBI if there's a case of sabotage or espionage. I think that's what we have here."

"You've thought about this," Greiner said grudgingly.

Egan smiled. It had been a small skirmish, he thought, but an important one to win. Greiner was committed. "How long will it take to set this up? I mean, to profile all the information we have, all the names and everything?"

Greiner shrugged. "Any way of cutting the roster down? If everything was already in a computer, like the university student lists, it would be different. Incidentally, we can't go after those university records. They're in the RDC's files, too. My guess is your Intruder has already set up some barriers."

"I've got student names already," Egan said without explanation, thankful that Tom Ames had done his work quickly.

"Okay, but you've got to cut back your names as much as you can. Do some pruning."

Egan didn't like it, but he saw the validity of Greiner's argument. "There are ways to narrow the lists down," he conceded. "We're probably looking for a man, for instance."

"Why?" Greiner was curious.

"The things the Intruder has done add up to a man. I'm making

a statistical judgment. Very few wire tappers and arsonists are women."

"Things are changing," Greiner said sardonically. "This is the age of the liberated female criminal."

"We'll have to take that chance."

"Okay, that's up to you. Break down your lists—and give me some priorities. What's the most important set of names of group of facts, what comes second, and so on."

"I'll work on it," Egan agreed.

"When?"

"I'll be back tonight." He did not ask whether Greiner would stay on the job. He knew without asking.

"You want to know why I'm doing it?" Greiner asked.

"It's occurred to me," Egan said with a faint smile. "You're going to tell me, anyway."

"Yeah." Greiner's gaze was cool. "Maybe I just want to be there when you fall on your ass."

James Conway arrived at the Regional Data Center shortly after five o'clock. Del Thomas was waiting for him in the lobby. The director escorted him to his office. "I'm sorry to bring you over here like this," Thomas explained agitatedly, "but there seemed to be no alternative. The . . . the Intruder insists that from now on he will communicate directly with you and no one else. I am to be the . . . go-between, so to speak. Someone to push the buttons," he added morosely.

"I don't like letting him crack the whip like this," Conway said, more to himself than to Thomas.

"Well . . . that is your decision, of course."

Of course. Glancing at Thomas, Conway caught him in the act of absently plucking at his mustache. The nervous habit was becoming exaggerated. Thomas must already be worried about being held accountable for the penetration of his computer system, especially since he had discounted the possibility so dogmatically. He was eager to shift any further responsibility to someone else.

Thomas wasn't a bad man, Conway thought. On the record, in fact, he was an efficient administrator, adept at budgeting, skilled enough at the manager's art of getting someone else to do the necessary work so that, under the right circumstances, he might have gone through his entire life building an enviable record of accomplishment, without a serious failure—as long as no genuine

crisis plunged him out of his depth, savaging his confidence.

A closed-circuit television screen on one side of Thomas's large, modern office offered a panoramic view of the computer room. It seemed quiet, only a few people moving about, but Conway could only guess at the activity going on behind the sleek façades of the machines. At right angles to Thomas's orderly desk was a small console housing a peripheral unit of the computer system with an input keyboard and a video display panel.

"What's supposed to happen?" Conway asked without preamble.

"We're to let him know when you've arrived."

"All right, tell him."

Thomas typed rapidly on the keyboard. The words appeared on the CRT display.

*MAYOR CONWAY IS READY TO RECEIVE
YOUR MESSAGE ACCORDING TO YOUR
INSTRUCTIONS.*

Conway read the lines with distaste. They amounted to a capitulation, an acknowledgment that the Intruder could demand obedience.

Seconds later an answering message moved across the screen in white block letter. Neither Conway nor Thomas spoke.

*YOU ARE LATE MAYOR CONWAY.
DO NOT DO IT AGAIN.
IN FUTURE YOU WILL HOLD YOURSELF
READY TO RECEIVE INSTRUCTIONS
ON THIS UNIT
HAVE YOU MADE ARRANGEMENTS
FOR PAYMENT OF
THE \$5 MILLION SETTLEMENT?*

Conway tried to find emotion in the electronic display. There was a humorless arrogance, to be sure. A trace of bravado: He was young. Putting a mayor through his paces was new to him. But there was something else behind the impersonal electronic images on the screen. Impatience. Edginess. Was he not quite as sure of himself as his performance in these past weeks would have indicated? Or was something else disturbing him?

Conway looked at Thomas. "Tell him I'm working on it. It

isn't as easy as he thinks to raise that amount of money on short notice, and I must have approval of the City Council."

When Thomas had typed out Conway's reply, the Intruder's response was immediate:

*DELAY WILL BE USELESS AND IS
UNACCEPTABLE.
YOU HAVE EXACTLY 48 HOURS TO
COMPLETE ARRANGEMENTS FOR PAYMENT.
MONEY WILL BE HELD IN
MERCHANTS BANK CITY ACCOUNT
WITH AUTHORIZATION FOR WIRE TRANSFER
AS DIRECTED AFTER 05:00 PM FRIDAY.
YOU WILL STAND BY
TO RECEIVE FINAL INSTRUCTIONS
AT THIS HOUR TOMORROW.
END.*

The display screen went blank.

The office was silent except for the clattering of the automatic typewriter producing a printout of the Intruder's emphatic ultimatum. Del Thomas cleared his throat and tugged nervously at his mustache. Conway stared at the empty screen, feeling not anger but a helpless frustration.

Wire transfer, he thought. Not cash that could be marked or traced, a parcel that had to be picked up and carried away. Not clumsy couriers buying traceable airline tickets to launder money through foreign banks. Something much more invisible: electronic funds transfer. An exchange of information between two or more computers. Almost instant transfer from Hollister to a private numbered account in a discreet bank—where?

Anywhere in the world.

Conway had a glimpse then of what the Intruder had planned.

The moving van was pulling away from the apartment building when the Intruder drove up. He watched it lumber around the corner, heading north. He was feeling depressed now, like someone coming down from an exaggerated high—a fair enough description of his real state. There had been exhilaration when he had Mayor Conway dancing at the end of his line, the hook sunk deep. Now there was an inevitable letdown.

As the time drew near, rage was never far away.

When he entered the building he saw that Norma Hooper's door was open—and the living room was empty of furniture. He stood for a moment, staring into the empty room. So the timid Miss Hooper was running scared. He felt an impulse to find out where she had gone, as if her flight were a personal insult for which she must be punished. He had done nothing to harm her.

He wondered if Norma Hooper had fled because of what she had learned about George Devoto, so briefly her neighbor, or because she had sensed that a greater danger still lived less than ten feet away, directly overhead.

He went up to his apartment. Angrily he stomped across the floor, on the off chance that Norma Hooper had lingered behind the moving van, packing the last of her pathetic trinkets, souvenirs of an unlived life. Why did she make him so angry? Because of the reminder of that other life so pathetically wasted?

He lost minutes to his rage, so indistinguishable now from his grief. Coming out of it was like surfacing from a trance. For a brief period he was disoriented.

Then he remembered the scene he had played out with James Conway, and there was a renewed surge of elation . . .

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"If you keep buying me steak dinners," Jenny Tyson said, "I'm going to feel obligated."

"That's the idea," Egan said amiably.

It was after nine and they were finishing off a Big Mac and fries at the local fast-food hamburger outlet. The place was nearly empty. Outside, the snow looked wet in the light of a street lamp. A young couple came in, laughing, stamping their feet to shed

clumps of wet snow. A blast of cold air chased them before the door slid closed.

"Maybe we're in for a real thaw," Egan said.

"Uh huh. I'm glad you noticed."

He grinned. "I was speaking of the weather, but I'm open to other offers."

"Everyone speaks of the thaw, but no one does anything about it."

"Lady, as if it weren't enough to have this candlelight making you look all soft and glowy . . . if you don't stop dropping hints like that, how am I going to go back to work?"

"Do you have to? No, strike that." Jenny looked down at her paper coffee cup as she slowly sloshed the last inch of oily black liquid around at the bottom of the cup. "Do you still hear from her, Michael?"

"Who?"

"You know who. Miss California. The woman you left behind."

"How do you know there was one?"

"I'm psychic, didn't I tell you?" She looked across the restaurant at the young couple ordering their quarter-pounders, at the cheerful girl behind the counter. They can't do it all for you, she thought. She said, "It isn't fair, you know. Here I went through my whole true-confessions number Saturday, and you haven't told me a thing about her." She hesitated. "Are you still in love with her? Is that why you don't want to talk about it?"

Egan was instantly sobered. "It's been over a long time. As far as being in love goes—really being in love—I think I'm only beginning to get an idea what that might be."

She didn't care then if he ever talked about Miss Los Angeles, but he did. "There isn't much to tell," he said, and he proceeded to tell her about Joan Wellman.

He told the story economically, incidents well organized and unembellished, as if he were giving a deposition at a trial. You can take the man out of the FBI, she thought. . . . Listening to him, she was conscious of how *orderly* his mind was. He got everything all pulled together in this systematic fashion so that he could make it all crystal clear. He told about his relationship with the California woman (relationship, indeed, she thought) as if he were on the witness stand, the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God. Except that it wasn't the truth, of course. He was too much of a gentleman for that. He couldn't come right out and make old Joanie look bad. Jenny wanted to tell him not to

worry, that Joanie did that all by herself. But she held her tongue.

"I think I was simply one of her display pieces," Egan said. "The FBI Man. There was also the Actor, the Stockbroker, the Hippie, the Yachtsman, the Musician . . . you name it. So I discovered during one memorable argument." There was amusement in his glance, a reaction that left Jenny disconcerted. "I found out about the Stockbroker, and when she got mad she trotted out the whole list."

"Oh, wow."

"No, it was a healthy antidote. I think I might have stayed angry longer if it had been only the Stockbroker. But you can't stay mad or jealous or whatever, brooding over what you've lost, when you find out you were something like part of a chain letter."

"Ummm." Jenny decided that she had heard enough about Joan Wellman, her Mercedes and her chain of admirers. She probably played superb tennis, even had a good backhand, and she would certainly have a golden California tan all over. To hell with her. But this firm resolution had hardly formed before the next question popped out, unbidden. "Does she write every week, this Joanie-girl? Does she still phone you?"

"No."

"A little too much hesitation there, Egan." She sighed. You've got to stop this sighing, she told herself. "You're not very good at lying."

"I don't make it a habit."

"Only where Joanie's concerned." Oh, wrong, wrong! She was coming on like a shrew. No wonder he was going all cryptic and formal. But she couldn't stop herself. "Is she still that important, Michael?"

"No—you are."

"Oh, sure."

"Jenny . . . I don't want you to get the wrong idea, that's all. Yes, I had one call from Joan recently. I think she was feeling a bit low."

"She was between performances?" Jenny asked sweetly.

Egan laughed. "Something like that. But it's not a condition that's likely to last very long." He paused. "Forget about her, Jenny. She belongs to another world. Not even a very important one."

"Are you kidding? Forget about her? I can't even handle a dead husband, much less a live Miss Sunkist." She stopped. "I said it, didn't I? About David."

"Loud and clear. He *is* dead, Jenny. And it wasn't your doing. He was where he chose to be, from what you told me. He didn't go kicking and screaming."

"I know, I know." She sighed again. "We've got a problem, Egan."

"I don't think so."

"What do you know?" Her eyes were full on him. He could drown in them, he thought. Then she said, quietly, "I'm in love with you."

There was a long moment before Egan said, "It's about time you admitted it."

"Oh God," she said. "This FBI grilling is going to be hell." But her grin said otherwise. It started slowly and spread, a dazzling grin that made Egan think of musical fanfares, a triumphant soaring of violins as the hero and heroine climbed to the top of the hill into the sunset.

"And I thought you were such a cool lady," he murmured.

"Think again, sir. You are looking at a woman who doesn't feel in the least bit cool. No, sir."

They grinned at each other foolishly. At last Egan said, "Our timing is lousy. I've got to get those lists back to Greiner. And it's a cold night for the back seat of a car."

"I come from hardy stock," she said. "Hey, don't apologize, Michael, darling-honey-sweetheart-love. Don't mind me. I'm the one who helped you get into this whole thing, remember? I'm the girl who said there was an intruder pulling some funny strings and he had to be stopped. I even encouraged you in this latest wild scheme of yours, this computer search." Gradually she became thoughtful again. The glow of the past few moments did not fade, but reality intruded. She could deal with reality now, she thought. "You and Greiner—you know what surprised me about that, Michael? That you decided to use Rob. I thought you suspected him."

"I haven't ruled him out completely."

"You haven't! Then why did you pick—"

"Jenny, if you do suspect someone in a situation, like this, you're better off having him where you can watch him." He paused. "Anyway, I only meant you can't rule anyone out completely. I don't think Rob is the Intruder. Whoever he is, he's someone you don't notice much, because what you see isn't what you get. He's not who he seems to be. That's really why I decided

Greiner isn't it. He's just too obviously himself. And too conspicuous, which may be more to the point."

Sobered by the reminder of the problem that still remained, the attempt to track the Intruder through an endless labyrinth of data banks, Jenny said, "Do you think you and Rob have any real chance of identifying him?"

"I don't know. It sounded like a good idea, but..." Egan suddenly threw up his hands. "What the hell's wrong with me? Jenny—you can speed things up! You could work with Greiner. That is, if you don't mind going without much sleep for the next two days."

"You know I don't," she said eagerly.

"I'll talk to Del Thomas in the morning and get him to lend you to us. Don't worry, he won't object. I've got a lot of clout for the moment—five million dollars worth."

"Five million dollars," Jenny said with a kind of awe. "Is that what he was after all along? Was everything else a build-up to forcing the city to pay him off?"

Egan was slow to answer. The question had been on his mind ever since he had heard the Intruder's ransom demand. Motive was a crucial factor in any case—not just the fact of a motive, but the *kind* of reason for the crime. If he could answer that question he would be closer to understanding the man. "I think the money is only part of it," he said finally. "Whatever it was that happened to him—whatever it was he blames Hollister for—means more to him than the money. At least it did in the beginning. Now that it's gone this far..." He shrugged. "If we don't catch him soon, I only hope five million dollars is all he wants."

Jenny Tyson shivered.

After driving Jenny home Egan returned to the Data Center to work on his lists of names. They were voluminous—students and faculty at the university, RDC employees, city employees involved with computer operations, patients and staff and service personnel at Hollister County General Hospital, and—most important in Egan's view—victims of the Intruder's manipulations.

Somewhere, Egan hoped, there might be a record linking Hollister and someone on one of the lists in a revealing match.

Greiner had quickly spotted the flaw in this approach: The Intruder would hardly have retained his real identity while carrying out his plot. It seemed unlikely that he would have left himself open to a computer search. Still... every criminal who was ever

caught was tripped up by what Egan desperately hoped to find—a detail overlooked, a mistake that should not have been made, a random incident that could not have been planned for. Criminals aren't perfect either, he told himself.

And the search cut two ways. It was intended not only to turn up significant data about those on Egan's lists. It might also uncover the *lack* of corroborating information—an identity without a natural background.

It was midnight when Egan arrived at Grayson's to drop off the lists. A security guard let him in, and he rode the only operating self-service elevator to the sixth floor.

Egan noticed the cot set up at one side of the office. Greiner was apparently here for the duration. "I'll be back in the morning," Egan said. "With some help."

"I don't need any help," said Greiner quickly.

"You've got a lot of names to go through and we have less than forty-eight hours. Besides, I think you can work with this assistant. She's on loan from the Data Center. Jenny Tyson."

Greiner broke off his protest. "Bastard," he said. "You knew she was the only one I could work with." He stared at Egan for a moment in silence. "Why are you so hot on catching him, Egan?"

"It's my job. Besides, in my book he's a murderer. He has to be caught."

"Maybe he didn't mean for anyone to get hurt."

