

In the Western Tradition

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It was obvious from his reaction that Holland had never bought time on the Bubble before. He could scarcely sit still in his chair. "That's him! That's him!" he shouted. He was grinning like a child on Christmas morning, surrounded by toys.

I knew how he felt. I would never forget my own first assignment, and my first view of the man I sought. Holland knew his quarry from photographs; I had only stone likenesses to guide me. Yet I knew him immediately, though the statues had been idealized, youthful, flawless. That was back in the beginning, when almost all of us were involved in the Life of Jesus Project based in Istanbul. I was assigned to the western branch—the less important one, I thought. But my hands started to shake when I saw my man in the Forum, shaking as hard as if I were seeing Jesus himself, and they kept shaking while I brought his face closer and closer, close enough that he could have spit in my eye if he had not been just an image in the Bubble. Augustus Caesar, dead two thousand years, was in that fellow Bubble operators, and the most significant man in history. Yes, I knew how Dr. Frederick Holland felt. And no matter how often I sat at the console, or even just watched another operator at work, I still experienced a strong echo of that initial thrill every time I saw the Bubble spring into being from nothingness in a small, bare room. For I knew that within its confines the dead would walk again. Holland had known that, I supposed, on an intellectual level; how he knew it as I did, in his soul.

I sat behind him, a casual visitor to his enterprise. I was there because I never tired of watching the Bubble and because Alison and I would be going out to dinner as soon as she finished her shift. To my left, she played on the computer and gave Holland what he had paid for—Ellsworth, Kansas, August 18, 1873:

Wyatt Earp took a seat under the wooden awning that shaded Beebe's General Store from the scorching afternoon sun. He tipped the chair back

against the weathered clapboard wall and surveyed the street from beneath the wide brim of his dark hat. Beyond him, the town stretched hot and dusty to the railroad tracks, and in the distance, long-horned cattle could be seen moving sluggishly as they grazed on an endless expanse of prairie grass.

Earp turned his face toward us; gaunt, hollow-cheeked, he appeared to be in his early twenties, not yet the legend he would become in Dodge and Tombstone. His eyes focused briefly on something we could not see.

"Shall I turn the viewpoint and catch what he's looking at?" Alison asked.

Holland shook his head violently. "No, stay where you are. We can check that out in another session."

A muffled uproar heralded the appearance of two men: they burst from a doorway down the street, shouting curses over their shoulders.

"The Thompsons," said Holland. "Ben and Bill."

They crossed the square at a run and entered a two-story building whose sun-bleached sign said GRAND CENTRAL HOTEL.

Earp rose from his chair, tall and loose-limbed, and stepped into the doorway of Beebe's, flattening himself against the jamb. Up and down the street, people peered out of other doorways, roused by the clamor but unwilling to come out into the sunlight.

Quick footsteps sounded nearby, hard heels on the boards of the sidewalk; a man materialized from nothing directly in front of the console, his back to us. He was short and stocky, and the sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up over thick, gray-haired forearms. He wore a sweat-stained vest.

"Whitney," said Holland.

Whitney stopped by Earp. "What's going on?" he asked.

Earp shook his head.

"Now Logan," whispered Holland.

More footsteps, very fast this time, and a young man—scarcely more than a boy, really—appeared abruptly to clutch at Whitney's arm. "I ran to find you as soon as it happened, sheriff." He was breathing hard, and his dark hair was plastered in wet points against his forehead. "Bill Thompson got nasty drunk, and John Sterling gave him the flat of his hand across the mouth. When Bill invited John to get a gun and meet him outside, John hit him again and knocked him out of his seat. Then Bill and Ben ran after

their guns."

Whitney turned, fists on his hips, and I could see the glint of the metal star on his vest.

By this time the Thompsons had returned to the street with gunbelts, shotgun, and rifle and were standing behind a hay wagon, shouting threats toward the saloon.

"All right," said Whitney. "We can't have this." He started across the street toward the wagon.

"You keep out of this, sheriff!" shouted a Thompson. "We don't want to hurt you."

"Don't be foolish, Ben," Whitney replied.

"You tell that to Sterling!" said Ben, and he shook a fist toward the saloon door, adding a string of profanities for Sterling's benefit.

Whitney went into the saloon.

Several people from the interior of the store crowded its doorway, craning over Earp's shoulder, trying for a good view of the excitement without exposing themselves to danger. Holland pointed to them one by one, relishing their names as if they were fine wines. "Stacey. Anderson. McDonald. And there's Beebe himself in the apron."

Alison leaned forward, elbows coming to rest among the telltales, fingers interlacing beneath her chin. "Logan's the young one, the one who brought the news?"

Holland nodded. "Jimmy Logan. Blacksmith's son. Hangs around the saloons too much for his father's taste."

She smiled. "You've really done your homework."

"I know every one of them," he replied. "I know every man, woman, and child who impinged on Wyatt Earp's life."

"Must be quite a crowd," murmured Alison.

"Ah—he's coming back now."

Whitney strode down the sidewalk like a man very sure of himself. At Beebe's he waved as if clearing the air of flies. "You can all go about your business; there won't be any gunplay out here today. Sterling's gone out the back way, gone clear out of town."

"I didn't take Sterling for a coward," said young Logan.

The sheriff shook his head. "It wasn't his idea. He was ready to come

out shooting, but he had some friends with better sense, and they wouldn't let him. Now everything is just fine, nothing to worry about. I'm going to treat the Thompson boys to a couple of drinks at Brennan's, and that'll be the end of it."

With some muttering, those who had been Beebe's customers drifted back inside while Whitney approached the Thompsons with his offer. Up and down the street, the rest of the audience melted away, too. Earp settled back into his chair, and Jimmy Logan leaned against the wall beside him.

"They've got this town treed good," said Logan. He was looking toward Brennan's.

Earp gazed out into the street. "Why'd you go for the sheriff? I hear he's not much use with a gun. Marshal, now—he's a man with a reputation."