"That's one of the problems with crime. You think you can contain it. You can't. You're going to rob a bank, say, and all you want to do is scare the folks into following orders. But there's this little old lady who walks in when she isn't supposed to, and somebody gets excited. A couple of people get shot. Nobody was supposed to get hurt, but someone almost always does, and it's all because of what you started. Everyone thinks they can have a little crime and it won't hurt. But there's no such thing as a little, harmless crime."

"Spoken like a true cop."

Egan shrugged. "That's the way it is. Besides," he added, "this isn't a small crime. And five million dollars isn't a small ransom."

"Hmmm. You know what, Egan? I think he's going to pull it off."

"If you believe that—"

"Don't worry. I'll try to help you nail him. Not because of the money, but because it's an interesting problem. And maybe be-

cause I don't like what he's done to my alma mater."

"You're sentimental about the RDC? That doesn't sound like you."

Greiner's smile was mocking. "Like you said, that's the way it is."

They remained unlikely partners, Egan thought. Their reasons for trying to track down the Intruder could hardly be more divergent. They had nothing in common in their attitudes toward life, people, criminals, the sense of duty and obligation. Greiner was a product of his own time, responsible only to himself, indifferent to any public morality. Yet at this particular moment, in this situation, Egan was grudgingly willing to concede that he could not have found anyone better for the task ahead.

Greiner broke the silence. "I've got one more question for you."

"I almost think I have enough of my own."

"You better think about this one. How come he's giving the mayor forty-eight hours to come up with the blood money? Have you wondered about that?"

"Maybe he thinks it would take that long for Conway to get authorization and set up the payment."

Uh uh. He's not doing the city any favors. He's not trying to make it easy. He's got his own reason for stalling. He hasn't worked this thing out overnight, Egan; he's got a timetable. It's the only answer that makes any sense. You better try to figure out what it is, because my guess is he's got something else up his sleeve. And if he runs true to form . . . it won't be something the city of Hollister is going to give him a medal for."

35 THURS FEB 17 / 05:00 PM

By late Thursday afternoon the responses generated by the computer search for the Intruder were beginning to pile up in long ribbons of white printout paper on the floor of the search team's headquarters at Grayson's.

Greiner had worked most of the night setting up his search profile. For each of the names on Egan's lists a punchcard had been prepared—Jenny Tyson's assignment—and fed into the computer. For each name the same questions had to be asked. The most time-consuming task had been the process of getting the known information organized, programmed for the computer and punched onto the cards.

The search itself within any particular data base queried would be simpler. The repetition of simple steps over and over again with dazzling speed was precisely what computers did best. For any computer to search its memory and pick out data matching people with certain keys—Hollister, computer education, injury or accident, mental illness, computer crime—was a swift and simple procedure.

Michael Egan stepped out of the terminal room, which had a conspicuous no-smoking sign. A small adjoining office with a desk and telephone had been made available. Egan stood at the window

watching darkness pool in the alleys and doorways below. He remembered a joke he had heard shortly after coming to Hollister. He had been talking to one of his security officers and had asked, "What do you do for night life here?" "Well, you can watch it grow dark."

Egan thought idly of the mind's capacity for retaining such trivia. It was exactly such a random memory that he was hoping to turn up somewhere in a computer's memory, where nothing was every forgotten.

He filled his favorite Charatan pipe with tobacco, lit up, tamped the ashes down and fired up again. With each puff the burning tobacco glowed red in the dark reflection of the window.

He felt useless. There was relatively little for him to do beyond examining the replies as they came in for anything significant—or anything that might suggest the need for further inquiry. Greiner and Jenny had to do most of the real work.

The tedious, repetitive pattern of the day was long familiar to him. It was the way any cop worked most of the time. Pavement pounding. Ringing doorbells. Asking the same questions over and over. Endlessly getting the same answers: Sorry, never heard of him. Don't know him. Nothing on file.

The computer search had begun with other city, county and state record systems—including motor vehicle departments, pupil information systems, medical and insurance records, criminal history and Department of Correction files in each state. Specific names of individuals had been checked against the cities they had lived in, the schools they had attended, the organizations they had belonged to. One student at Hollister University had sixteen unpaid traffic warrants. Several had been arrested for minor offenses. One was in jail on a serious charge—George Devoto. But he was in the hospital for psychiatric tests, charged with multiple counts of rape—and the Intruder was, quite obviously, still at large. Every incident reported, every match recorded for every name, had had to be examined, but not one had suggested a motive for the Intruder's vendetta or a clue to his identity. Nor had any evidence of false identity come to light.

This afternoon the search had turned toward national databanks. Some of them were huge—the Social Security Administration had over 150,000,000 citizens listed in centralized computer files. The Veterans Administration and Department of Defense had databanks almost as large, and the DOD was the federal government's largest user of computers. Queries had gone to the General Service Admin-

istration's National Government-Wide ADP Sharing Exchange Program, to the IRS, the Job Corps and others. Some of these databanks were readily accessible, others not. Some had specific regulations against such "fishing expeditions" as Egan had conceived. A copy of Greiner's search profile had been provided to the FBI for inquiries against government files that were open only to other federal agencies.

So far all of this activity had been futile.

Credit agencies were still being queried when Egan left the terminal room for a smoke. These inquiries were being made on behalf of both Grayson's and the city of Hollister, directed to the files held by the Associated Credit Bureaus and individual credit-reporting agencies. Egan was not even sure what he hoped to find in such records. Would a disgruntled credit user who had lost his card or been turned down for credit take his anger out on a city? The absurdity had to be ignored, the questions asked. Ostensibly, inquiries against credit files were for the purpose of verifying credit information. In this case, however, a crime had been committed. In at least one instance, involving Ralph Lambert, a routine credit-and-criminal check had been subverted and erroneous information had been supplied. That provided an extra excuse for the additional inquiries.

Egan's pipe had gone out again. He lit it absently, staring out at the city. Street lights had come on while he watched. Dusk was turning into darkness. Cold radiated from the window, and the chill touched him. The brief thaw had been a false promise. The day had turned colder again, freezing the melting snow into ice. Bad driving tonight.

His reflection brooded at him from the window. Another reflection appeared behind him and he turned quickly.

"Getting discouraged?" Jenny Tyson asked.

"Let's say, I'm not exactly encouraged."

"You can't give up now. We've still got a long way to go."

"And we have less than twenty-four hours."

"That's a lot of time for a computer. Even a whole army of computers." She paused, studying him, smiling a little as he held another match to the bowl of his pipe. "Maybe there's something we haven't thought of yet, some questions we should be asking that we aren't."

She looked concerned and tired and lovely. Egan wanted to take her into his arms and hold her. He didn't, but he remained conscious of the emotion, liking it.

"I know," Jenny said softly. Her eyes were smudged with fatigue.

He walked rapidly away from the Physics Building. Lights were on in the laboratory on the second floor, and someone had briefly appeared in one of the windows.

It was a contingency he regretted, but one he had also had to plan for.

Now that he had established full communication with the RDC's computer he had been able to adapt a portable, hand-held terminal for direct input to the main processor. He preferred the greater flexibility of the laboratory's minicomputer, but for tonight's message the portable terminal would be adequate.

He wanted only to give the mayor his final warning.

The campus was busier tonight. Students were out in spite of the renewed cold. He heard laughter from the mall, voices carrying in the cold air. Some classes were also in session, and the atmosphere of fear had lifted. George Devoto was no longer around, jumping out of the bushes.

George was probably still wondering what had happened to him.

He left the campus behind. Two blocks away he found a gas station closed for the night, with two phone booths at one side of the paved parking area. Both phones had touch-tone dials.

He stepped into one of the booths and closed the door. It took him only a few seconds to hook up on the portable terminal to the telephone. Then he dialed the RDC.

The first message directed James Conway to be present in person at the RDC on Friday from five o'clock onward. The computer room was to be cleared of all personnel; Conway would wait there to be contacted. He was to have only one designated operator in the room with him.

Prior to five o'clock Conway was to have completed all arrangements for transfer of funds. He was to be on hand to authorize the payment, the operator to carry out instructions as they were received from the Intruder. No one else was to be present. Not only the computer room but the entire Data Center was to be cleared of all personnel. No exceptions would be permitted.

"That's preposterous," Del Thomas objected. "I won't leave—"

"The whole thing's preposterous," Conway cut him off. "But we'll do what he says. We have no choice."

The second message was briefer. It said:

*ADDITIONAL DEMONSTRATION OF WHAT WILL
HAPPEN IF THESE ORDERS ARE NOT OBEYED
WILL BE PROVIDED WITHIN THE HOUR. END.*

For the next hour an oppressive atmosphere of tension and gloom pervaded Del Thomas's office. There was little discussion. Conway wondered if Thomas was going to pluck his mustache out, hair by hair.

Six o'clock came and went. Nothing happened.

Finally Conway broke a long silence. "Any guesses on what that last threat meant? Why haven't we heard anything?"

"It's always possible," Thomas suggested, "that he's failed. That he can't do everything he claims."

Conway stared at the RDC's director bleakly. "He can do enough. We probably haven't had time to get word of this next disaster. God knows..." He left the possibilities unspoken.

The call came at six-thirty. It was from Kenny Nance. Conway took the phone with a feeling of apprehension. His face drained of color as he listened. The hand holding the receiver began to shake. "The bastard!" Conway said hoarsely. "Is there anything he can't do?"

When he hung up he stood for several seconds in silence. When he looked up his eyes were dull. "He cut off the power to the county hospital," Conway said. "Five minutes ago."

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Snow crunched under the Plymouth's tires as Conway turned into the driveway of his home nearly five hours after receiving Nance's call. His shoulders ached. His thoughts moved sluggishly. On many occasions he had worked sixteen hours or more at a stretch, or even the clock around, without feeling so drained.

He wondered if there was something else he ought to do. The hospital was running on emergency power. Non-emergency schedules were being altered, Friday appointments being put over until Saturday or Monday. The scene at the hospital was one of confusion and anxiety, of improvised heroics in the emergency room, of frightened relatives and patients—and of questions Conway could not answer.

There was nothing more he could do.

His exhaustion was more than fatigue. Defeat was the crusher. Knowing you were beaten and there wasn't a damned thing you could do about it. Knowing that—

His head snapped up. He was still in the car, sitting there without purpose, and he had been slow to react to an ordinary fact that was suddenly not ordinary.

Lights were on in the house.

For a moment he thought he might have left lights burning

when he went out that morning. But no, he hadn't. Not so many lights. Downstairs in the den, the kitchen, the front hallway. The outside porch light, too.

And upstairs, light shone in the windows of the front bedroom.

Conway tumbled out of the car, weary lethargy falling away. He was calling out before he reached the front door and threw it open. "Toni? I can't believe it. Toni, where are you?"

She ran out of the bedroom. Near the top of the stairs she stopped, one hand on the bannister, the other holding her robe at the front, as if she had forgotten the loose belt that trailed to the floor. "You're back," he said, his voice threatening to break.

She nodded, still without speaking.

He went up the stairs slowly, as if he felt an instinctive need for caution. At the top he paused, facing her. Toni's robe, the combed-out hair, the face scrubbed clean of makeup suggested that she was back to stay. But there was a gravity in her eyes that left him uncertain. "Why did you come back?" he asked.

"I belong here."

"Yes," he said happily, "you do."

"As long as you feel the same way." There was a hint of challenge in the words that matched the expression in her eyes.

"I love you, Toni—I have from the first night we met. Nothing can change that. I want you. I would even if the rubbish in that report had been true."

"You weren't so sure about that at first."

"I am now."

She studied him intently, as if she were determined to pierce all barriers, to strike down all pretense. "Can I believe that?"

"It's true."

She was silent. The challenge, with its hint of anger, was gone, but the grave expression did not leave her eyes. Conway realized that, whether it had been happening all along or had occurred overnight, his beautiful child bride had grown up. The discovery left him a little less sure of himself, a little unsettled, but it was also intriguing. A challenging woman was not less interesting, but more.

"I had to work things out, too," she said finally. "How I really felt. That's why I had to go away for a while."

"And did you? Find out, I mean?"

She smiled. "What do you think I'm doing here, dummy?"

When he reached for her there was no hesitation. Her robe fell

open as she came to him. Beneath it she was naked, and the nipples of her small, perfect breasts were already taut.

In the small office at Grayson's adjoining the computer terminal room, Michael Egan leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. In an instant he was drifting into sleep.

Greiner shook him awake. "You'd better get in here, Egan. There's a message for us."

Egan followed him into the other room. The communication was at the top of the printout roll. It was a terse warning:

*YOU ARE WASTING YOUR TIME. THE MAN
YOU ARE SEARCHING FOR NO LONGER EXISTS.
DISCONTINUE YOUR SEARCH OR ACCEPT
THE CONSEQUENCES. END.*

Egan felt a quick, hot anger. "What the hell does that mean?" he demanded.

"What it says." Greiner seemed to be enjoying Egan's reaction.

"I mean, how did he know what we were doing?"

"I don't know." Greiner's amusement faded. "For a while I thought the John Doe who worked here this past Christmas for a week or two as a data clerk, the one we can't find, might have been the Intruder. Now I'm not so sure. He *could* have been, but . . . I've been through Grayson's system backwards and forwards and I can't find him anywhere—not a trace. I was beginning to think that billing mix-up was a separate thing entirely—a routine fiasco. Or if he did have a hand in it, he was just experimenting to see what he could do."

"But if he didn't work here, how did he get into Grayson's system to deliver that message? And how did he find out about us?"

Greiner gave a snort of disgust. "Up until the last few days, getting into this system would have been about as difficult as seducing a streetwalker. And he could've planted an instruction that lets him dial in any time he wants."

"If it was that easy, why didn't he go on using this system?"

"He wanted to get at the city, not at Grayson's. To do that he had to penetrate the RDC. He had to get into the city's own databanks. Hell, I don't see why he even bothered with Grayson's."

Egan was silent. "So he knows everything we're doing."

"I doubt that. Grayson's people are running a very tight ship now, monitoring all activity. I'd say our Intruder was curious, made a quick probe or two, and found out we were running a private show up here. He couldn't know much more than that."

"He knows we're looking for him."

"He knew that anyway."

Egan nodded slowly, his anger under control. The frustration was getting to him, he thought.

"What about his warning?" Greiner asked, nodding toward the printout of the Intruder's message. "Discontinue your search or accept the consequences. What about that?"

"Forget it," Egan said.

"Yeah? Maybe the mayor wouldn't agree. He doesn't want this bastard coming down on the city any harder, not after tonight."

Egan stared at him. Greiner saw the stubborn set of his mouth, a hardness in his stare that not been visible before. Put Egan in a bind and there was a toughness there that the easy manner concealed.

"He's not going to do anything to jeopardize his plans because of us," Egan said flatly. "The time is too short—he's too close to getting what he wants. He's not going to risk throwing it all away when he doesn't have to. Besides, he probably has a good idea that we *are* wasting our time. You said it yourself before: he's only confirming it. He's living under another identity now. That's the only thing his message can mean. The man we're looking for doesn't exist any more."

"So you're not even going to tell Conway."

Egan's gaze was level and hard. "That's right."

Greiner looked as if he wanted to challenge him. Then his eyes shifted away. He gave an indifferent shrug. "It's your show," he said.

37 FRI FEB 18 / 08:00 AM

Egan slept on a cot in the lounge of the campus security department. He was awake when Tom Ames arrived that morning. They shared a cup of strong, bitter coffee. Ames grinned as Egan shuddered over the first sip. "Yeah, my secretary is a helluva girl at her desk, but she makes lousy coffee."

"You ought to make the coffee test part of your employee-screening program. Put it in the job description."

"It's a thought, but it's probably against the Constitution. You look beat, son."

"You surprise me." Egan scrubbed at his prickly chin. "I didn't think about a razor."

"You can use my electric." Ames studied the younger man with a professional's approval. Egan was not sure what he approved of. "I think we found your wire tap," Ames said.

Egan came fully alert. "Where? When did you find it? If it's still active—"

"Whoa! Slow down." Ames broad palm came up in a stop signal. "I should've put that another way, I guess. We found where it was. At least that's what the telephone company guy says. A tap was put on a junction box in the basement of the Chemistry Building. It's gone, but the expert says there was definitely a tap

for a while, wired into an RDC line. But that's all we know. Sorry, Mike—it doesn't really help very much."

"It tells us that he was on this campus, and that he knew his way around here."

"You already figured that."

The two men fell silent. From the outer office came the rapid clatter of an electric typewriter. A young security guard entered the lounge, glanced curiously at Egan and Ames, and nodded tentatively. He helped himself to a mug of coffee, sipped appreciatively, savoring the flavor, and carried the mug out of the room, leaving Ames and Egan to talk in private.

"I guess you haven't had any luck with the computer checks."

Egan shook his head. "We're running out of throws of the dice."

"It's gonna go down tonight, then, just the way this Intruder called it."

"Looks like it. You'll have your people ready? It's been agreed that we won't have police on campus. They'd be too conspicuous. Your people won't be."

"We'll be ready," Ames said.

Egan looked at his coffee, hesitated and pushed it away, marveling at the young guard's brutalized taste buds. He rose with a faint smile, "I've got to make a call. Then I'll borrow that razor."

The portable TV set was turned on in a corner of the kitchen facing the breakfast table. Linus Webster liked to watch the "Today" show for a half-hour or so before leaving for the university. He had little time for television or newspapers, and the morning show gave him a capable view of current events.

"The cold high pressure center that brought the latest frigid weather to the East has moved into the central Gulf of Mexico," the announcer was saying. "A ridge of high pressure extends from the Gulf into the upper Ohio Valley. Southerly winds to the west of this high pressure ridge are pushing warmer air northward. Warmer temperatures were experienced Thursday from the Great Plains through the Mississippi Valley, the Great Lakes region, the Ohio valley and much of the Southeast. Warmer temperatures are expected to move into the Atlantic Coast states today, with maximums ranging from the 30s in the North to the 70s in the South..."

Returning to the kitchen, Jenny Tyson dropped into a chair and yawned. "Maybe winter's almost over," she murmured.

"You've hardly been getting any sleep," Webster said.

"I'll have plenty of time for sleep after tonight." In spite of Mayor Conway's edict about silence, she had told her father of the Intruder's ultimatum, with Michael Egan's sanction. Webster would not betray the confidence.

"You're sure that will be the end of it?"

"Michael thinks so."

"Ah, yes . . . that was Michael on the phone just now?"

"He called to tell me the brownout still has the hospital on emergency power."

Webster looked thoughtful. He sipped his coffee carefully; it was still very hot. He ate little in the mornings these days, but he had always been addicted to strong, hot coffee. Even though he was no longer supposed to have it, Jenny relented in the morning, allowing him one cup. She wondered if he sneaked more at the lab in spite of his doctor's order. "Curious," he said after a while.

"What? I'm sorry, Dad—"

"Your Intruder shows a remarkable knowledge of the power grids. To arrange a selective blackout in that way. It's a very complex system."

"Not for a computer, surely."

"No. . . ."

"What's on your mind? What are you thinking?"

He shook his head. "Nothing that would help you, I'm afraid." He sipped his coffee pleasantly, sighed and glanced at his daughter fondly. "Isn't it about time I met this young man of yours?"

She laughed, struck by the somewhat old-fashioned tone of the suggestion. "Yes, it is—and you will, as soon as this is over. I think you'll like Michael."

"I expect I will. I enjoyed David, for that matter."

"You did?" She was startled. Why was it that he was always surprising her now? Was it simply that she had never really known him before? Had never been old enough, or perceptive enough, to understand him?

"Yes. But he was not the right man for you. It's time you married again, my dear."

She laughed again, this time nervously. "That's a bit premature."

"Not at all. It's long past time, I think. And that bracelet you wear . . . isn't it time you put that away?"

She stared down at the bracelet on her wrist, so familiar that she was hardly aware of it most of the time. She fingered the

smooth metal, turning her wrist so that she could read the lettering engraved on it. DAVID TYSON M.I.A. She wondered how naked her wrist would feel without it.

In Orlando, Florida, the temperature was already 65° Fahrenheit at eight o'clock that Friday morning when Rick Harmon arrived for work. A DP operator at the national headquarters for Credit Systems, Inc. Harmon stopped at the snack bar to buy a cup of coffee. He carried the white styrofoam cup across the open employee patio toward his office. Lifting his face to the sun briefly, he squinted and sighed. *I'd rather be sailing*, he thought, quoting his bumper sticker.

Stepping inside the computer center, Harmon was hardly aware of any change in temperature. The center was kept at a uniform 68 degrees day and night, the year around. He went directly to his own console.

He had been working on a long inquiry from Hollister before he left on Thursday, and the rest of the job was still waiting for him. Harmon felt a bit of irritation. What did those people think Credit Systems was running, anyway? Grayson's was a subscriber of CS, and a good customer, but Harmon didn't like the idea of a wholesale inquiry, even though in this instance Grayson's had some heavy backing from the city of Hollister. And the FBI.

The problem was that there were more than two hundred and fifty names in the Hollister inquiry, with a check requested against every name going back as far as Credit Systems' files permitted. The recent stuff, any activity over the past two years, was stored on-line, directly accessible to authorized subscribers. On-line data was also random storage; the computer could go straight to the data it wanted. But anything older than two years was stored off-line on magnetic tapes. This meant that Harmon had to go to the library and load up the requested tapes, which contained data going back an additional five years where applicable. The tape then had to run sequentially, much like a tape on a conventional recorder, and that was taking a hell of a lot longer, even at the speed with which the computer read.

What could be so damned important?

Rick Harmon did not care much for the assignment, but he was not an especially adventurous young man. One reason he liked his job was that the work was so patterned. After a while you didn't even have to think. The parameters were clearly defined, the hardware was remarkably efficient, the guidelines were laid down for

every activity. He grumbled about odd-ball requests, or the occasional complaint from some joker who insisted that his credit rating was inaccurate or unfair. But Harmon was not about to joust with the FBI, or even with a good customer like Grayson's, a thousand miles to the north. If they wanted to run two hundred and fifty names through the mill, he would run their two hundred and fifty names through. Let someone else question it.

The original request had come through Thursday afternoon. By Friday morning at 10:42 the last inquiry was completed.

And all of it for nothing. Harmon couldn't see a single thing on all of the reports generated by CS's data on file that warranted any such massive search. Two thirds of the names being checked belonged to students, most of whom didn't even have credit records. A handful had already managed to run into problems. There were several car repossessions among the names on the list, a sizable number of divorces, one volunteer bankruptcy (a teacher in Hollister University's economics department), a dozen known alcoholics, and the usual number of slow payers. But nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing that grabbed attention.

Rick Harmon called up Grayson's computer, using the prearranged code, and an instant later the data generated by the search was flowing north along the telecommunications lines linking Credit Systems with the waiting computer at Grayson's.

Harmon unloaded the last of the magnetic tapes and returned them to the library. Job finished.

Back at his desk he hesitated. Something was nagging him but he couldn't remember what it was. Something about Hollister. And Grayson's Department Store.

His memory refused to cough it up. *What the hell*, he thought. *I'm not a computer*. With a shrug he turned to the morning's stack of mail inquiries from subscribers around the country.

38 FRI FEB 18 / 10:00 AM

At City Hall Friday morning James Conway completed a series of telephone calls, the last one to Keith Simpson at the Merchants Bank. The ransom demanded by the intruder was ready for transfer.

When Conway had hung up he swiveled slowly to gaze out the window. A small area that included Hollister's civic center was bathed in bright sunlight. Beyond that patch of brightness, however, as if symbolically, high clouds shadowed most of the city.

It was not a time for Hollister's mayor to be basking in sunshine, he thought, or to be feeling as good as this mayor was. In spite of himself, a stray memory of last night brought a smile to his lips.

Kenny Nance entered the office without knocking. "What are you grinning about?" Nance demanded. "For Christ's sake, the hospital's still running on half power, kids can't get their tonsils out, the whole town is about to go bankrupt, and you sit there acting like it's an Easter egg hunt!" The exasperation was feigned. To Nance, Conway's positive mood was a welcome sign.

"We're not going bankrupt," said Conway.

"We're not, huh. I seem to recall you talking on the darker side yesterday."

"That was yesterday."

"Your Task Force has come up with something? Is that it?"

"I wish, Kenny." The mayor shook his head. "We're going to have to pay."

Nance was silent a moment. Then he too smiled. "I guess that means she came home."

"It's about the only good thing that's happened this week." Conway's expression sobered. "Funny, isn't it, the priorities we have. It's selfish, I know, for me to feel any kind of happiness on a day like this, but . . . we all have our own brass rings to grab."

"That's what makes a horse race," Kenny Nance said.

In Orlando the temperature climbed to 70° before noon, but Rick Harmon was no longer thinking about going sailing. He had remembered what was bothering him about Hollister.

He put through a call to the auxiliary facility in Tampa which housed the backup files for Credit Systems. As a precaution against natural or other local disaster, such as a fire or a hurricane, the backup data was stored in a different city.

"Janice? This is Rick Harmon. Listen, I'm sending over a bunch of names. You should have the hard copy coming out of the machine in a couple of minutes. I want to check on something. I figured I'd tell you before you started screaming."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means there's a bunch of names."

"What's it all about?"

"I don't know for sure, but . . . a few weeks ago I had a series of inquiries from Grayson's Department Store up in Hollister. They're one of our big subscribers. Routine stuff, but I remember thinking the operator up there was calling in more than usual, you know? I mean, he'd call in for one check, and a half hour later he'd be back again. It was like he was trying to find out how our system responded, you know?"

"So what?" Janice asked coolly.

"I don't know, it just seems funny to me now, is all. Something about it. And the Hollister people are looking for something important. That's what these names are all about. I want to run them against the backup files to see if there are any unusual intersects. Anything at all."

"You don't want much, do you?"

"Hell, Janice, you know what I *really* want."

"Yeah, sure. You got permission from your wife?"

"We've got an understanding."

"I'll bet you do."

Harmon grinned. "Listen, you'll let me know if you stumble onto anything, okay? Give it priority, huh? This is an Urgent Special Request."

"Isn't everything?" Janice said.

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FRI FEB 18 / 02:00 PM

With an assembly of reporters camped outside his office, Conway did not call his Emergency Task Force together. Instead he telephoned each individual to announce his decision that payment would be made that night as demanded. He pressed each member to remain silent; a public statement would be released that night—after the ransom was paid.

There were no serious objections, not even from Councilman Burton. The Task Force was resigned to the inevitable.

Shortly after two o'clock Conway left Kenny Nance working on the final draft of the statement that would be given out to the press and announced by Conway himself on television. Nance was to delay his request for TV time to the last possible minute. Conway drove slowly over to Grayson's store, thinking about the impact that bombshell revelation would have upon the city. There was no way to soften it, no way to make it less sensational.

Oddly, the permanent damage to his own promising career did not disturb him as much as he might have expected. Lucky in love, he consoled himself.

There was an element of luck in being a big winner in anything, whether it was writing a best seller or winning the Super Bowl. The winners smugly assured themselves that they had made their

own luck, but that was more often than not a comfortable illusion. You had to have the toughness and talent to take advantage of good fortune, to be sure, but you also had to avoid the lightning bolt. And that was luck.

The Intruder's revenge against the city of Hollister was Conway's lightning bolt. He just happened to be standing there.

Or was all that simply another rationalization, an attempt to find an excuse for his failure? Conway shook off the brooding speculation as he crossed the alley between Grayson's parking garage and the back entrance to the store.

The search for the Intruder had come up empty-handed. With less than three hours remaining before Conway had to be in the computer room at the Regional Data Center, no one on the search team was able to offer any reason for Conway to change his mind. He hadn't expected any.

But Michael Egan stubbornly objected to Conway's willingness to accept the Intruder's edict that he had to be in the computer room himself. "It's not a good idea," Egan argued. "Someone else could do it."

"It's not my idea," Conway said. "It's an order."

"I've been trying to figure out why Friday night," Egan went on, with a glance of acknowledgment at Greiner. "Why has he waited so long? Why not last night, for instance? He knew then that you had to come through and meet his demands. What had he been waiting for?"

"You have an explanation?"

"Maybe. For one thing, there is the fact that he means to try to have the five million dollars transferred through the interbank wire network. He needs you, or at least someone in a position of authority, to make the first move, which involves getting the money out of Merchants Bank. But Greiner tells me that once that's done, if the Intruder knows what he's doing, he can have that money routed halfway around the world, almost anywhere he wants. The money doesn't move; all that happens is that one bank's computer records a loss and another bank's computer is credited with the corresponding amount in a numbered account. And there's a good reason for doing this Friday night after five o'clock."

"The banks are closed," Conway said slowly.

Egan nodded. "Officially they're closed at night and for the weekend, but a lot of banking activity goes on during those hours. Wherever that money ends up, the Intruder means to be there to

pick it up himself. The way he's got this set up, he'll have the whole weekend to get a running start toward wherever it is he's going—Switzerland, Argentina, Hong Kong, Wherever." Egan paused. "Do you see what's bothering me, Mr. Conway?"

"I'm not sure I do . . . outside of the fact that the Intruder seems to have had a very good reason for everything he's done."

"Uh huh. So what about the two people who are in that computer room helping him transfer the money? If they know what he's doing, if they're able to follow the money trail, then the Intruder won't be able to show up in Zurich or Luxembourg or Buenos Aires to collect. We'd be waiting for him."

"We might not be able to keep track of what he does."

"Can he be sure of that? Even though he's in control of the transaction? I'm not sure he'd take that chance."

"What exactly are you driving at, Egan?"

"Whoever goes into that computer room tonight has to be a hostage. The Intruder must have some way he's figured out to cover his tracks, to protect himself. He wants to disappear forever—with the money. He might have started out on this escapade to get even for something that was done to him, but that apparently isn't enough. He wants the money, too. He probably believes he's entitled to it. And he can't have anyone else showing up when he tries to claim his fortune."

"I'm still not clear—"

"There's something else," Egan went on stubbornly. "Why did he insist on you being there? You could give the necessary authorization without being in that computer room."

"All right, why?"

"Because you're the mayor of Hollister. You represent this city. I think that's why he's insisted you be there personally. And that's also why you shouldn't go into that room. Whoever handles that money transfer can't be allowed to talk."

"Killing two birds with one stone!" Rob Greiner interjected. "I like it, Egan. You're making sense."

There was a prickly silence. Conway could feel the tension like something physical. Even Greiner's attempt at humor sounded harsh. "What could he do to us?" Conway asked finally. "Even though there'll be only two of us in that room, we can still have the building surrounded. What can he do?"

"I don't know," Egan admitted. "But he does."

Conway walked to the windows to give himself a moment to think. He stared out at his city, but the thought that surfaced was

of Toni, waiting for him. Tonight, as she had waited last night. Without turning he murmured. "Do you have any suggestions, Egan?"

"Call his bluff. Tell him you'll pay, but not that way. Make him come up with something else."

Conway slowly shook his head. It wasn't even a difficult decision to make, he realized with a trace of surprise. It made no difference that Egan might very well be right, and that by going into that computer room, accepting his isolation there, he was taking a blind risk. It still had to be done. "He won't go for it," Conway said. "He doesn't have to. What he did with the hospital's power supply was a warning. I can't take a chance on whatever else it is that he might do to this city. I'll follow his orders to the letter."

"Whoever goes in there with you will be running the same kind of risk you are," Egan pointed out.

"I understand that. I can't order anyone else to do it, but—"

"What the hell, you don't have to," Rob Greiner said.

The others looked at him in surprise.

"If there's anybody who knows that system better than this Intruder, it's me." There was both anger and arrogance in the flat declaration. "And if there's anyone who can figure out a way to beat him at his own game, that's me."

"You don't even work for the Center any more," Conway protested.