"I knew the sheriff would be in his store. It was close-by."

Earp shook his head. "A man should be a full-time peace officer, not half merchant and half sheriff. Job's too hard in a town like this any other way."

"You're sure right about that."

They lapsed into silence, each surveying the street in his own way. As the minutes passed, I found myself restless. Alison's shift had only about an hour to go, and I began to wonder if anything significant would happen in that time. Holland, however, seemed to find every swirl of dust in that scorching summer day fascinating. He had one elbow balanced on the edge of the console now, fist tight against his mouth; the outside of that hand almost brushed the insubstantial edge of the Bubble. He looked like he wanted to reach out and touch Earp. I thought he might be the kind that would try to enter the Bubble space to get closer to his subject, in spite of the standard warning. I had worked with one of those once—in his enthusiasm, he kept edging into the Bubble itself and blotting out sections of the scene with the interference generated by his own body. But as the minutes passed, Holland sat, obviously yearning but able to restrain himself.

Alison, too, seemed to have found some sort of fascination in the vision of two men doing nothing; she hadn't moved since speaking to Holland. My own restless shuffling sounded loud in the quiet room, and I was glad when Whitney finally came out of Brennan's, striding noisily.

He turned toward us and crossed the few meters that separated him from Earp and Logan. He stopped, smiling, self-satisfied. "They've calmed

down a bit. They're inside with a bunch of Texas men."

Earp looked up at him. "Did you take their guns away from them?"

"No, they wouldn't stand for that."

Before Earp could comment further, Bill Thompson stepped out of the saloon, shotgun in his hands. "I'll get me a sheriff if I don't get anyone else!" he shouted.

Whitney turned to face him just as Thompson fired both barrels. At point-blank range, the blast caught the hapless sheriff full in the chest. The sound of the shot, earsplitting in such close quarters, rocked Alison and me back in our chairs; my pulse lurched wildly, while her knee slammed the underside of the console, and she clutched it, growling curses. Holland, evidently expecting the shot, was unruffled.

Whitney had fallen back into Earp's arms. Above the pounding of my heart I heard him gasp, "I'm done. Get me home."

Thompson had run back into the saloon. But there were hundreds of other people in the street now, most of them with drawn guns, and more were gushing from the hotels, the stores, the saloons with every passing moment. At last both Thompsons strode out of Brennan's, guns waving from one side to the other, and walked to the nearest rail where horses were hitched.

"Those are their friends," said Holland, pointing to a group that was gathering in front of the Grand Central Hotel. "Peshaur, Pierce, Kane, Good—"

"All right," said Alison, one hand still massaging her knee. "You don't have to name them all. I just work here."

Holland threw her an injured glance, then sighed. "Sorry. Still, you have to know some of them, for future reference."

"They can't *all* be important."

"That depends on how many times my grant is renewed."

Alison shook her head. "I won't remember most of them. Not from a single session."

"Very well," said Holland. "I'll try to keep to the crucial ones."

The sheriff had friends, too, it turned out, inside Beebe's. They bore his barely breathing body off. Earp and Logan backed into the doorway once more. Within a couple of minutes, a third face peeped out between them.

"Morco," said Holland. "Deputy marshal."

The deputy elbowed Logan aside and peered into the street. The Thompsons were facing the other way, engrossed in their guns.

"Jump out and get them now," Earp said to Morco.

Morco shook his head. "Those fellows across the street might get me."

"You'd get both Thompsons first."

"Not me, friend."

An expression of disgust passed over Earp's face.

Bill Thompson rode out of town, and Ben Thompson covered his retreat by stalking up and down the street with half a hundred armed men at his back. One of them fired his gun into the air and crowed, "I'll give a thousand dollars to anybody who'll knock off another lawman!"

Holland chuckled then. "Watch this next piece of frontier bravery. Here comes the mayor." Appearing from our side of the Bubble, the mayor edged along the wall of Beebe's as if magnetized to it. He slid into the doorway, crowding Logan and Earp. "And there's the marshal—that new face just behind Logan. He came in the back."

"You've really picked the center of the action. Dr. Holland," said Alison.

He hushed her with a sharp gesture, and we spent the next few minutes listening to the mayor try, unsuccessfully, to talk the marshal and his deputy into arresting Ben Thompson. At the end of his tether, the mayor himself shouted at Thompson to lay down his arms and submit to arrest. But the mayor did not dare go out into the street to say that, and Thompson's only answer was some colorful profanity.

Earp had been silent since he suggested that Morco take action. Now he folded his arms across his chest and said to the harried mayor, "Nice police force you've got."

The mayor, whose face was red enough to explode, said, "Who the hell are you?"

Earp shrugged. "Just a looker-on."

"Well, don't talk so goddamned much. You haven't even got a gun."

Earp, wearing dark trousers and a long-sleeved white shirt with soft collar and string tie, looked more like a frontier schoolteacher than a gun-fighter. "It's none of my business," he said slowly, "but if it was, I'd get me a gun and arrest Ben Thompson."

"Don't pay any attention to that, kid," said the marshal.

The mayor looked the marshal in the face and said, "You're fired,

Norton. You, too, Morco." He snatched the marshal's badge from Norton's shirt and turned to Earp. "I'll make this your business," he said. "You're marshal of Ellsworth. Here's your badge. Go into Beebe's and get some guns. I order you to arrest Ben Thompson."

Earp took the badge and went inside.

"Follow him!" said Holland.

Alison's hands moved over the console; the viewpoint swung sideways to center on the doorway and swoop inside past the mayor, past the ex-marshal and his deputy and Logan, their bodies melting away at the edges of the Bubble like mist at sunrise.