"What the hell difference does that make? Anyway, the city's paying me to try and stop this crazy. Okay, my best advice is to have *me* in there tonight. Maybe the Intruder owns the system right now, but that doesn't mean I can't find some kind of hole in it that he doesn't know about. The thing is, if I'm in there I can get at the hardware itself. That's something he can't do. And maybe . . ."

"Maybe what?" Conway demanded. Hearing the eagerness in his own voice, he realized how desperately he was willing to grasp at the flimsiest straw. "What are you thinking, Greiner?"

Greiner regarded the mayor with cool arrogance. "Do I go with you or not?"

"Someone has to," Conway said after a moment's hesitation. "All right, it has to be a volunteer, so it might as well be you."

"Del Thomas won't like it."

"I think I can decide who to have in that room with me. Now

what were you getting at a moment ago? What can you do to the hardware?"

"Uh-uh. Let me think about it."

"I don't want to try anything that will set this man off. That's an order, Greiner. Otherwise I'll find someone else."

"Stop worrying," Greiner said. "I haven't even said there's anything I can do for sure, only that I'd like to have a look. And okay, it has to be something the Intruder doesn't get onto, right? All I'm saying right now is that you need me in there."

Conway stared at him. Greiner's arrogance was an additional risk he didn't want to have to think about when he was dealing with the Intruder. It would be easier to have someone else, someone more cautious and stable, someone who could be counted on not to try anything reckless. Easier, and possibly safer.

"We go in at five o'clock," Conway said. "I don't want to make him nervous, and I don't want to keep him waiting."

"Give me an extra half hour," Greiner said quickly. "See if you can shut down the Center by four-thirty at the latest, and get me in there with nobody else around. We may not have any time after five."

Reacting to the proposal, Michael Egan felt a momentary uneasiness, remembering his earlier suspicion that Greiner himself might be the Intruder. What better way to complete his coup than to carry out the last phase himself?

He caught Jenny's eye and knew that she read his thoughts. She started to speak and checked herself. She couldn't be objective and she knew it. Egan could.

And he knew that, once again, he had to go with his instinct. "Give him the time, Mr. Conway," he urged. "That may be the only chance we have left."

In Orlando, Rick Harmon answered the call from Tampa.

"Who did you say?"

"Janice," the data clerk at the Credit Systems backup library said tartly. "Don't tell me you've forgotten all about your high-priority Urgent Special Request."

"Janice, would I ever forget you?" He really ought to get over to Tampa, Rick Harmon thought. Janice had one of those warm, liquid voices even when she was trying to be sarcastic. He had never met her in the flesh, and he wondered about the shape of that flesh. They had a lot in common, working for CS. She was

probably neat and orderly, and she wouldn't leave the dishes to stack up for days or forget to collect his suit from the cleaner's the way Drucie did. "Did you find anything?" he asked.

"Well, I don't know what you're looking for exactly," Janice said. "But there is a file where one of those names showed up."

"That's odd," Rick Harmon said, frowning.

"You want to know which one?"

"Of course I do! What have you got?"

She told him, reading the brief record in its entirety. "You notice something funny?"

"What's that?" Harmon asked, while his mind probed the fact that a record was in the backup file that was not in the main tape library. One was an *exact* duplicate of the other. He was thinking about those inquiries from Grayson's a few weeks ago. Had someone used those queries to get into the files to *remove* a record?

"The date," Janice said. "February 18, 1970. That's today's date, exactly seven years ago."

"So it is," Harmon said.

"So seven years is our time limit, right?"

"Yeah, that's right." Derogatory information was retained for a maximum of seven years by law, after which, if there was nothing new against the subject, the file was removed and destroyed.

"We're just getting ready to update," Janice pointed out. "If you called for that information next week, it wouldn't be there any more. It'd be gone."

"That's a funny coincidence, all right," Harmon said. "Listen, Janice, thanks a lot. Maybe this doesn't mean anything but it just could be important. I'll make this up to you, okay?"

"Sure," the girl said. "I won't hold my breath."

Harmon hung up. For a moment he stared at the information he had scribbled down. It didn't look like much, he thought, and it was seven years old. Still . . . you never knew.

He reached for the phone.

40 FRI FEB 18 / 04:30 PM

"Edward Lee Craddock?" Egan said.

"That's the name. And like I said, it was seven years ago it happened. I mean, seven years to the day! February 18, 1970."

Egan stared at Jenny Tyson, his face mirroring a confusion of elation and disbelief. Greiner had left for the Regional Data Center before the call came through from Florida. Jenny, answering the phone, had listened only briefly before she excitedly turned the caller over to Egan. Now she grinned at him, that trumpets-in-the-sunset grin that seemed as if it would swallow him. Egan said, "Mr. Harmon . . . would you mind going over that again?"

"From the top?"

"From the top." He wondered if he should have Jenny try to reach Mayor Conway and Greiner on another phone. He decided against it. He wanted to be sure he was across the goal line before spiking the ball and going into his victory dance.

"... he was on a Stop Credit Bulletin," the bright, sunshiny voice from Florida said. "He was AWOL from Fort Benning, a deserter, and the way it looked he was trying to get to Canada on a credit card. He kept using this oil company card all the way from Georgia on up north where you all are, and nobody caught it in time. The oil company puts out a Stop Credit bulletin on cards

that are supposed to be picked up, and they pay a ten dollar reward for a bad card pickup."

Get on with it, Egan muttered impatiently to himself, his own excitement rising. Like a damned bloodhound, he thought.

"Well, this gas station near Hollister, the owner looked at the bulletin when this kid tried to use the card to buy some gas. He picked up the card and held it. This Craddock lost his card, and he didn't get any gas either. The station owner turned it in later and picked up ten bucks. That's why I thought it might be important, Mr. Egan, because that station owner was on your list. His name was Prochaska—Arthur J. Prochaska."

"My God!" Egan breathed.

"What did he say?" Jenny demanded. "Michael, what's he saying?"

He shook his head, mutely asking her to wait. To Harmon he said, "Is that all you've got?"

"Listen," Rick Harmon said. "You're lucky to get that. It wasn't even in our regular file, but I checked the backup over in Tampa, just on a hunch, and it was there." He paused. "I think someone got in and erased the primary record. Tricked one of our people into pulling the tape, and then got in and zapped the data. Which sounds like Craddock to me. Nobody else would have had a reason."

"There's no follow-up information on Craddock? Nothing else in your files?"

"No, that's it." The Credit System operator sounded aggrieved.

"Well, this helps a lot," Egan said quickly. "You don't know how much, or how important it is. Wait a minute," he added, thinking rapidly. "Do your records show any other personal information on Craddock, other than what you've given me?"

"Only that he was married," Harmon said, "and his wife was pregnant."

Rob Greiner had been in the computer room since 4:30 by arrangement with Del Thomas. The regular staff had been sent home at that time, the Center virtually shut down. Deserted, it had a thoroughly dehumanized atmosphere, reminding Greiner of a missile programmed to fly straight to its target without a pilot.

The buzzer sounded. Looking up, Greiner saw James Conway standing in the man-trap. But it was an unfamiliar Conway, someone who had lost his cool. In his excitement, the mayor couldn't stand still.

Entry to the computer room was controlled by the main processor itself, and Greiner punched the code that operated the inner door. The code had not been changed since he last worked at the Center and the door opened instantly.

"We've got a match!" Conway shouted. "Damned if Egan hasn't done it after all!"

"How?" Greiner was unable to keep the resentment out of his tone. Egan hadn't done it alone, he thought.

Conway recounted what Egan had told him about the call from Credit Systems in Orlando. "It's the weirdest thing," Conway concluded. "I still don't know how it all ties up, but there has to be a connection. That old man, Prochaska, froze in his house because of a computer foul-up on his utility bill. That *can't* be a coincidence."

"No," Greiner agreed grudgingly. "But nobody waits seven years to get even for not being able to buy some gas."

"I know, there has to be more to it—but at least we now have a name, a real identity. It shouldn't take long to pin down who he is."

"Maybe," Greiner said. "But I wouldn't count on it. The way you tell it, Craddock did get into Credit Systems' files to erase his record. He slipped up over the off-line backup file, but now we know he's been trying to make sure he doesn't exist on record, just like he told us."

Conway's elation died. He stared at Greiner. He had been too ready to believe good news unquestioningly. Greiner's blunt reminder brought him down from that artificial high with demoralizing suddenness.

Knowing the Intruder's real name might eventually expose the identity he was masquerading under—but not soon enough. And perhaps—if his late-night boast to Egan and Greiner was more than idle posturing—he might not be identified at all.

"It doesn't really change anything, does it?" Conway said.

"He's still got us by the balls. If he squeezes, we still hurt. Unless you're ready to call his bluff right now and take your chances on what he can do to this system."

"Could he really have created a false identity we wouldn't be able to penetrate? Is that possible?"

"With his computer savvy?" Greiner shrugged. "I could do it. Pick a town where the vital stats are in a databank and he could be born again, like our President. But with a new name. We'd have to do a lot of scratching into every name on our lists—and

he might not even be there—before we could find out if somebody's loving Mom and Dad only exist on a piece of tape in a file, or some kid who got all A's and B's in Dorsey High never went there at all. And once you get data like that on file, you can build everything else from it—Social Security number, driver's license, the whole bit. All 'legitimate.'" Greiner paused. "Yeah, he could be hard to find. He forgot about that backup file in Credit Systems, or else he didn't know about it. You better hope that wasn't the only mistake he made." Another pause brought a scowl. "I wish I knew how he did that."

"What?"

"I didn't find any extra activity between Grayson's and Credit Systems, and I was looking for stuff like that when I was hired to check out Grayson's system. There should have been extra line charges, and higher billings from CS. There weren't."

"That's hardly surprising. He's beaten us at every step."

Conway felt thoroughly deflated. He glanced at the digital clock on one of the consoles. Five minutes to deadline. At five o'clock, if he was on time, the Intruder would be making his demands. Not enough time, Conway thought bitterly. If only they had had the name earlier . . .

"Can we stall him?" he asked.

"You've heard from him more than I have. Would you say he could be stalled?"

Conway shook his head.

"Then you'd better decide what we're gonna do."

Something in Greiner's tone made Conway look at him narrowly. Greiner had punctured his balloon, but there was a gleam in his eyes that didn't suggest failure. "Have you come up with something? Damn it, Greiner, don't play games with me—"

"Take it easy, Mr. Mayor. I've been busy, sure. That's what I was here for."

"Have you found a way to cut him off?"

"Nothing like that. But I got in there." He looked at the sleek metal shell of the main processor, his expression softening. "She's got holes in her. Every system does. And if you can find holes in the hardware, there are some things you can do. Even a few dozen microseconds is enough to get into a file and change it, just like your Intruder did."

"Wait a minute! If he's as smart as he seems to be, he'll know what you've done. I told you not to do anything that would set him off."

"Give me credit," Greiner snapped back. "Look, I'll make this simple. If you know a system well enough—and I do—you can make it work for you. You can add logic that will hide what you've done. I figure Craddock will be looking for trouble; he'll expect us to try something. So he'll be making a sweep, sending out test signals to search for any changes we might try to make. But you can also beat that. You can put in what's called a user-controllable change. It answers only to the user. And you can fix it so the system picks up any test signals and deactivates your change while the test is going down. No matter what tests he runs, what you've done won't show up. You can make your little piece of business play possum, understand?"

"I think so," Conway said slowly. "What did you do?"

"I figure the one thing he doesn't want us to do is follow the money trail. He'll suppress any printout, and he'll write over the instructions so there's no after-image we can read later on." Greiner paused, and now the gleam in his eyes was unmistakable. The triumph would be his in the end, not Egan's. "I just set it up so he'll leave us some tracks, that's all. Some tracks he won't know are there."

Linus Webster closed the laboratory early. Because Jenny had been uncertain about getting away in time to pick him up, he had made arrangements with Barry Westfield, a younger associate professor in the department with a special interest in astro-physics, to give him a ride home. Westfield's office and laboratory were on the ground floor, and he was ready to leave when Webster stopped by.

"All set, Dr. Webster? We have a dinner engagement tonight, so I'm expected home early. Be with you in a minute."

"That won't be necessary, Barry. That is . . . my daughter is picking me up, after all. So I won't have to bother you."

"No bother!" Westfield protested. "You're sure, now?"

"Yes—thank you all the same."

"Any time, Dr. Webster, you know that. It's hardly out of my way at all, you know." He flicked off his desk light and reached for the overcoat on the nearby rack. Gray with a black alpaca collar, it somehow made him look like more like a successful Wall Street broker than a physicist. "Is she picking you up near the parking lot?" Westfield asked cheerfully. "I'll walk out with you."

He never seemed to be tired, Webster thought, unable to control a slight resentment. One of the problems with growing old was

that one never mentally adjusted to the fact that it was no longer possible to make the same demands upon oneself, to work the same hours tirelessly, to shrug off fatigue. It was the mind that refused to accept the truth; the body knew.

The two men parted near the parking area, Westfield calling out, "Have a good weekend, Doctor—and say hello to that pretty daughter of yours."

"Good night, Barry."

Webster moved slowly along a path that took him into shadows. There he paused, looking back. He saw young Westfield's car lights come on—the car was a Porsche, silver-gray like his coat—and a moment later the growl of the engine faded into the night.

The old man looked back in the direction of the Physics Building. No one was in sight, but he was quite certain that his departure would have been noticed.

He wondered for a moment how he was going to get home. Perhaps Jenny . . .

He shrugged off the thought irritably. She had her own life to live. It was a clear night, and there would be no trouble getting a taxi.

But for the moment he was in no hurry.

Killing time, he had a cup of forbidden coffee at the cafeteria, surrounded by the babble of young student voices. He justified the coffee by telling himself that he had been chilled by his walk.

But it was another kind of chill he felt as he left the cafeteria and slowly retraced his steps.

The Physics Building was silent as he entered. Friday night, even the dedicated ones were anxious to leave. It was nearly five o'clock. He saw no one as he climbed the stairs to the second floor.

The office was dark. Through the frosted glass he could see the glow from the laboratory beyond. He let himself in quietly.

A young man was on the far side of the lab, hunched over the minicomputer. His expression was startled as he saw the old man in his heavy coat standing in the doorway. His eyes darted anxiously this way and that, as if he were searching for a way to run. But then his eyes riveted on the physicist, and Webster saw their expression harden.

Webster had known him on sight—at least by the name under which he had masqueraded in Hollister. The hunch which had brought the physicist back to his laboratory tonight also suggested another name. "You must be Eddie," Linus Webster said.

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Now there was only one name to match against information in the labyrinth of databanks: Edward Lee Craddock.

In the small office adjacent to the borrowed computer terminal room at Grayson's, an open line had been set up to the regional FBI office. Egan had been on the phone almost constantly, requesting and receiving reports relayed through the Bureau. Jenny Tyson remained at the computer terminal, sending out requests for data on Craddock to the sources previously queried. Inquiry and response, with only one name to be checked, were sometimes completed in a few seconds.

Nothing turned up.

According to Credit Systems, Craddock had come from Detroit, Michigan. That city and state had some very large databanks, including Detroit's extensive "people information system" that contained both social and physical data. The trouble was that no Edward Lee Craddock, age twenty-one in 1970, could be found. As far as Detroit's records were concerned, Edward Lee Craddock had not been born there, he had not attended school or been a truant, he had never been in a correctional institution or on welfare, and he had never contracted venereal disease. He had had no car or driver's license. He had never owned or been the beneficiary of a life insurance policy. On record, he did not exist.

Egan appeared in the doorway connecting the two search rooms. Jenny's disappointment over her own efforts deepened when she saw the expression of disgust on Egan's face. "There's nothing on him in the NCIC," he said. "Not one word. This has really put them into a flap in Washington. What it means is that Craddock got into the FBI's computer system, probably using some legitimate local law enforcement code, and somehow took out his own record."

"He penetrated the *FBI*?" Jenny asked in mock surprise.

Egan managed a feeble grin. "You have to understand how things are at the Bureau these days, I'm told. They're very sensitive over criticism about the possibility of inaccurate information getting into the National Crime Information Center, or the lack of follow-up on arrest records. So there's been a special push to make sure your local sheriff or police chief follows through wherever there's been a change of status or information in any criminal record entered into the system. It looks like Craddock was able to take advantage of that. But instead of updating a record, he eliminated one."

They were silent for a moment. Then Jenny said, "What about the other government databanks? If he could get into the FBI's system—"

"I won't believe it until we've checked them all," Egan said. "I *can't* believe it."

"But it's exactly what he told you he'd done," Jenny pointed out.

"I know. But I'm still betting he slipped up somewhere else, not just with Credit Systems. We know now he's not infallible." Egan scowled pensively. "The irony is that he never could've pulled off what he has if we were still using old-fashioned manual records—not without doing a lot of breaking and entering." He shook his head. "We're always getting ahead of ourselves. It's like we've become an unthinking people. We gulp the new drugs before we know how they'll affect our own chemistry. We turn the running of our lives over to computers before we really know what they can do to us. They're new, and New is Holy."

"You can always blame it on TV," Jenny said facetiously.

This time Egan's grin was more genuine. "What do you expect from a law-and-order type? Originality?"

"You haven't exactly been a clod around here."

"I've felt like one. Every time I think we've got this guy, he wriggles off the hook again." Egan paused as a thought struck

him. "He's had a lot of time since 1970 to set up his dirty tricks. Where's he been all this time?"

"Canada? Maybe we should be making some inquiries there."

"Let's get the FBI on that—should have done it before. They can use their clout with the Royal Canadian Mounties."

"Do they still call them that? I mean, really?"

"They do. And it's just as modern and computerized an outfit as any we have." Egan paused. "The fact that Craddock was on the run; a deserter from the army, is still the best lead we have. That kind of information doesn't just vanish!"

At the moment the phone in the computer room rang. Jenny scooped up the instrument, listened briefly, then held it out to him. "It's Herb Greenberg," she said. "From the *Times*."

Later Egan remembered looking at his watch just before he took the phone from her. The time was one minute past five. He wondered what was happening at the RDC.

The Intruder regarded Linus Webster coolly. He felt quite calm. "Why did you call me that?" he asked.

"George Devoto used the name once in talking about his new roommate. Then he acted as if he wanted to bite his tongue. At the time I never thought much about it. Why was George worried? Is Eddie your real name?" When the young man did not reply, Webster speculated aloud. "I know about George being a draft evader. He came back to this country before the amnesty program, and he was quite bitter about it. I suppose that's where he knew you before—in Canada?"

"You're crazy if you think George knew anything about what I was doing."

"Oh, I don't think that. Not at all. But you used him. You dealt badly with a friend."

"I wasn't hurting him—he did that to himself." The denial was too quick and emphatic, betraying its defensiveness.

Linus Webster shook his head in self-deprecation. "I should have suspected what was done. But I didn't—not even when George got into trouble. It was that interference with the hospital's power supply that made me wonder. Today I did something I should have done before. I examined the program George worked on for me." The old man paused. "The printout was there Monday morning. At the time I simply thought it was George's work, and I didn't see any need to go over it again. I wish I had been wiser."

"Fortunately for me, you weren't—and now it's too late."

"You used my computer, and my program, to take over the Regional Data Center."

"It wasn't so hard. And if it hadn't been your program, it would've been someone else's, so don't take it personally." The statement was defiantly boastful, but Webster caught the young man's uneasiness. Then the Intruder said, "If you guessed what happened, how come you came back here alone tonight?"

"Let's say it was . . . curiosity. A weakness of my profession, I'm afraid."

"Have you told anyone else?"

The old man smiled at the transparent motive behind the question. "I'm a scientist," he said. "We do a great deal of guessing, but we don't publicize our guesses."

The younger man was silent for a long moment before he said, "It doesn't matter, Professor. I have no reason to harm you."

Hearing the lie, Linus Webster felt his years, an infinite weariness. He looked around for something to sit on. When he turned as if to retreat, the young man moved quickly to block his way. He stopped as Webster found a stool. Their eyes met and held.

Sinking onto the stool, Webster wondered if he should take one of his pills. Ordinarily he was able to get by on two a day, one in the morning and another with his evening meal. But he carried a pillbox in case of emergency, a time of sudden, unexpected stress. He decided to wait. His heartbeat was rapid but not alarmingly so. He had less to fear from his heart, he thought, than from this disturbed young man with the eyes of a trapped animal.

"Why did you do it, Eddie?" he asked after a moment.

"It has nothing to do with you. You don't need to know."

"It has to do with all of us in Hollister now. And you did use my work as well as my computer to penetrate the RDC. By the way, did you deliberately wait until the fresh, uncorrupted copy of the operating system was put in before your takeover? My daughter explained what happened."

The Intruder laughed. "Keep guessing, old man."

"It is a guess, of course . . . but then I guessed right about expecting to find you here tonight." Webster paused. "You must have had a strong motivation. It wasn't only the money, was it? I can hardly believe that."

"I want the money because that's the only way you can really hurt them."

"Them?" Webster probed quickly.

Eddie ignored the question. "I'm going to make them bleed

money, because that's getting them where they really live."

The old man nodded slowly, as if this were a sensible explanation. He said, "It must be time you told someone why you find it necessary to punish this city. They'll track you down, you know. Don't you want someone to know why you did it?"

Eddie glared at him. "Are you talking about Greiner and that security hotshot, Egan? They'll never identify me. They don't have a clue."

Webster wondered if the angry young man realized how obvious he had made it that he could not allow Webster himself to survive. Curiously, he felt no fear. Twenty years ago the thought of untimely death would have enraged him, and the rage would have engendered fear. But death had become a familiar companion in later years, too familiar to be very frightening.

"It happened a long time ago?" he prompted.

"Yes. Seven years—" The Intruder broke off, suspicion flaring. "Why are you asking so many questions? Why do you want to know?"

"I'd like to understand. Perhaps . . . even help."

"No one can help. Not now. And you wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

The younger man was silent, struggling with himself. He discovered to his own surprise that he *did* want to talk. He did want someone to know—even if Webster could not be allowed to carry the knowledge away. They killed her," he said, the words almost inaudible.

"Killed whom, Eddie?"

"My wife! Mary Jane, and . . . and . . ."

"Dear God!" Linus Webster's chest contracted painfully. He took a careful breath. The weary lines in his face deepened into anguish. "Who did? What are you trying to say?"

"All of them!" Eddie cried. "This city—these people—all of them! No one cared—no one would do anything to help! They let her die. And now they're paying for it! Yes, I used your program. George Devoto didn't know, but he almost caught me out. I was here last Sunday night when George tried to hide. I'd been working on that program of his, and he nearly caught me. I had to . . . I had to give him away." He paused in his half-coherent tirade. "I didn't want to hurt him. He wasn't to blame."

"The others you've hurt," Webster said softly. "weren't to blame either, surely. Not for something that happened seven years ago."

"How do you know? You don't know anything!"

"Then tell me!" Webster thundered, the words a command, authoritative and compelling. "For heaven's sake, man, you *must* tell someone."

Staring at him, startled, the Intruder knew that the old man was right.

"You called in a while ago about this Craddock?" Herb Greenberg made the statement sound like a question.

"What have you got?" Egan asked eagerly.

"With the name and a date to go by it was easy," Greenberg said. "All our old stuff is on microfilm now, we don't keep the clip file the way we used to. I looked for something on Craddock for this date back in 1970. I found it in the obits for the nineteenth, the next day."

Egan held his breath.

"The death of one Mary Jane Craddock and a baby, unnamed, on February 18, 1970. Survived by husband, Edward Lee Craddock." Greenberg paused. "It's not much."

"It's a lot more than you think, Herb."

"You want to tell me now or do I keep guessing?"

Egan hesitated. "I'll get back to you. That's a promise."

"Yeah, sure." Greenberg was silent a moment before he said, "I guess you have your motive now."

Egan silently acknowledged his admiration for the newsman's intuition. "I guess you're right," he said.

He wondered what Arthur J. Prochaska's pickup of a credit card had had to do with the death of Mary Jane Craddock and her baby.

Egan placed a quick call to the county hospital's security office. The security director there was back on the line within ten minutes. The hospital records for 1970 were in manual files stored in a basement archive under lock and key. The Craddock file was intact.

"The infant strangled on the umbilical cord," the security man said briskly. "The medical terminology for what happened is called *placenta previa*. The fetus blocked the passage from the womb, and there was catastrophic internal hemorrhaging by the mother. I talked to one of the doctors here, and he said the chances are the mother could have been saved if she'd been in the hospital in time. Delay in a case like that can be fatal, and this time it was."

"I'd like a copy of that hospital record," Egan said. "And thanks for your help."

He hung up and told Jenny Tyson what had happened to Edward Lee Craddock's wife and his unborn child.

The Intruder had turned off all the lights in the physics laboratory except for the alcove that housed the minicomputer. Linus Webster was conscious not only of the darkness pooling through the rest of the laboratory but also of a deepening chill. The automatic thermostats in the building were set to lower the temperature at five o'clock on Friday. Sitting on a stool at the edge of that self-contained well of light, feeling the cold and listening to the Thank-God-it's-Friday silence that pervaded the building, Webster had an intensifying sense of his isolation.

The younger man spoke of a lonelier, embittered exile that would never end. "All I wanted was a can of gas," he said. "A piddling can of gas! We ran out on the highway just outside of town. I thought I had enough to get into Hollister, but we didn't make it. It was cold and snowing, and I didn't want her to have to walk in that kind of weather, with the baby due any time. I had to leave her in the car." He paused for a long time. Webster said nothing. He doubted that the young man would even have heard him. "She was all right when I left her. I walked back about a half-mile to where I'd seen this gas station open, because it was one I had a credit card for. We were out of money then. Flat broke. I spent our last dime on a candy bar for Mary for lunch that day even though she didn't want me to." He paused, his features contorted. "This old man was there alone. He was suspicious right off. I could see he didn't like what I looked like. I had long hair and a beard, and I must've seemed scruffy and dangerous to him. He called me a hippie and let me know he didn't like hippies. 'I don't give credit to hippies,' he said.

"Then I told him I had a credit card. He didn't like it, but he took the card and told me I could go ahead and fill up a can of gas. While I was filling it he went into the station with the card. When he came out he was holding a shotgun. He pointed it at me and said, 'You can leave the gas right there.' He told me not to ask for my credit card back because it was on a pickup list. If I wasn't on my way down the road in ten seconds, he'd call the police.

"I tried to tell him that Mary Jane was in the car, waiting for me, and that she was pregnant and I had to get her to the hospital.

He wouldn't believe me. Said I was lying. I was a no-good hippie and I wasn't going to get any free ride from him with a story like that." Anger soured the Intruder's mouth, pinching his lips inward. "I should have gone for him right then, but he looked like he really *wanted* to use that shotgun. If I'd known how bad Mary Jane was, how close it was to the time, I would've gone for him anyway . . ."

The young man fell silent.

"It wasn't the old man's fault," Linus Webster said gently. "He didn't know."

"That's always the excuse! But he *did* know—I told him! It would've been different if I hadn't been wearing a beard and long hair. He'd have given me a lousy can of gas if I'd cut my hair and ducked my head and saluted the flag. There wouldn't have been any trouble if I hadn't been someone he hated on sight. And if I'd been willing to carry a gun and kill little yellow people I had nothing against on the other side of the goddman world. I wouldn't have been on that road with Mary and . . . and I wouldn't have been running and it never would have happened!"

Webster said nothing. The angry polarism of those days was vivid in his memory. Thinking back, he could understand the distrustful stubbornness of the gas station owner. He could also sympathize with the young man's terrible rage.

"What happened to your wife?" he prompted after a while. He thought he knew already and, knowing, he didn't want to hear more. But it was important to keep the young man talking.

"What happened?" Wildness flamed in Eddie's eyes. Then it faded out like a spark gored in its own ashes. He told the rest of the story in a dead, dispassionate monotone. "She was crying and hurting when I got back to the car. There was already a lot of bleeding and she kept begging me to get her to the hospital. 'Hurry!' she kept saying. 'Hurry!' But we had to walk, and all these cars kept driving by us, all heading in to Hollister. And after a while I had to carry her. I tried to get someone to stop and help us. No one stopped. Nobody. Nobody would do anything to help. All those good citizens of Hollister, all those schoolteachers and truck drivers and lawyers and politicians in their fine cars, all the best people of this wonderful city drove right past us. No, they wouldn't stop. They wouldn't help. They didn't care.

"We were almost to the hospital when an ambulance saw us and pulled up. They must have seen the red tracks in the snow. The blood ran down my legs onto my shoes and I was leaving tracks. They took us in. We got to the hospital and she was

screaming when they took her inside. They wouldn't let me follow them, they kept me out. But it was too late . . ."

Linus Webster lifted a hand in mute protest. The hand trembled and, after a moment, fell to his side.

"I swore I'd come back," Eddie said in the same flat, emotionless tone. "When the time was right, when I was ready, I'd come back and make them pay—all the upright citizens of this fine city who let her die."

"You waited all those years . . ."

"I had to get out of the country!" Anger flared. "They weren't finished with me. My wife and baby weren't enough, they wanted my life too! So all I could do was wait and think about how I would pay them back. I had plenty of time to think."

Seven years, Webster thought. For the grieving young husband, seven years of brooding, plotting, scheming, keeping alive his anguish by making it the center of his life, using the time to create a tortured plan of retribution. There was a madness in that prolonged nurturing of vengeance that made those years of exile terrible to contemplate.

"What made you think of using the computer system against the city?" Webster asked quietly.

"They used it against me—why shouldn't I use it against them?" Eddie made the question a challenge. "I didn't know how at first, all I knew was there had to be a way. I knew a little about computers, but I started learning everything I could, taking courses. Then, about three years ago, I read this story in a magazine. I even remember where I was. I was sitting in this coffee shop, in Montreal, reading about these government grants going to cities setting up community computer systems, and the name jumped right out at me: Hollister! The story told how Hollister would have this marvelous total-information system, how all the city's vital functions would be controlled by the same system. I knew that was what I needed the minute I read about it. It was better than any bomb in the world. I didn't just want to blow up a building. *People* did it to Mary Jane. It was people who had to pay."

"Her death was no one's fault," Webster protested. "Surely you know that now."

"Because no one knew? Like Prochaska?"

"Prochaska?" The old man frowned. It was a moment before he placed the name. "The man who froze to death in his house . . . he was the one . . ."

"He got off too easy," Eddie said bitterly. "I had better things planned for him."

"You mean . . . you didn't plan on his dying?"

"Not like that! Not that easy!" Sullen anger corroded the words. "You know what I had planned for him? I was going to doctor his credit first, ruin him, make him see what it was like to beg for a can of gas. But would you believe it? He didn't *have* any credit. I mean, he didn't need it. That stupid old man always paid for everything the day he bought it! I had to find something he couldn't pay cash on the line for—like his utilities. He had to be billed for those, like it or not. So I worked it out to cut off his power. The night it was shut off, I cut his telephone line too. But I didn't want him to die—not then. I wanted to scare him, but I didn't want it to be over so quick—not after I waited seven years! I wanted to make it last. I wanted him to beg for it to be over." Harshly he said, "Maybe he knew. He didn't have to give up so easily. He killed himself. . . I didn't kill him."

"No one killed your wife and child," Linus Webster said.

The young man stared at him. Abruptly he turned away. He crossed the narrow lighted space and stood at the edge of the darkness beyond it. His face was in shadow, but there was a shrewd speculation in his voice when he spoke. "You think you're very clever, don't you, Professor? Making me talk like this."

Webster shook his head. "You needed someone to talk to."

"I don't need you. I don't need anyone—not any more. She was the only one I needed. She was the only one who ever cared."

"You must have had others—friends, relatives. What about your parents?"