The interior of the store was dim compared to the sun-scorched plaza. Without breaking stride, Earp turned to his left, to the firearms counter, where he requested second-hand forty-fives, holsters, and cartridges. Beebe himself hurried over to help with the selection and to watch the new marshal examine the weapons, load them, settle them on hips. Our viewpoint wheeled to float above Beebe's shoulder as Earp returned to the door and the store owner followed, then swept on past when the latter stopped with his customers at the threshold. Earp went out to the street alone save for our invisible, unknowable presence.

Fifty meters away, Thompson spotted his new adversary as soon as Earp stepped off the sidewalk. The shotgun muzzle swerved to point toward him as he began to close that gap with a slow, steady gait.

"What do you want, Wyatt?" shouted Thompson.

Until that moment, I had not realized they were acquainted with each other. I wondered how much Thompson knew about Earp, how much there was to know at this early date.

"I want you, Ben," said Earp.

"I'd rather talk than fight," said Thompson. Whatever their relationship, he clearly did not think Earp insane for facing him down in that Ellsworth street.

"I'll get you either way, Ben," said Earp. He kept walking.

"Wait a minute. What do you want me to do?"

"Throw your shotgun into the road, put up your hands, and tell your friends to stay out of this play." He was less than ten meters from Thompson.

Close up, Thompson was ugly, bloated from too much drinking, and powerfully built. He looked belligerent. Earp looked cool. I had to admire

him; how many men could appear so calm while facing a loaded shotgun? And then there were all those other half-drunk cowboys in Thompson's entourage, including the one who had offered the reward for the lawman. I began to understand the making of a legend.

"Will you stop and let me talk to you?" shouted Thompson.

Earp halted. He still had not drawn a gun.

"What are you going to do with me?" Thompson asked.

"Kill you or take you to jail."

"Deputy Brown's over there by the depot with a rifle," Thompson said, tilting his head in the appropriate direction. "The minute I give up my guns he'll cut loose at me."

Earp said, "If he does, I'll give you back your guns and we'll shoot it out with him. As long as you're my prisoner, the man that gets you will have to get me."

Thompson hesitated.

"Come on. Throw down your gun or make your fight."

Thompson threw down the gun. "You win." He raised his hands above his head. "I'm all yours."

Now Earp's right hand went to his hip, touched the butt of the weapon there, but still he did not draw. With his left hand he pointed toward Thompson's supporters, swinging his arm wide to encompass them all. "Get back, all of you! Move!"

They moved, and Earp took his prisoner's shotgun and gunbelts and marched him through the throng to the courthouse. Some of Thompson's friends attempted to storm the court, but Earp drove them out and locked the door.

The arraignment was swift. "What's the charge?" said the judge.

The mayor was there, and the peace officers who had been fired, but now that they were sealed into a room with Thompson—a room surrounded by his supporters, who could be heard shouting through the thin walls—none of them had any suggestions to make.

"How about accessory to murder?" offered Earp.

The judge looked to the mayor. "How about it?"

The mayor frowned, hesitating, and finally said, "Well, your honor, in my opinion, Ben Thompson here could be charged with... disturbing the peace."

"Guilty!" said the judge. Twenty-five dollar fine."

Thompson grinned and peeled two bills from a roll of greenbacks. He slapped them down before the judge. "Do I get my guns back now?"

"Certainly," said the judge. "You have paid your fine, and the marshal will restore any property he may have taken from you."

As Thompson started to strap a gunbelt on, Earp caught his arm. "Listen to me, Ben," he said. "Court or no court, don't you put those guns on here. You carry them straight to the Grand Central, and don't so much as stop to say hello to anybody on the way. I'll be watching you. Keep moving till you're out of my sight. After *that*, whatever you do is your own business."

Earp watched Thompson walk into the waiting crowd, which engulfed him and moved en masse toward the hotel. When Thompson was completely lost to sight, he turned to the mayor, plucking the badge from his shirt, unbuckling the gunbelts from his hips. "I don't need these any more," he said.

The mayor stared at him, his hands receiving the items like coat hooks. "Don't you want to be marshal of Ellsworth?"

"I do not."

"We'll pay you a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month."

Earp looked him in the eye. "Ellsworth figures lawmen at twenty-five dollars a head. That's too cheap for me." He turned and walked out of the courthouse, down the street which no longer swarmed with armed men. We followed him for some minutes, but he only went into a hotel—not the Grand Central—for some dinner. He was just being served his steak when Holland's time ran out.

Alison hit the finish button, and the Bubble collapsed into itself like a deflating balloon, dwindling to a spot of light before winking out. Without it, the room beyond the console was bare and lonely.

"All right," said Alison, swiveling her chair to face Holland. "I'm impressed."

"He was quite a man," said Holland. "Now, where do I get the tape?"

"At the records office. Down the hall to your left."

He rose from his chair and offered her his hand. "Thank you very much for all your efforts. I'm very grateful that the company assigned me one of its best operators."

She smiled. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes." He hurried out, obviously eager to lay his hands on the tape and live the whole experience again.

Alison turned to me, still smiling, and shook her head. "Sometimes I think the ones who just sit there with their mouths shut the whole time are the best clients of all, even if they don't offer any cues."

I laughed as I reached out for her. "He's in love with his subject matter." I pulled her onto my lap. "Almost as much as I'm in love with you."

She slid her arms around my neck and touched my forehead with her lips. "Don't we have a 1900 dinner reservation?" she murmured.

"Uh-huh." She was warm, and soft in all the right places. I could have sat there for an hour, just holding her.

"And Myra's due on shift in about five minutes."

I gave her a last squeeze. "You must be hungry."

"Dying," she said. "Nothing like a little simulated fresh air to give a person an appetite."

"It was just the look of that huge steak, I know. They don't make them like that any more. Or at least they don't serve them like that."

"And a good thing, too," she said, extricating herself from my embrace. "That was grass-fed beef, and I'm sure it tasted terrible by modern standards. Let's go get our dinner."