"You're beautiful, Professor, you really are. What's that supposed to do, soften me up?" He turned toward Webster, his face appearing out of shadow like a mask of tragedy. "Do you want to talk to me about parents? My old man would've turned me in if I'd gone home when I was underground, you believe that? He was just like Prochaska, like your whole generation. All he ever fed me was lies. When it was on the line, when I was kicked out of school for protesting that whole napalm-dropping Vietnam scene, he showed me where he was *really* at. He was so uptight he wanted to disown me, so I beat him to it. I disowned *him*!"

"Your mother too?" Webster asked softly.

Eddie laughed without mirth. "Mom's apple pie and home-sweet-home? Now you're really reaching. Professor. And you're wasting your time. I don't have any parents. They don't exist."

He crossed the alcove and stopped in front of the physicist. Then he leaned closer. "I told you I was broke that day. Well, I wouldn't have been if I had any parents. I took a chance the day before and I wired them for money. But I had a hunch, and I waited across the street from that Western Union station, and do you want to know who showed up to see if I tried to collect? *Look* at me, damn you! The FBI, that's who showed up!"

"Maybe . . . maybe they intercepted the telegram. You don't know . . ."

"Maybe. And maybe somebody told them." Eddie drew back. He shrugged, as if the distinction was no longer of importance. "Mary was the only one who never lied to me. She didn't know how. She never learned. I don't know how that happened, but she came through the whole rotten system without ever knowing how to be anything but what she was. I let them draft me because of her, would you believe that? She thought it was honor and duty, God and country. I must've been crazy to think I could take that hup-two-three-four, learn how to kill by the numbers, but I'd have done almost anything she wanted. I loved her. So I didn't run. I tried it, man, I just couldn't handle it. Did you ever listen to anyone tell you how you're supposed to stick this bayonet inside somebody's guts and rip him up? I mean, they wanted me to *practice* it! I had to split, that's all . . ."

Webster felt a constriction in his chest. The young man's pain was like his own. Reluctantly he said, "Yet you would risk other lives now—"

"Shut up!" Eddie screamed. "It's not the same. This is *punishment*. I *loved* her, do you hear me? And this city took her away from me. These people destroyed her because I wouldn't play by their rules. Now you want to tell me about loving kindness and turning the other cheek—about doing the right thing. Just *shut up*!" He stopped, chest heaving as he struggled for control. "I'll tell you something true, Dr. Webster," he went on after a moment, calmer. "Do you know what this sick society says is good? Good is what makes *you* feel good. That's where it's at. Well, it makes me feel good to make this city bleed. You understand what I'm saying? What I'm doing isn't bad, it's *good*! They'll remember me after tonight, even if they don't know who I am. And every time they think about it they'll bleed some more. And every time I think about them bleeding, I'm going to feel good."

"They'll find you, Eddie. It's only a matter of time."

"How? Because you'll tell them?" Eddie's stare was pitiless.

"No. I didn't ask you to come here. That was your own doing. But you're here now, and you won't tell anyone anything." He turned toward the minicomputer behind him. "Just stay where you are, old man. You can watch until I'm finished. Maybe you figured it was smart to keep me talking, but I knew what you were doing, and it didn't matter. They're not going to find me now, and I didn't mind keeping the good mayor waiting. He's the one that's sweating now, waiting to hear from me." He grinned savagely. "You all think you're so goddamned clever. Do you really believe for a minute I don't know what they'll try to do with that computer? That they'll try to keep track of the money so it'll lead them to me? Christ, would I go through all this and then pull something that dumb?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Just watch, Professor. Just watch."

In the computer room at the Regional Data Center Rob Greiner had been poring over a wiring diagram, double-checking himself, so intent that he was oblivious of James Conway's presence.

"Why haven't we heard from him?" Conway asked abruptly.

Greiner looked up in surprise. "How the hell should I know? He's crazy. Why do you expect him to act rationally?"

"I don't think he's crazy."

Greiner's smile mocked him. "Are you saying that piling up cars at intersections and starting fires and holding up a city for ransom is your everyday all-American activity?"

"I didn't say that."

"Put whatever nice label you want on it. He's still freaked out. Crazy."

Conway saw no point in pursuing the argument. "He instructed me to be here at five. Something must be wrong. Maybe he knows what you've been up to."

Greiner shook his head, arrogantly confident. "He may be looking, but he won't find anything. Take it easy, Mr. Mayor. You'll hear from him soon enough. I wouldn't be so anxious—"

He broke off. There was a sudden clattering at the main console.

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Edward Lee Craddock no longer existed.

Except in a backup credit file maintained by Credit Systems, Inc., located off-line in the pre-1975 section of the company's data library in Tampa, Florida.

Except in a dusty manual file located in the basement of the Hollister County General Hospital.

Except in the archives of the Department of Defense, located at Fort Holabird, Maryland.

Jenny Tyson had been trying to reach her father. There was no answer at home. She dialed his office number at the university and waited for a full dozen rings—when he was working he was often reluctant to answer the phone. She was looking up Barry Westfield's number when she heard Michael Egan's triumphant shout.

She met him in the doorway. Egan embraced her exultantly, swinging her off her feet as he whirled away from the door. "We've got him!" he cried as he set her down. "That was Defense finally coming through—the Central Index of Investigation and National Agency Check Center, to be exact. All we needed was Craddock's real name. The DOD had his discharge record—he's a 669."

"What does that mean?" She felt breathless. He was still holding her closely.

"That's his Separation Program Number. Officially it means 'dropped from rolls, AWOL, desertion.'"

"There's . . . no question about the ID?" His arms were around her waist and their thighs pressed together. She knew the solid strength and warmth of him. She felt a little dizzy.

"There's always a question until you get physical identification, but how many Edward Lee Craddocks went AWOL from the army in 1970? Only one—and that's our boy!"

Egan's arms tightened around her. She leaned against him, weak-kneed. What absurd creatures we are, she thought. When she had been alone with Egan in the comfortable isolation of his cottage, she had fled. Now, in the middle of a crisis that should have left no room for anything else, his touch left her as giddy as a schoolgirl.

She freed herself reluctantly. Too many things were crowding in on her. Coming to grips with David's death, identifying the Intruder, Egan, her father not answering the phone . . .

Trying to concentrate on Egan's news, she said, "So he wasn't able to erase himself completely after all."

"He probably tried," Egan said. "But that DOD center at Fort Holabird has to be one of the toughest places in the world to get into for information. The fact is that Craddock probably thought he had nothing to worry about there. He didn't think we'd ever learn his name—finding that off-line file in Tampa was just luck, after all—and without that we'd never have got to first base with Defense."

"It wasn't all luck," she said, reminding him that the computer search had been his idea. "Where does that leave us, Michael? We still don't know what he looks like—we don't know who he is *now*."

"I know. But once you have the basic identification, then you've also got case files to dip into—manual files, I mean. There are separate Military Police record depositories, for instance, for each of the services. Craddock was Army—and a deserter. They should have a nice fat file on him with all kinds of physical ID. I've got another call in to the Department of Justice's Inter-departmental Intelligence Unit. They may have something on Craddock, too, in their databank." He paused, subdued. "But you're right. Until we get fingerprints or a photo, we still don't have a match. And we're running out of time."

The statement produced a sober silence. Close, Jenny thought, but still no cigar. Once again, even with his true identity established and the motive for his actions known, the Intruder remained invisible.

She realized that her part of the search was over, and, restless, she thought again of her father, wondering where he was. But the puzzle of the Intruder would not be pushed aside. "I wonder why he left those hospital records intact," she said after a moment. "You'd think . . ."

"They were locked up."

"But he went to such elaborate lengths to erase himself in other ways. Why wouldn't he take that precaution? We know he was in that hospital when he used the terminal there."

"I think I can understand that," Egan said thoughtfully. "What happened at the hospital is what this whole affair is all about. It started there. Psychologically, he may have found it impossible to destroy the only proof that his child ever existed—and the documentation of his wife's death. Besides, if he'd succeeded in wiping out the other records of his existence—if we hadn't stumbled onto that Credit Systems match—the hospital records would have been no threat to him at all. They could have remained there forever, a file forgotten by everyone but him—and a record that justified everything he did here in Hollister."

"In his eyes."

"That's the way we all see things."

Keith Simpson of the Merchants Bank, acting after consultation with the mayor's Emergency Task Force and his own computer staff, had worked out the method of transferring the funds. The Intruder could not be permitted direct access to the interbank wire network. Instead, he was to transmit his instructions to Greiner, who would then key in the required access code. Use of a one-time-only code for each transaction would deny the Intruder the ability to repeat the performance on his own. If he tried to hide the money trail through a complicated series of maneuvers, which seemed likely, there would have to be a separate access with a new code number for each transaction.

Conway had expressed surprise over the Intruder's ready acceptance of the arrangement. "He's got nothing to lose," Greiner pointed out. "We complete the transaction for him, but he's in control of our system so he can monitor everything that's done. And he can suppress any printout. There's no permanent record."

"Won't he need one?"

"Why? All that matters to him is where the money ends up."

The instructions came in quick flurries of messages, sometimes followed by pauses of several minutes duration. Simpson had provided Conway with a list of current numbers of major U.S. banks, and he recognized several of those numbers in the early messages as they appeared briefly on the CRT display. The \$5 million ransom was moved from the Merchants Bank in Hollister to a numbered account at a New York bank. From there it was transferred to Chicago, back to New York, and on to Atlanta. After that Conway lost track.

The destination account numbers kept changing. Greiner guessed that the Intruder had set up dummy accounts all along the line, with a real account waiting at the end.

"Won't the interbank system's computers question all this activity?" Conway asked during one of the lulls.

Greiner shrugged. "Any human being would question such erratic moves, but not a computer. You have to understand, a computer is built on logic, but it doesn't recognize anything illogical in activity that is irrational only in terms of human behavior. To the computer there's nothing illogical whatsoever about transferring money electronically when it's been programmed to do exactly that. As long as there's a disbursing computer and a receiving computer, and a connection between the two, it's perfectly logical for sums to be exchanged. Not just once or twice, but a hundred times, ad infinitum. The hundredth transfer is just as logical as the first one. Not to you and me, maybe, but it is to the computer."

There was another burst of activity. Greiner turned back to the keyboard, repeating the Intruder's instructions. Another silence followed.

"Where is the money now?" Conway said after a moment.

"I don't know. Overseas, I suppose. Switzerland? Luxembourg?" Greiner chuckled. "Only the Shadow knows."

"Damn it, this isn't funny! What did you do to this machine before I got here, Greiner? Is that money lost or not?"

Greiner's gaze was cool. "Take it easy, Conway. The game isn't over. Let's just play it out."

Conway sagged into a chrome-and-vinyl chair. He felt completely helpless, plunged into a world he could no longer control or even understand. He was like a chess piece, once important,

that had been captured and taken out of the action.

From now on the game was between Greiner and the Intruder.

"Justice turned up a file on him," Egan was saying. "Not only as a deserter but as a student activist. Seems he took part in an occupation of a computer center at the University of Michigan back in '69—which tells us he knew something about how important computers were way back then." He broke off. "What's wrong, Jenny?"

She was putting on her coat. She was genuinely worried about her father now. No one answered her calls either at her father's or Dr. Westfield's office numbers. There was still no answer at home. She had tried looking up Westfield's home number but it was unlisted. "I don't know, Michael—nothing, I hope. But I can't raise Dad anywhere. And I have a . . . a funny feeling about it."

"He was getting a ride from another professor, wasn't he? They're probably visiting."

"I know, that's probably it and I'll feel like a fool. But I just have to make sure. Barry Westfield's number should be in Dad's black book at home. I'm sorry, Michael, but you don't need me here now. I'll feel better when I find out where Dad is, that's all."

Egan was sure that she was alarmed for no cause, but he could see that she was uneasy. "You'll be at home?"

"Yes, I . . . I'll let you know."

"Hey, take it easy." He took her by the shoulders and kissed her gently. "Go on home. There's not much either of us can do here until we get some physical identification on Craddock. We'll talk later."

"I know I shouldn't be such a . . . a square."

"Go," he said firmly.

There had been silence for several minutes in the physics laboratory since the last time the phone had rung. Watching the young man he knew now as "Eddie," Linus Webster considered the possibility of attempting to run from the lab. Somewhere in the building someone might still be at work, someone who would heed his call for help.

He had almost tried it when Eddie's attention was riveted on the ringing telephone. The mental picture of his ungainly flight along the corridor, banging on silent doors, pleading for help, had

stopped him. He smiled wryly. Friday night was getaway night. The chances of finding anyone who would come to his aid seemed small, and the attempt seemed beneath him. He did not really want to give the young man any such satisfaction, particularly when the chance of success was slight.

Pride is expensive, he thought. We will die before we give it up.

There had been several long periods of inactivity between Eddie's transmissions to the RDC, but the current delay seemed longer than the others. Why was he waiting so long?

Eddie turned to stare at him. "I haven't forgotten you, old man."

"I didn't suppose you had."

"It's done," the young man said in a matter-of-fact tone. "Can you believe it? Five million dollars! And it's out of their reach forever!"

"Let them go, then," Webster said. "Tell them it's over. Tell the mayor."

Slowly Eddie shook his head. "Uh-uh. You don't get it yet, do you? You think I don't know they're trying to trick me? Greiner knows the system inside out, right? So what's he been doing there all this time? He's probably set it up so he has a record in the system of everything I've done, even though I stopped any print-out."

"That seems very unlikely."

"No, it doesn't. It seems very likely. But it doesn't matter. You see, they're like you. They know too much. Now I have to make sure that none of you gets a chance to talk."

"I couldn't tell anyone where you had the money transferred," Webster pointed out.

"No, but you can identify *me*. I can't take that chance."

"I see." Webster smiled mockingly. "That sounds very melodramatic, Eddie, but what do you propose to do to me? Put your hands around my throat and choke me to death—in the memory of your wife?"

"Shut up, old man!" Eddie came to his feet, flushing angrily. "There are other ways."

"Oh, there are many. As a scientist I could teach you a few. But cold-blooded murder isn't the same as pushing a key on a computer keyboard. It's more like using . . . a bayonet. I wonder if you have the stomach for it, Eddie. And how are you going to

harm the mayor and Greiner in the computer room? You can't possibly go there."

"I don't have to," the young man said harshly, stung by Webster's mocking tone. "All I had to do was push one of those keys, Dr. Webster. And it's already pushed. You understand now? It's already done—programmed to happen just when I want it to!" There was boastful triumph in the announcement. He was glad that Webster was there, an audience to witness this moment. But as he stared at the skeptical physicist he felt his brief euphoria beginning to fade. He was conscious of the time—of the minutes ticking closer to that unbearable reminder of what had happened on this night seven years ago.

"On your feet, Professor," he said coldly. "I don't have to choke you to death. You've got a bad heart, right? I saw you fingering those pills a while ago." Even as he spoke the words he moved quickly—too quickly. He blocked Webster's hasty grab while his own hand snaked into the old man's pocket and emerged with a small pillbox. "No pills, Dr. Webster. I'll just keep these . . . while you and I go for a nice long run."

The last message from the Intruder remained on the video display. It said only:

*THANKS A MILLION, MR. MAYOR. MAKE
THAT FIVE MILLION. END OF MESSAGE*

"So he's done it," Conway said after a moment. "He's got away with it."

"Not yet he hasn't."

Conway shook his head. "It isn't like him to end it this way. He should be making a grand gesture at the end, something dramatic. His whole performance has been theatrical. Why should he be different at the last?"

"I don't know, but let's work it out later. For now I'd like to get out of here. I don't know why, but there's something creepy about this place tonight. And don't worry about your money, Conway. I know how to follow where it went. Baby here wouldn't let me down. I just asked her to store a repeat of our friend's transactions where he couldn't find it or even know it was there."

Conway stared at him. "You like being on stage yourself, Greiner."

"Doesn't everybody? Come on, Mayor, I'll open the door for you. Let's get out of here."

After a brief hesitation Conway nodded. He too felt uneasy in the computer room's isolation, at the core of the empty building.

At the door he looked back, puzzled. "Open the door, Greiner. No more games—"

Then he saw that Greiner's face had turned pale, "I already keyed the exit code," Greiner said slowly. "It doesn't work."

There was a long moment of silence. Conway looked at the central processing unit, then around the starkly functional room. He knew what Greiner was saying but he asked the question anyway. "What do you mean, it won't work?"

"The cunning bastard has changed the code that opens the doors." Greiner's glance darted across the room until it found the heavy fire door with its panic hardware. Used only for emergencies, the door had no outside hardware—it could only be opened from the inside. "Let's get the hell out of here!"

He reached the door ahead of Conway, shoved down on the panic bar as he threw his weight against the door. It didn't budge. The bar moved no more than an inch. Greiner stared down at it, breathing hard, not from exertion but from a swiftly mounting fear.

"What's wrong, Greiner?"

"The door's jammed—he must have done that earlier." In a spasm of anger he slapped one hand, palm open, against the door. "I should've guessed! Damn him, he knew what I was up to here, and he didn't care! He didn't care because he knew it wouldn't make any difference."

"Greiner, make some sense! What can he do to us now?"

"He's already done it." Greiner slowly surveyed the computer room, much as Conway had done a moment earlier, his eyes searching. They settled on the small, unobtrusive vents in the ceiling, the openings for the automated fire extinguishing system. He felt a sharp chill. Oddly it cooled his rage, and he spoke quite calmly. "Don't you see it, Conway? We were never supposed to get out of this room. We're trapped!"

Egan took Jenny Tyson's phone call. There was an edge of anxiety in her voice. "Michael, he's not here!"

"You're probably worrying about nothing, honey. You've told me how self-absorbed he can be. If he's with this other professor—"

"That's just it. I found Dr. Westfield's number in Dad's book and I just talked to him. Dad's not there. But that's not only what's worrying me. Westfield said Dad told him I was going to pick him up. He knew that wasn't true, Michael—why would he say it? Why would he turn down a ride when he has no way of getting home?"

"Maybe he forgot."

"No. He acts absent-minded, but he's not—not really. And there's something else. This morning at breakfast he was curious about that power failure at the hospital. When I asked him why he put me off."

"What does that have to do with—"

"That's what Dad's been working on for the past year. He uses the laboratory computer to communicate with the RDC, working out power-usage problems. Don't you see, Michael? I know this sounds crazy, but what if someone has been using his computer the same way he used the terminal at the hospital? And what if Dad went back there tonight to find out?"

Egan felt a chill. "Don't start jumping to conclusions."

"There's information about local power grids in Dad's files, I know that much. And the Intruder found a way to shut off power to the hospital. I think that was what had Dad wondering this morning. And now he lied to Dr. Westfield about not needing a ride. He was staying behind, Michael. He's still at the university—but he doesn't answer his phone."

Egan cut in quickly. "I'm on my way there, Jenny. And don't worry."

"Michael, hurry! I'll meet you there!"

"Keep moving, Professor!"

Eddie shoved Linus Webster ahead of him, forcing him into an awkward, stumbling run. The physicist tried to pull free, but Eddie was younger, bigger, surprisingly strong. "We'll be seen," Webster gasped. "Don't be foolish, Eddie. The campus guards . . . they'll see us."

"A couple of joggers? Who'll care? What do you think this track is for? Come on, old man—run!"

Webster stumbled on, despairing. His heart was laboring, and there were disturbing darts of pain in his legs and in his left arm. How long before the sudden, convulsive seizure?

On the same wave length, Eddie said, "You're tough, Professor, I give you that. I wish it didn't have to be this way, but you brought it on yourself."

When they left the Physics Building Webster had been convinced that Eddie was making a serious blunder. Surely someone would see them—a guard, a student, another teacher. Webster could call for help. But there had been no one. No one in the empty building. No one on the paths outside. Then Eddie had struck out across campus, alternately dragging and prodding Webster through deep snow until the bulk of the football stadium loomed above them.

The stadium dominated the recreational complex along the west side of the campus. The tiers of seats that formed the huge bowl were covered in snow, the seats themselves almost completely hidden, visible only as ripples in the smooth, unbroken slope that rose on all sides above the playing field. The stadium was silent, dark and deserted, but the gates had been left open for joggers. And the track that circled the field had also been cleared for running.

Linus Webster and Eddie were alone on the track, shielded from the rest of the campus by the high walls of the stadium.

Linus Webster fell heavily. There was constant pain now, a tightening band of pressure around his chest. His breathing was noisy, ragged.

Eddie picked him up and urged him onward, half carrying him until they were on the move. When Webster started to fall again, Eddie caught him and held him up.

They ran on.

"You won't be the first one," Eddie said. He was breathing easily. He sounded as if he could run forever. "You know what I mean, Professor?" White teeth flashed, breath pocketed the night air. "Jogging can kill you!"

Linus Webster's anger overrode the pain in his chest. "Did you bully her, too, Eddie? When you made her walk to the hospital?"

The young man's stride broke. Seeing the look of shock on his face, Webster knew that he had accidentally struck a vulnerable spot. Eddie also had his Achilles heel, his point of pain.

Webster pulled up, forcing Eddie to stop. "Were you angry with her, Eddie? Yelling at her? Why are looking at me like that? What's the matter—*did she fall, too?*"

"Shut up!"

They confronted each other on the empty track, at the bottom of the smoothly sculptured banks of snow. Linus Webster bent over the pain that now enveloped his chest. He hugged his body as if he were trying to surround and contain the pain.

It was hard to talk, but he knew he had to keep Eddie off balance. "Did she beg you to let her stop?"

"Damn you, stop it! You don't know anything!"

"What about running out of gas, Eddie? Whose fault was that? And why were you there on the road that night when she should have been at a hospital?" The young man seemed paralyzed, unable to react. The torment in his eyes gave Webster a momentary satisfaction. He disliked the feeling. We will all fight for survival,

he thought grimly. There was no pride in the observation, which was as old as man and still surprising. Relentlessly he kept on. "Are you punishing us because you've been blaming yourself for seven years, punishing yourself?"

"No! No, you're wrong—"

"Did she want you to run out on everything, Eddie?" He read the answer in the young man's anguish. "Did she want to run away? To escape to Canada? Or did she want you to stay and face up to what you believed in? Dear God, that's it, isn't it? She never wanted you to desert—"

With a scream Eddie hurled himself at the older man.

Jenny Tyson raced recklessly over the frozen streets to the university campus. The parking lot near the science buildings was empty. No one was about. She panicked at the possibility that the Physics Building might be locked. She had no key.

But the entrance was unlocked. It was still early enough for someone to be working in the building. She went straight to the second floor. The door to Linus Webster's office was open. The laboratory was dark except for one small area. The small computer leaped into view as if in a spotlight.

"Dad?" she called out anxiously. "Are you there?"

Silence. The laboratory was empty.

The door left open, lights on for the computer. He would never have gone of his own volition without shutting down completely, locking up. He was too methodical. These thoughts were clear, logical, but they were a barrier erected against the unreasoning fear that clawed at them.

He might still be in the building, she told herself. Others worked late. He could be visiting with someone. She was only guessing about the connection with Craddock.

But she had not been wrong. The cigarette smoke that still hung in the air confirmed her guess. Near the small computer she found several half-smoked butts on the floor, dropped carelessly and ground under a heel. There were no ash trays in Linus Webster's laboratory.

In panic she ran out of the building.

She had no idea which way to turn. With no fresh snow falling, the main walks were clear, revealing no tracks. Where was Michael—what was keeping him? How could Craddock and her father have walked out of the building without being seen and stopped? Where were the campus police?

She circled the building, moving away from the parking areas to the east only because she had come from that direction.

Near the side exit on the west side of the building, she found fresh tracks that left the cleared walk and broke a path through the deep snow. The tracks were uneven. In places there were long deep furrows, as if someone had been dragged along, his feet resisting.

She followed the path ploughed through the snow, her heart beating rapidly, unwilling to confront the meaning of the signs in the snow. Her father and Craddock—he must have gone back to the lab *expecting* to find Craddock there. Why had he taken such a risk? Searching for the answer, she had an insight into a proud old man's disdain for danger, a lifetime teacher's habit of authority that would have minimized or dismissed the reality of the danger.

The trail ended at a cleared walk near the football stadium.

Jenny was standing uncertainly on that walk, her despairing glance finding nothing in either direction, when she heard a cry of pain or rage.

Craddock rolled with the old man off the cinder track into a bank of snow. Webster's heavy clothes protected him, and Craddock's own bulky jacket was cumbersome. In his anguish he struck out blindly. His fists glanced off a padded shoulder, a heavy collar, an upraised arm. One blow skidded off Linus Webster's jaw.

The old man's tenacious resistance surprised him. After a few moments Craddock's head began to clear as the wild rage ebbed. Get him on his feet, he thought savagely. Run him into the ground.

He caught hold of Webster's coat lapels and lifted him.

A woman screamed.

When Craddock looked up the woman was already through the gates at the end of the stadium. She ran toward them. "Leave him alone!" she cried. "Craddock, stop!"

It was the name that panicked him. "Craddock, stop!" His name! There was no way she could know it—no way anyone could call out to him by name. He had buried the name as he had buried everything else that mattered in his past. Erased it from every record that could threaten him.

"Craddock!"

The name broke his rage. The woman was still some distance away but he recognized her—Webster's daughter! How did she know?

He shoved the elderly physicist away, but suddenly their roles

were reversed. Now Webster clung to him, refusing to let go. Craddock twisted and pulled but the old man hung on, his breathing rasping. Craddock dragged him across the track. Webster stumbled to his knees but his hands still clutched at the young man's legs.

The girl was close. In desperation Craddock's hand dug into his coat pocket. His fingers closed around the handle of the compact portable terminal he carried there. He dragged it clear and clubbed viciously at Webster's head. With a soft moan the old man fell away into the snowy bank.

Almost on top of them now, Jenny Tyson cried out. Craddock plunged through the snow toward the stands. He leaped a low railing at the bottom and scrambled up the steps.

At the mouth of the nearest tunnel he looked back. The woman had dropped to her knees beside the fallen scientist. Her face lifted toward him. Once more she screamed his name. "Craddock—you're finished now!"

Craddock ran down the tunnel and disappeared into the bowels of the stadium.

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Tom Ames's call on the security two-way radio in Egan's car alerted him as he drove onto the campus. Minutes later he joined Ames and Jenny Tyson in the campus security office.

Her father lay on a stretcher which had been placed on a cot. His face was white, its parchment color accentuated by the blue and bloody mass of a deep bruise on his temple. Egan felt a sickening despair until he heard the old man's rasping breath. His breathing was painful to listen to—but he was alive.

Egan looked compassionately at Jenny. Her eyes seemed calmer than they had when he entered the office, as if she drew reassurance

from his presence. "The ambulance should be here any minute," she said. "Mr. Ames and one of his men brought Dad in here."

Briefly she told Egan of tracking her father and the Intruder from the laboratory to the football stadium, of the struggle she had witnessed there, and of the Intruder's flight.

"What was he doing—why the hell did he take your father there?"

"He was trying to kill Dad—I'm sure of it! They'd been *running* around that track!" She smiled a bitter, humorless smile. "Obviously he knew about Dad's heart. What he didn't know was that Dad's doctor is one of those heart specialists who believes in having his patients take up jogging."

Egan heard the rising wail of the ambulance's siren, not far away. He glanced again at Linus Webster. His lips tightened in a stubborn, angry line. One more victim, the first the Intruder had actually struck down with his own hand.

"I'll be going to the hospital with him," Jenny said. When he looked into her eyes he found a flashing light that matched his own anger. "Find Craddock, Michael. You've got to stop him."

"Don't worry, we will."

"I thought we had him, Mike," Tom Ames said then, "but he gave us the slip. We were kinda thin in the middle, that was the problem, and there are too damned many places to hide on this campus, especially at night. But we've got the perimeter sewed up tight, just the way you wanted it. He got in but he can't get out. He had to be here somewhere. I've got my whole crew out beating the bushes."

The ambulance pulled up outside as Ames was speaking. Two white-coated attendants hurried inside, took in the scene quickly, and moved to Linus Webster's side.

"He'll be all right, Mrs. Tyson," Ames said gruffly. "People like Dr. Webster aren't as easy to kill as that bastard thought. Even weak hearts take more punishment than you'd think."

Jenny nodded distractedly, her eyes anxious as she watched the two medics working over her father. One of the young men glanced up at her. "He's tough, that's for sure. I think he's gonna make it."

When they carried the stretcher out to the ambulance Jenny followed. At the door Egan caught her arm. "One last thing, Jenny—did you get close enough to Craddock to recognize him?"

She shook her head. "It was too dark."

"And your father? Did he—?"

"He was unconscious when I got to him."

She broke away with a sob. A moment later she stepped into the back of the ambulance. The doors closed behind her, shutting off Egan's last view of Linus Webster lying on a raised platform while Jenny hovered over him.

He watched the ambulance's emergency lights until they disappeared. For almost a full minute he continued to listen to the siren until it was a thin cry fading away into the night. Then a deep silence settled over the campus, and Egan found his mind reaching out into that silence, sifting it, wondering. Craddock had panicked. Where would he run? Where would he go to ground?

Egan had been prepared to join the hunt across the darkened campus, searching every shadowed arch or entry, following every track across the snow. Suddenly he knew that he would not find Edward Craddock that way, hiding behind a bush or a snowbank.

Craddock knew he had been identified. That meant he knew the game was lost.

He was no longer running.

It was all coming down, the intricately balanced edifice he had so painstakingly constructed for so long. Somewhere he had missed some necessary point of stress, some needed support.

He remembered one of the Churrigueresque churches of Mexico, an extravagantly baroque amateur masterpiece, built by a man who had copied from photographs and postcards of European cathedrals, without formal knowledge or training, building out of native genius, imitation, passion and luck, creating finally a thing of quirky beauty. But how many such haphazard works of art had fallen for each one that still stood? How many had tumbled in on themselves because of a missing stone, a beam too weak, an angle too strained?

What stone had he forgotten? How had they identified him?

In the empty field house near the football stadium he found a touch-tone telephone. He attached his emergency portable terminal and dialed into the RDC once more. He had instructed the system to seal the entire building after Conway and Greiner were inside and the rest of the Center was cleared of its staff. Now he wanted the lobby entrance opened.

He felt emotionally empty. Paradoxically, his body was heavy, a burden to move.

Out of the blue he thought of the moment when he left home for the last time. From the doorway he had looked back at his

father. Edward Craddock Senior was a rigid man, as narrow-minded and fearful of change as Arthur Prochaska. He had been appalled by his son's long hair and his politics, ashamed of his expulsion from school. "Where are you going?" he demanded.

"Don't worry," the younger Craddock had said, quite calmly. "I won't bother you any more. I'm disowning you."

The older man had snorted derisively. "That's for me to say, not you."

Craddock shook his head. "It doesn't only work one way. I'm telling you—I'm disowning you. You're not my dad. She's not my mom. You won't see me again."

He had banged the door on his father's astonished glare. Felt the momentary elation, the triumph of his Declaration of Independence. And then, with shocking suddenness, there had come this awful feeling of emptiness, of being gutted like a fish...

He shook himself, shedding the memory. He had got over the feeling of loss then. He could survive it now.

The Data Center loomed in front of him. He dragged himself up the steps. Off in the shadowed reaches of the campus the guards were searching for him, he knew, but no one challenged him as he went openly up the steps. The doors parted for him.

Entering the lobby, he felt lighter, freer. They were chasing a phantom across the campus, just as they had pursued a phantom through the city these past weeks, never knowing where to look. But here in the Data Center there was no one to stop him. Here he was in command.

The lobby was too bright, too open, too empty. He could be seen from outside. He moved quickly to his right and entered the main corridor, walking with confidence. He had nothing to fear in this building. The computer controlled it, and he controlled the computer.