We passed Myra on the way out; she was one of the two other operators who used Alison's Bubble. She had a sour-faced old woman in tow — a woman I had seen so often that I was beginning to wonder when her grant would run out. She was studying the Plains Indians, and I was sure she must have enough information to write a dozen books by now. Hers was one of the longest ongoing projects in the Kansas City Center, and Myra had been complaining lately that the whole thing was starting to bore her. I had never had that experience myself. All of my assignments had been fascinating; perhaps that was the luck of the draw or just a reflection of my attitude toward time viewing. Time viewing, after all, had given me everything I wanted—the endlessly marvelous past, a fat salary, and Alison.

She and I had been living together for about a year just then, sharing an apartment in one of Kansas City's plushiest high-rises. The place suited us well—it was full of creature comforts, of deep-cushioned chairs and thick carpeting, and of the personal things of our lives, the music we loved and

the souvenirs of our work. We stayed there during most of our free time, relaxing together, content with each other's company. We had the money to do anything, go anywhere, but that never mattered. The only thing we ever spent it on was good food; and because neither of us cared much for cooking, we went out for almost every meal.

That evening we visited one of our favorite restaurants. We were dressed plainly compared to the other patrons, wearing our work clothes while other diners wore furs and jewels, but the manager was accustomed to that and did not even raise an eyebrow. His place was frequented by Bubble operators, and that only boosted its reputation.

We ordered wine, lobster, paté. Alison had a weakness for Maine lobster; there were not many places in Kansas City that served it.

"I thought you'd be having steak," I said, "after seeing it in the Bubble."

She shook her head. "The more I thought about it, the less appetizing it seemed. Earp probably ate it every day of his life. He probably never tasted lobster. Why should I limit myself to his menu? I can have steak anyplace. The famous Kansas City Steak."

I had to laugh. "People in New England probably care as little about lobster."

"Ah, yes," she murmured. "One never appreciates what's available at home."

We stopped for a swim after that, in the pool on the fortieth floor of our building. Ordinary people would probably have taken in a show instead, but Bubble operators rarely found the artificial life of either the theatre or the holomovies attractive—they spent their days with the reality of the past, live people instead of actors, and if that moved more slowly than professional entertainment, it was still too similar for the other to be diverting.

We went to bed early, and to sleep somewhat later. Alison seemed distracted while we made love, and quickly tired, but I put that down to an irritating session with a new client; I had had the same experience myself often enough. Clients—invariably Ph.D.s in some variety of history or anthropology—would sit still for a short time, patient at first while the operator worked the Bubble back to the appropriate time period, patient still while the Bubble swept through space to locate the precise spot requested. Only when the process began to drag out did they become restless; only when they began to realize that pinpointing events in time and space was not a simple matter, that it took a practiced and delicate hand and a great deal more patience than they ever thought existed, did

they start to show their annoyance. Some clients merely became tense and twitchy as their sessions stretched toward Finish and they saw nothing that they were searching for. Others became sarcastic, making snide comments on the ability of the operator. Some became abusive. One client—back in the early days, just after the Jesus Project was finally geared down to ordinary proportions, when we had trained enough operators that a few could be spared for other parts of the world and other projects—actually tried to strangle me for, as he put it, delaying him unconscionably. Fortunately, the intercom to the maintenance office was open as usual, and about ten seconds after I yelled for help, three technicians erupted into the room and pulled him off me. He was gabbling about me wasting his grant money as they dragged him out. The company refunded his grant money and barred him from further use of the Bubble.

Alison had never had quite so bad an experience—I was something of a showpiece among the operators, the guy everyone pointed to when new operators asked if there was anything else to know about handling clients. But she knew her share of petty irritants. No matter how well an operator worked, the clients were hardly ever satisfied. Ultimately, they always thought there was something else they could have seen. And they were probably right. Especially in the cast of tracing historical figures, there was always far more to a person's life than could be viewed in a few hours, even a few hundred hours, in the Bubble.

Alison had been an operator almost as long as I, though I had known her only two years when we moved in together. She had come out of the Paris office, one of the earliest set up after the experimental Bubble in Los Angeles and the first commercial office in Istanbul. She had been kept busy with the Romans and the Vikings there until the Kansas City office opened and needed some experienced operators. When that finally happened, there was considerable maneuvering among the company staff, mostly people trying to avoid the Kansas City assignment; they pleaded that it was an out-of-the way place without much intrinsic interest, not like Istanbul, Paris, or even Los Angeles. But it was a good central location as long as the Bubble was limited in range to about 1500 kilometers—superior to Chicago, which would have pleased some operators better as a base. The result of all the maneuvering was that only the operators with the most interest in the job itself went to Kansas City, those who got pleasure from time viewing almost to the exclusion of outside concerns. We prided ourselves on being the best, the cream. Alison, Myra, and I, and half a dozen others.

There was no lack of work for us, certainly. Pre-Columbian culture

studies swept up most of the viewing slots at first, though Vanderbilt University did put in a big, successful bid for the Civil War period as soon as the office was announced. Having a relatively small grant, Holland had been forced to wait a long time for his opportunity to study Wyatt Earp.

On the day after I watched Alison's first session with Holland, the holos appeared in our apartment. It was a common practice among operators to surround themselves with pictures of the current assignment—people, genre scenes, anything typical of the period, anything attractive to the eye. We kept in the mood of the assignment that way, kept our minds working on it even in off-duty hours. In some ways, we were never off duty, because there were always calculations to be made, procedures to be planned, suggestions to be formulated. Few of the scholars who used the Bubble understood its techniques or its limitations, nor did they often even know exactly what they wanted from it. Part of the Bubble operator's job was to show them what could be discovered with the device. Too many users wanted to know *why* things happened in addition to the events themselves. And they fumed that they couldn't walk right into the Bubble and ask questions of the people there. "Anthropology without informants" was what one of my clients called it—valuable, of course, but not enough for some researchers. Two clients out of three would moan that they wished the company sold time travel instead of time viewing.