He had not planned to come here. Now that he was in the building he was eager to view the computer center—and the two men trapped inside.

The monument he had built was collapsing. It would bury him—but not him alone.

He knew exactly where he was going. He glanced at his watch anxiously. He was still on time.

He had done that much for her at least, his beloved Mary Jane. He had made it possible for her to play a role in his final act of vengeance. "I'll set the time by you," he had promised her in the endless dialogue that was part of the endless fantasy that kept her

alive. "So they'll never forget why I had to do it."

He started along the corridor. He knew now that flight was purposeless. With his identity known, all that was left to him was to view the climax of all his planning. He would bear witness.

That old professor was wrong. He could do more than push a button from a distance.

He was almost at his goal when he heard the fall of a footstep far behind him. He turned quickly.

Michael Egan stood in the entry between corridor and lobby. "Stop right there, Craddock," the security man called out.

Craddock turned to run. The office he sought was close. He raced toward it, heading away from Egan. He would lock himself in just long enough—

He stopped. Other footsteps pounded along the corridor ahead of him. A uniformed security guard bolted around a corner. His way was blocked. The guard tried to stop too quickly, skidded on the tiled floor and crashed into the wall. The gun he was carrying nearly slipped from his grasp.

Craddock swung back toward Egan. The portable terminal he still carried was in his hand. He raised it as if to show Egan. The tiny keyboard fitted into his palm, and the slightly elongated miniature display panel jutted out. The end pointed toward Egan. He said, "It isn't over—"

Egan shouted, "Riskind, no!"

The Intruder heard the shot, magnified a hundred times in the smooth tunnel of the corridor. The concussion was unbelievable. Its force lifted him up and threw him forward.

He knew what was happening then.

What had he forgotten? he wondered as the structure of his terrible dream collapsed around him. What stone had he forgotten?

"I thought it was a gun," Riskind kept saying. "I thought it was a gun!"

Egan could not answer him. For a while, kneeling beside Craddock's body, he could not bring himself even to look up at Riskind. But it was not the young officer's fault, he told himself; it was his. He had put the gun in Riskind's hand.

Well-meaning, he had chosen youth, flexibility and quickness over age, rigidity and experience. And perhaps an argument could still be made that he was right.

But because he had made that choice, the Intruder was dead.

The whole case fell into a pattern, Egan thought bitterly, staring

down at Edward Lee Craddock, who lay sprawled awkwardly on his face. We put new and unfamiliar tools in the hands of people not yet skilled enough in using them. Tools that were also weapons. His mistake was the same as James Conway's—the mistake the city of Hollister itself had made.

He had an exaggerated vision of a world shaped by well-intentioned fools, each destroying what he had sought to build. Hoover and his FBI. Conway and his Data Center. Egan and his youth movement. And Edward Lee Craddock . . .

He stared down at the man he had known as Carl MacAdam.

Riskind brought him back to reality. "I don't understand," the young officer said. There were tears in his eyes. "He could never have got away with it. If he planned on disappearing, we'd have known it was him then. As soon as he showed up missing!"

"Would it have done us any good? I doubt it, Riskind. Not without his real identity. We would have been searching the world over for Carl MacAdam, and he would have ceased to exist. Edward Lee Craddock would have been home free."

There was a momentary silence before Riskind said, "What . . . what did he mean? The last thing he said was . . . 'it isn't over.' What did he mean?"

In that moment the silence of the empty building was shattered by the hammering squawk of the fire alarm. Simultaneously Egan remembered that the building was not empty—and he thought of the extinguishing agent he had wanted to change: carbon dioxide flooding of the computer room.

"He meant just that." Egan jumped to his feet. "It isn't over!"

45 FRI FEB 18 / 06:31 PM

At the console in the security office Egan spoke over the intercom to James Conway and Rob Greiner. He told them tersely that Craddock—Carl MacAdam—was dead. Then he asked Greiner

one question. "Was MacAdam the only you suspected of getting you fired?"

"Yes." Greiner scowled. "So that's how he got into Credit Systems without leaving any trace at Grayson's. All he did there was get the code he wanted and scramble some records as a calling card. He must've done everything else through the RDC."

Egan nodded. MacAdam had probably also been instrumental in his own hiring—a security "expert" who knew little about computers. He said, "All that's left is to get you two out of there."

"How much time do we have?" Conway spoke calmly over the clamor of the fire alarm. On the monitor screen Egan could see the tension etched clearly into the mayor's face.

Egan glanced at the countdown dial on the console. To allow for evacuation there was a five-minute delay between the first alarm and the release of the extinguishing gas. "Less than four minutes. We're trying to break in now, Mr. Conway. But I have to tell you this place wasn't built to be broken into easily."

"I understand." Conway's glance met Greiner's. Then he looked upward, as if searching for the lens of the closed circuit television camera. To Egan he said, "It's true this gas is quite deadly?"

"I'm afraid so, but . . . we'll get you out."

"I'm sure you'll do your best." Egan admired the mayor's self-control. Grace under pressure, he thought, the phrase that had been used about John Kennedy. "He didn't miss a trick, did he?"

"No."

"For God's sake stop the post mortems!" Greiner interrupted. "We're not dead yet. Let's get back to those locked doors. Didn't Craddock say anything, Egan? No last minute confession?"

"Nothing," Egan said. "But we do have some information you don't know. I think Craddock could've opened those doors if he wanted to. He obviously changed the code, but he was still carrying a portable terminal. Maybe he would have opened the doors if he'd had time . . ." Egan shook off the speculation, annoyed with himself. "The problem is finding that new code. I kept asking myself the last couple of days why he was waiting. Why Friday night? Why not Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday? He was in complete control then. I think he wanted the weekend to get clear, but that's not reason enough to risk waiting until tonight. I think he *had* to wait until tonight."

"Why?" Greiner demanded impatiently.

Egan checked the countdown time. Under three minutes now. "His wife died on this date seven years ago. It was a fixation with

him. He timed everything tonight to match what happened then. I know this is guesswork, Greiner, but we don't have anything else. Have you tried to break that code?"

"What the hell do you think I've been doing the last thirty minutes? He could have used anything—random numbers."

"No, he wouldn't," Egan said. "Not him. Why wouldn't he have used what was so important to him? The date and time it happened seven years ago! Feed that to the computer, Greiner!"

Greiner stared at him. "What was the time?"

"I don't know—but it was at night."

"Never mind, never mind." Greiner was already at the keyboard of the main console. "Let's have Big Bertha run through the numbers. She's good at that."

"You've got two minutes," Egan said.

They were the longest two minutes of his life. He watched Greiner frantically keying the computer, feeding in the latest possible code, setting up the variable sequences. The Computer was capable of about a million separate calculations per second, but Greiner's work at the keyboard seemed agonizingly slow.

Then Greiner slumped back in his chair, finished.

The last minute ticked away.

At 6:30 P.M. the harsh ringing of the alarm was abruptly stilled. Michael Egan stared helplessly at the two men locked in the computer room, knowing that the overhead vents were now opening, releasing their smothering gases.

The CRT display at the console beside the main processor was already beginning to be obscured by a dense white cloud of gas when a single sequence of numbers marched across the screen:

02 18 70 06 31

Egan saw Conway and Greiner bolt toward the man-trap. The door opened.

He was shaking with relief as he flipped on the intercom. "Break off and pull back," he said, struggling to keep his voice calm. His words echoed along the corridor on the far side of the building, through the empty offices and service rooms, heard only in the media library where a security crew was attempting to break into the computer room. "Clear the building—it's all over!"

As he rose his glance went once more to the CRT display in the computer room. The screen was almost completely hidden by the gas that filled the room, but the numbers still glowed, dimly visible: the code that recorded the month, day, year, hour and minute when Mary Jane Craddock died.

Shortly before midnight it began to snow. Egan and Jenny ran through white flurries from the hospital exit to his Vega in the parking lot.

He drove back toward the Hollister University campus, where Jenny's car had been left when she rode in the ambulance carrying her father to the hospital. Egan glanced at her as the light from a street lamp flickered by, briefly throwing her features into relief. Her expression was pensive. "He's going to be fine." Egan said.

"Yes, I think so. MacAdam did underestimate him." There was a moment's silence between them, filled by the clatter of the Vega's engine, the blowing of the heater fan, the steady slap of windshield wipers. "I never would have guessed it was MacAdam."

"Maybe that's one reason I should have suspected him. He had a way of disappearing into the woodwork."

"That could apply to a dozen people or more, not just Mac."

"There were other things . . ."

"Name some others," Jenny said.

"Well . . . for one, there was the fact that someone turned Del Thomas against Greiner. You suggested that. That was a convenient way to get rid of a serious roadblock, an independent mav-

erick who would not have been easily fooled if he'd still been working at the Data Center. And who had Thomas's ear more than MacAdam?"

"Go on."

"Let's leave out his ease of access, his familiarity with the system. That's also true of a lot of people. But MacAdam was involved in the internal RDC search for evidence of any intrusion. What he came up with was always too little and too late—and not threatening to the Intruder. Then there was the way the Intruder always seemed able to keep a step ahead of any attempt to stop his penetrations. And take tonight, the way he set things up, insisting the Data Center be completely evacuated. That accomplished several things for him—one being that it wasn't necessary for Carl MacAdam to explain why he wasn't there." He paused, braking cautiously at a crossroad. A snow-shrouded car passed in front of them, wheels spinning as it tried to accelerate. "All of that suggested someone on the inside. We just didn't believe it."

"Why didn't he simply work from inside? Why go to all the trouble of wiretapping and using outside terminals? He could do anything he wanted from inside."

"Not if we started concentrating on staff. He didn't want that. It had to look like an outsider for him to escape closer scrutiny. Instead of looking at a couple dozen people, we had to consider hundreds. That was really the key. That threw us all off."

Egan turned onto the campus, driving slowly. Fatigue had settled behind his shoulder blades. He lifted his shoulders, then rubbed the back of his neck with one hand to relieve the tension. The campus appeared quiet and peaceful now. No one was about. The snow fell silently. White, glittering halos surrounded the sparse street lights.

"What about that message from Credit Systems?" Jenny persisted, unable to let go of the puzzle. "Didn't that Florida man say that someone from Grayson's had got into their files to erase Craddock's record? How did Craddock pull that off?"

Egan shrugged. "Greiner said that Grayson's security was practically non-existent. It wouldn't have been much of a trick for Craddock to get the identity number and anything else he needed to masquerade as Grayson's when he called up Credit Systems. Don't forget that Greiner was never able to find any hard evidence that Grayson's system had been abused."

"What about their billing foul-up?"

"Greiner's suggestion is that that might just have been a nasty

calling card—or something else to confuse us. On the other hand, that might not even have been Craddock's doing." Egan smiled. "Computers do make errors."

"Touché." He saw the glint of amusement in her eyes as they passed another street light. "Just for that, I have another question. I thought you had the backgrounds of all the RDC people investigated. So how did Craddock get through the regular clearance when he was hired?"

"Riskind looked into Carl MacAdam's background," Egan admitted. "Everything checked out. A degree from Boston University, a clean record with a big software firm. Craddock was clever there. He kept his background simple so there wasn't much to check on. And he picked a large company for his employment sheet. He had probably verified the company's policy on release of information. Many of the big companies are cautious about what they'll give out today, even on a security check. They won't do much more than check the personnel file to verify employment. Same with many universities."

"But even that—"

"He planted those records in computerized files," Egan said. "And they looked authentic enough to fool Del Thomas into hiring him, so I can't really blame Riskind for not questioning them further." Egan frowned. "You know something else that wouldn't surprise me? I always wondered why Thomas hired me. But MacAdam had a lot of influence with him. Why wouldn't he have encouraged Thomas to hire a security director without a computer background? Someone who didn't know enough to be a threat to him."

"Now don't start dumping everything on yourself—there's no way *anyone* could have done more than you did."

"Maybe not..." Egan felt some of the weary letdown faced by any investigator who has missed what he should have seen. "There was one other thing. It even jarred me a little at the time, but I let it slip by me. It was during the mayor's first emergency meeting that I sat in on. MacAdam was there, and he let drop the possibility that the whole operating system had been corrupted. That forced Thomas to admit to the mayor that there was a clean, uncorrupted copy of the Data Center's operating system under lock and key. That was the system's safe fall-back position, and Thomas was the only one who could authorize using it. Once that was taken out and loaded, all the Intruder had to do was complete his takeover and the Data Center was his. Thomas didn't want to use

the backup system, and I noticed that. I didn't pay enough attention to the maneuver that forced his hand."

Jenny sighed then, accepting the inevitable. "I'll never get over being surprised."

Egan did not answer. Ahead of them the modern Administration Building rose into a blurred midnight sky. Lights in the tower glowed through the snow screen, a permanent beacon. Egan drove past the Regional Data Center, glancing thoughtfully at the lighted lobby. A moment later he turned into the parking lot behind the science buildings. Jenny's car stood alone in the lot, already wearing a white hat of new-fallen snow.

She sat up suddenly, as if jolted out of her thoughts for the first time. "What are we doing here?"

"Your car," Egan said.

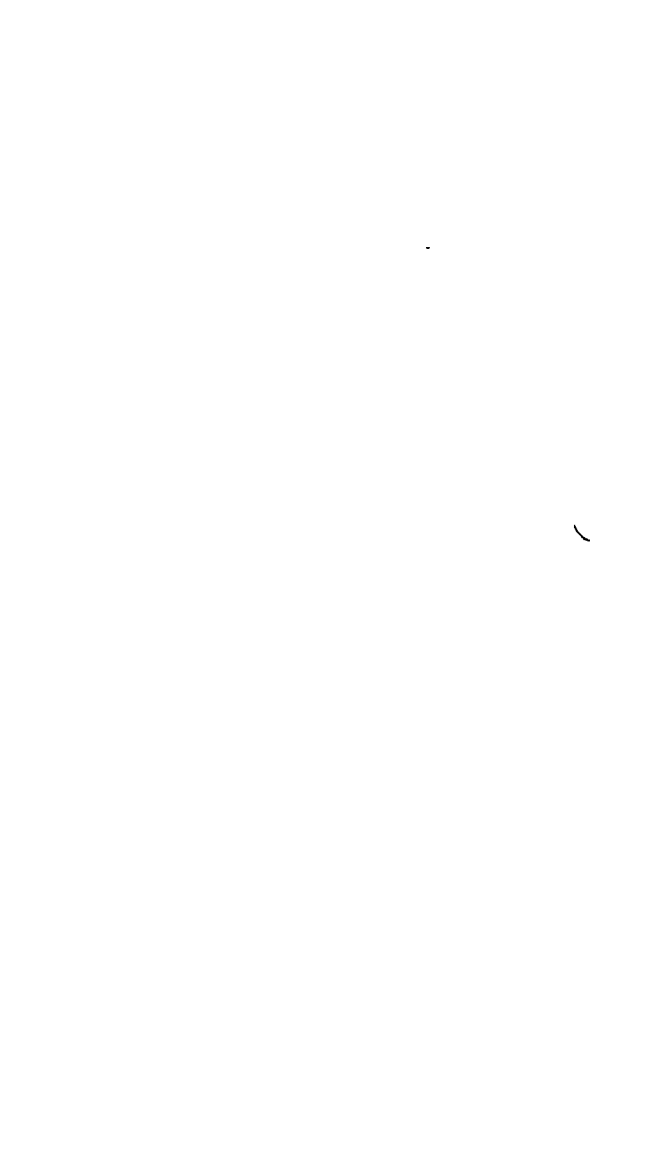
"It's safe enough there . . . isn't it?"

"I suppose so . . ." he said doubtfully.

"We don't need more than one car tonight, do we?"

Egan stared at her. He shifted his shoulders again, but this time there was no stiffness. The heavy feeling of fatigue lifted magically. "I guess we don't," he said, smiling slowly.

She leaned against him, relaxed and sure. "My place is closer," she said.



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