Myself, I was glad enough that it was just viewing. The complexities of actually going to the past made my mind spin every time I considered them. I was happy to sit at the console, safe in the world I understood, guiding people through the museum of the past, where everything was locked away behind the invisible walls of the Bubble, tamper-proof and secure.

Not all of the operators agreed with me, of course. Some of them surrounded themselves with so many holos of the past that their homes seemed to *be* there instead of in the Twenty-first Century. Myra usually turned entire walls of her place into scenes from her current project—for example, endless vistas of the Great Plains, complete with buffalo herds and Indian villages. When we sat in her living room during that period, it was like being camped on the prairie. Other operators were less extreme, like Alison and me, with a few holos from the current project plus a few well-loved shots from previous ones. In my bedroom there was a full-length, life-sized portrait of Augustus Caesar standing in the Forum, just as I had seen him that first time. Alison's room had a dragon-prowed Viking ship, one-quarter size, but still large enough to span an entire wall, and the waves beneath it lapped gently at its wooden sides; she said the

motion soothed her when she was thinking.

The day after her first meeting with Holland, she put up holos of the main street of Ellsworth and of Earp, Whitney, Logan, the Thompsons—almost everyone we had seen in the Bubble, some full body shots, some just faces. She put them in her own room, scattered them on the three walls not occupied by the dragon ship; we had agreed when we moved in together that we would each fill our rooms with whatever we wanted and that the common rooms—living room, dining room, kitchen—would be decorated by consultation. The result of that was that our bedrooms were crowded with memorabilia but the other three rooms held only furniture and drapes and a few music tapes that we both liked.

From the doorway, I looked around her walls. "They mostly seem to need baths," I said.

She nodded, still adjusting placement of the pictures. "Except Earp and Whitney. And Logan, I think—he bathes frequently, but smithing is dirty work. Lots of soot."

I glanced at Whitney's face. "I suppose you won't be seeing much more of the sheriff." I pointed at him.

"Some," she said. "I've seen him die from two viewpoints already. Holland says we'll try at least one more."

"How many times can you watch a man be shot?"

"It's Earp he's interested in, not Whitney. He thinks by watching this scene closely enough, he'll be able to figure out why Earp goes after Thompson in the face of all that opposition." She grinned at me. "He wants to read the man's mind."

"I take it nobody knows why Earp did it."

There are a couple of books, each with its own interpretation, but Holland says they're both based on interviews with Earp when he was an old man. He suspects eighty-year-old Earp of either embroidery or forgetfulness." She shrugged. "I don't think he knew why he did it. He just did it. He was crazy."

"Wyatt Earp crazy? The greatest legend of the West?" She started to step back to see the effect of her adjustment of the holos, and I eased myself behind her so that she ended up in my arms. I locked my hands over her navel. "What a cruel thing to think," I murmured, nuzzling her neck.

"He has that penetrating look of madness in his eye," she said. She covered my hands with her own. "He has restless eyes, as if he thinks

someone might be after him."

I chuckled against her hair. "That's the piercing gaze of the lone scout you're criticizing, you know."

"And he's thin—the nervous type that eats and eats but never gains weight. You saw the meal he ordered."

"He's the calmest person I ever saw. The way he faced that Thompson fellow, with the mob behind him...."

"A suicidal impulse." She ticked items off on her fingers, pressing one after the other against my hand. "Suicide prone. Paranoid. Megalomaniacal."

"Megalomaniacal? How so?"

"No one but a megalomaniac would have thought he could face down all those armed men and get out alive."

"That's not consistent with the suicidal part of your diagnosis."

She shrugged. "I'm looking at all the options."

I had to laugh. "Have you discussed any of this with Dr. Holland?"

"No. I don't think he'd want to hear it. Earp is his hero—pure, good, the epitome of courage. Sort of larger than life. And, anyway, why should I offer my theories? He's not paying me for psychiatric services." She turned her head to look at me sidelong. "Besides...an operator should always try to maintain a tranquil relationship with the client."

"You think Dr. Holland would try to do something unpleasant if you told him you thought Earp was insane?"

She pivoted in my embrace and slid her arms up around my neck. "Who knows," she replied. "I don't know how crazy he is yet."

"We're all crazy somehow," I said. "Me, for example—I'm crazy about you."

"That's good to know," she whispered.

We spent the rest of that night in her bedroom, surrounded by Ellsworth, Kansas, and its incongruous partner, the Viking ship.

My own project of the period was as routine as any had ever been—the endless trek along the Oregon Trail. There were thousands of stories in those covered wagons, most of which I never saw completed, for they passed beyond range of our equipment at the Snake River in Idaho, just before the last leg of their journey. Still, I thought their history, in a dramatic sense, had been pretty well covered by a multitude of classic

movies I had seen as a child. So I didn't much mind it being cut short for me. My client, of course, didn't see things that way, and she would be finishing her research in Los Angeles, where she could view the other end of the Trail.

I had been living with several holos of covered wagons, dusty mules, and poke-bonneted women for some time on the day that Alison installed her new pictures, and it was shortly after that that I decided to get rid of them and bring back some old favorites. I had steeped myself in the period long enough, I thought, that I no longer needed visual inspiration; I just *knew* what to do every day, almost without conscious effort. That was a common experience among operators during extended projects.

I dumped the holos and surrounded Augustus with other successes. There had been failures, of course—certain historical figures who could not be found no matter what I tried, leading me to believe that either they were entirely mythical or that my clients' literary researches were less than perfect—but there were few operators who liked to keep records of *that* sort. Nothing was more frustrating, and more ulcer-making, than searching time and space for someone or something that wasn't there.

The central office had those records, of course—and the failures would go before the upper echelons of the company during the semiannual employee evaluation. So far, though, no operator had ever been fired for lack of success. There were just too few of us to go around, and training was, at that time, too long and expensive a procedure to waste on anyone without considerable potential. The bad risks were weeded out early, and most operators had a strong sense of having found their life's work. I know I did.

Not long after I got rid of my Oregon Trail holos, Alison added to her Earp collection. She and Holland had moved on to Wichita, and a new set of faces replaced the citizens of Ellsworth. Earp was more mature, I saw, but gaunt as ever, and I thought there were five pictures of him on the wall until Alison explained, that two were of his brothers Morgan and Virgil. Only someone who had seen them often, alive, in motion, could have told them apart.

I also recognized another face, though at first I couldn't place it.

"Jimmy Logan, the blacksmith's boy, remember?" said Alison. "He followed Earp to Witchita. Hero-worship, I think. Wants to be his deputy, but Earp says he's too young."

Logan looked older than before, had gained some weight, just enough to give him a mature physique. But he still had a boy's face, and I could see

why Earp had said what he did.

"One less new name to memorize," Alison said, crossing her arms over her breasts. "Sometimes I suspect Holland can't possibly have any living friends —his mind can't have room for their names."

I had to smile at her. "Maybe he has holos of his living friends on his walls, just to remind him of them." She laughed.

With the lights low, we couldn't see all those eyes looking down at us. When I was new at time viewing, that had made me feel strange—dead people watching my sleep. Now, it was nothing, and I slept well beneath them, perhaps better than if the walls had been bare. There was a kind of childish security in knowing that the shadows in the room held only familiar things. I even dreamed about my holos, nights spent as my days were, perhaps even a touch more vividly. In my dreams I was often inside the Bubble instead of sitting at the console. Alison would smile when I told her that. She said she didn't dream about that sort of thing at all.

About a week after she and Holland began work on Wichita, the Viking ship vanished from the fourth wall, replaced by more shots of people. Alison's room was crowded with pictures now, every available centimeter, a kaleidoscope of pictures. She made no attempt at pattern, or at any illusion of reality; they were just scattered randomly, like a crowd pressing close to the bed. Her room had become a scrapbook.

Then she started spending her independent time in the period.

Most operators ran uninterrupted six-hour shifts, each trio assigned to a console arranging its own flexible schedule. The remaining time was, theoretically, reserved for maintenance, but in practice the machines rarely needed more than brief routine servicing. That left a couple of extra hours per day on each console. The company could have sold that time, of course, no matter how inconveniently placed the slots were, but early in its history it established a different policy: operators were required to sign up for those odd hours, every operator taking at least one of those slots every week, to practice search techniques. In the Kansas City Center, at least, no one had to be told to take a turn in independent study, and we all had pet private projects going that were important only to us. The company oversaw it all but generally looked the other way when an operator used independent time to make certain kinds of profit in the outside world. More than one operator had earned a minor scholarly reputation on independent work; even I had published a paper on the Indian Wars. Others just played at their consoles, watching famous sporting events or entertainments of the past. In the Paris office, according to Alison, the

most popular independent study was viewing the great Elizabethan plays as they had been originally performed, with Shakespeare himself sometimes appearing onstage. Some of us would have liked to view more recent events, the great baseball and football games, and the Olympics of the middle and late Twentieth Century—but the Bubble failed us there. The 93.675 years immediately before our own were closed to the Bubble, too near for focus. That was an explanation the Company had to give out tiresomely often, especially to the various governments of the world, which wanted to spy on each other from the vantage of yesterday.

I really didn't mind the loss of ninety-three-odd years. Like most operators, I was fascinated by the remote past, by the worlds that were so different from the one that had encompassed my life before I discovered the company. There was no single period that drew me; I moved from one to another as whim took me— which was typical. Ordinarily, an operator chose an area of independent study because of something he had seen during his regular work, something at a tangent to the client's desires but intriguing to the operator.

As Alison had chosen the period of Earp.

I became aware of her new interest when she signed a tape out of records and brought it home to project in her room. Projection required that she move a wall of holos, and for that she requested my help. I thought it was amusing that we didn't stack the holos but moved them to the ceiling, where she could see them from the bed. I had always thought of the ceiling as sacred blank territory, but Alison didn't want to discard any of the pictures. She asked me if I wanted to view the tape, knowing that I would demur. I rarely viewed tapes myself, only when necessary for the job, because their reality was so much less than that in the Bubble; they were not two-dimensional, but they seemed flat to me, and dead as the past really was. I left her there, propped on a mound of pillows on the bed, and I went out to the living room to listen to a little music.

She didn't come out that evening and didn't invite me in. I never knew when she stopped viewing the tape. Rather than disturb her, I went to bed in my own room, alone. We had an agreement about that, too—we respected each other's privacy.

She brought another tape home the following evening. And the one after that. She said they related to Holland's investigations, that she was doing extra preparation for some difficult searches. Alison had always been diligent that way. She came back to my bed on the fourth night, and I was certainly glad to welcome her; I decided that she was working just a little too hard on Dr. Holland's project—a little too hard for my taste. But I

didn't say anything. It was her job, she loved it, and this project wouldn't last forever.

Holland's grant had to run out someday.

So for a time I didn't see much of Alison, though we shared the apartment and similar work schedules. But when I did see her, it was wonderful. fresh, as if we had just discovered each other, as if she were trying to make up for having so little time for me. There was an extra measure of passion in her lovemaking, and of unpredictability, for I would never know when she was going to creep into my bed in the middle of the night—after staying up that long—and wake me in the best possible way. It was fresh, and frustrating, and a little silly, and at last I tired of it and found myself looking forward impatiently to a return to the old, settled relationship.

But I saw less and less of her, and what I did see began to be moody and morose, as if there were something nagging at her. I thought I recognized those symptoms—the signs of a project going sour, the goals not realized, seeming farther and farther away every day, or completely unrealizable. Better, I decided, not to discuss that possibility with her; I knew how oppressive such discussions could be. I saw Holland a couple of times in the corridors of the company building, and he seemed buoyant. He hardly noticed me, probably didn't recall me from that first day. The contrast between his and Alison's attitudes didn't seem odd to me; often the operator was the first to suspect that something was going bad, while the client was still wrapped up in evaluating earlier achievements.

Then her wardrobe changed.

Alison had never been much interested in clothes. Normally she wore jeans and a tee shirt and sneakers just this side of worn out. Now she traded the jeans for dark slacks, the tee shirt for man-cut long-sleeved white, the sneakers for boots. It was an unfamiliar style, not particularly attractive, except that Alison was wearing it. She never needed beautiful clothes in order to look beautiful. I didn't care that she wore something different. Except that it was...different. The change in wardrobe seemed to betoken some other change in her. She was...brisker, somehow. With me, at least. She didn't seem to have any time at all these days. There was pressure on her, of Holland's making or her own, I couldn't be sure which. Perhaps, I thought, his grant was running out and he was transmitting the pressure he was feeling to her. I found myself hoping that his grant would run out *very* soon.

Then she stayed away from our apartment all night.

It had happened before, always work. There was no reason for me to think it was anything else this time. When I saw her the next day, she didn't talk about it. She was in too much of a rush.

I hadn't wanted to believe it, but I couldn't resist the feeling that something was coming between us. The way Holland looked at me in the corridor, that look of complete disinterest... could it have been him? The new wardrobe nagged at my mind. Holland didn't dress that way, of course; he was just a typical, somewhat conservative academic type, subdued colors and patterns, his clothing ten or fifteen years behind the current fashions in their cut. But Earp dressed that way, and other men of the period—Sunday clothes, they called them, clothes of the leisure time. Alison wouldn't wear a hoop skirt and a poke bonnet, of course, but she might immerse herself in the masculine fashions of the day to be more in harmony with Holland's fascination.

I told myself not to be jealous. Holland was considerably older than Alison and I and, to my eyes, not particularly attractive. I didn't know if he was attached to someone else. But he wasn't a Kansas City resident, and so he would have to leave eventually. If it was Holland indeed, I could weather that. Alison and I had too much going for us for any outsider to pry us apart. I told myself that when she was out a second night, when I had lost track of how many nights it had been since we had made love.

I went shopping for myself. I figured that two could play this game, and so I bought myself a pair of dark slacks and some boots and a soft white shirt of the proper style. I even bought a string tie and did it up the way Earp did his. And then I checked at records to see when Alison was scheduled for her next independent stint; I was going to surprise her with my new outfit and see if I could get a laugh out of her. We had always laughed together, before Holland.

Records revealed that she had been spending an unusual amount of time in independent work. She had traded with the other operators assigned to her console, amassed a considerable number of extra hours, and spent them all viewing the period between 1873 and 1885. She had also signed out tapes of everything she had viewed independently and had claimed a projection room for replaying them. There were no records of how often she had used the projection room, just that she had access to it full-time. I thought about those rooms, with their wide, plush couches—perfect for meeting close friends. I wondered if she had viewed any of the tapes in that room, or if she had done something else entirely there.

I had always been honest with Alison. I had thought she would be

honest with me. I was sure there was something wrong now between us. And I wanted to bridge the gap before it became too wide. I didn't want to lose Alison. I didn't think I had done anything that would cause her to stop loving me. But maybe I hadn't done enough to keep her wanting to love me. All I could think of was Holland. What did he have to offer that was better? How could he possibly love her more than I did? He hardly knew her. I went to the door of her projection room when she should have been there. It was locked. Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to ring the call bell. It wouldn't have been fair to disturb whatever she was doing in there. I stood by the door awhile, hoping she would come out on her own, hoping *someone* would come out, but at last I gave up. I told myself I was too hungry to wait for her. But when I got to the restaurant, everything on the menu looked like dust; I could hardly choke down the light salad that was all I ordered.

Finally, she changed shifts. We had always arranged our shifts to more or less coincide, since the first day we decided to live together. No—before that, back when we first realized that we had something special. Each of us had settled into an arrangement with the other two operators of our consoles, and except for a few brief, temporary readjustments, everyone had been satisfied. Now I found a note taped to my bedroom door:

MYRA IS ON A NEW PROJECT AND HAS ASKED ME TO SWITCH SHIFTS WITH HER FOR THE DURATION—LOVE, ALISON

I stared at the word LOVE. In spite of its presence, the note felt cold and impersonal. In other days, she would have told me herself, in bed, in an apologetic tone. She and Myra were very close, they did each other favors often. Myra always had a good reason for asking Alison to take her shift. It never lasted long. But... for the duration?

Because Alison obviously didn't want to discuss the matter with me in person, I called Myra—she was at home at the same times I was now, while Alison was not.

"You can't imagine how glad I was to get rid of that old prune!" she said almost as soon as I could say hello. "She's taking a vacation, and with any luck, I won't be available when she comes back, and she'll have to drive another operator crazy!"

"Yes," I said. "I'd heard from Alison that you had a new project. Some problem with the scheduling, wasn't there? Was it a local academic with a teaching conflict?"

Myra's expression was puzzled. "No, just the usual out-of-towner. From Dallas this time. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I was wondering...why you switched shifts with Alison."

She frowned a little. "Why, that was Alison's idea. She did it to stay in synch with you, didn't she?"

"I haven't changed."

"No?"

"No."

Her eyebrows rose slowly. "Are you and Alison...having problems?"

I said, "I don't know. How long is your new project going to last?"

"Awhile. A few weeks maybe. It doesn't look like anything monumental. Maybe she just wants a change. A vacation."

"From me?"

"Well, any relationship can get...." She shrugged. "Claustrophobic." She leaned forward. "Is she talking about moving out?"

"She isn't talking at all. I haven't seen her in days."

"Maybe you should leave her alone for a while. Let her work through whatever it is that's bothering her."

"I don't think I have a choice on that. We may be living in the same apartment, but we don't seem to be living in the same world any more."

"Oh, Barry...I'm sorry." She spread her hands in helplessness. "Maybe it's just the job. She's been looking tired lately. Maybe she just doesn't have the energy left for her private life. After her current project is over, you two should take a long vacation, get away from the company, from the Bubble, from the pressure. Just the two of you."

"If it's still the two of us by then."

"Take it easy, Barry. Maybe it will all blow over, whatever it is."

I tried to smile at her, but my lips felt very stiff. "I hope so," I said. "Thanks, Myra. See you tomorrow." I broke the connection, and her face vanished from the viewscreen, but I couldn't get her expression of sympathy out of my mind. How did I look to her, I wondered, that provoked that expression? I went to the bathroom mirror and stared at myself for a while.

I hadn't examined my own face so carefully in a long time; in the morning when I got ready for work, it was all business—the hair, the comb, the chin, the depilator. I never looked at my eyes. Now I saw they were bloodshot, as if I hadn't slept well in a long time. For the rest, it could

have been misery or anger; I felt them both lapping over me, fighting with each other for supremacy. I wanted to break the mirror. The apartment felt so empty with Alison gone. So cold. I stood before her door, that blank, familiar territory. We respected each other's privacy; I knew it would not be locked; I knew Alison would never have dreamed that I might go in without her permission. I touched the smooth panel with the flat of my hand. What did I expect to find? The walls covered with pictures of Holland? Or everything packed up, ready to be removed, a trunk standing in the middle of the floor? Or...nothing—an empty room, already divested of all the individuality that was Alison?

I slid the panel aside. At first glance, the room appeared to be in its ordinary condition, much as I had seen it last, with holos on three walls and the ceiling, the fourth wall blank for projection. Scenes and people of the Classic West surrounded me, and Alison's bed and belongings were in their usual places. She wasn't moving out, at least. Then something began to nag at me and I turned slowly to take in all the pictures, to look at what they were, not just at the whole kaleidoscopic effect.

There was only one man on the walls of that room. In a hundred different poses, a hundred different sets of clothing, full body shots and portraits, profiles and frontal views, with mustache and clean-shaven, at a dozen different ages, but still, unmistakably, the same man. I knew him, I was sure of that, but it took me a few moments to place him. For me, he would never have stood out from a crowd, but I had seen him in the Bubble and I had seen him before on that wall. His name came at last—Jimmy Logan, the blacksmith's boy, the one who hero-worshipped Wyatt Earp. In one of the holos, a full-length shot, life-sized, he appeared to be about thirty years old, and he wore a marshal's star on his long-sleeved white shirt.

I sat down on the bed. In my periods of greatest devotion to Augustus Caesar, I had never been so immersed in him. It was overwhelming, stifling, claustrophobic. I lay back, and there he was on the ceiling, inescapable; he had his shirt off in the most central shot, hot sun pouring down on him, and the beads of sweat on his shoulders and chest glistened, giving him the appearance of being covered with oil. I rolled over, burying my face in her pillow to escape him. The pillow smelled faintly of her shampoo, and I wondered when the last time was that she had slept there. A glass half-full of water sat on the bedside table, the inside surface of the lower part covered with bubbles. Stale. Was it yesterday that she had drunk from that glass, or last week?

Behind the glass was a stack of tapes, coded with the company's

emblem. The recording dates were all recent. These, I thought, were what she had been spending some of her spare time with. I dimmed the overhead light and slipped one into her projector.

A dusty street materialized upon the blank wall. The sun was low, shadows long, few people walking anywhere in sight. The street looked vaguely familiar; it might have been Ellsworth, or any one of a hundred similar Western cowtowns of the period. I half expected to see Wyatt Earp stride through the field of view. Instead, Jimmy Logan entered it, Logan in his mid-twenties, I judged, walking with a sure stride down the street. The center of town was behind him. He was passing into a more residential sector, an area of clapboard houses surrounded by burnt-out gardens and white picket fences. He stopped to unlatch the gate at one of the houses, to step through it and latch it once more behind him. He hurried up the walk, climbed three steps and pulled the front door open without knocking. I guessed that it was his own house and he had come home for supper.

I swooped in behind him and found that more than supper was waiting inside for him. She was about his age, rather prim-looking in the tradition of the time, hair pulled back in a tight knot, dress high at the neck and long-sleeved, falling to the floor. Still, she was rather pretty and quite nicely built, and she gave him a very warm welcome. When her hand touched the back of his neck, I saw that she wore a wedding ring. They kissed for quite a long time, and the tape went on afterward, following lovingly close as they went into the bedroom and undressed each other and eased to the bed. From their intensity, I supposed that they hadn't been married long. Alison had caught everything, had recorded an excellent piece of erotica. I found myself reacting very strongly to it.

And wondering how she reacted.

I scanned the other tapes at high speed. They were all different, yet all fundamentally alike. Not that they were *all* erotic, not overtly. A few just showed him moving, chopping wood, riding a horse, working in his father's forge. Still, there was an erotic element to them all, a physical element. When I had seen the lot, I had a very fine awareness of his body, of the play of muscles, the style of walk and posture, the little habitual gestures. And I knew I would never again have any trouble recognizing him. If he had been alive, if he had walked into the company's offices, I could have greeted him by name.

And I didn't know who he was. I knew, of course, that he was Logan, but who was Logan? What was his place in history? Why was Alison so fascinated by him?

I put everything back as I had found it, smoothed the bed. When she came home...if she came home, she wouldn't be able to tell I had breached her privacy. I felt guilty about doing it, but glad. Out in the living room, I put in a call to the Encyclopedia Britannica, requested all their information on James Logan of Ellsworth, Kansas, approximate birth year 1853. They had no listing for him. He wasn't important, at least not that our contemporary culture knew. I thought that he must be important just to Dr. Frederick Holland.

So I waited until Alison was off shift and called Dr. Holland, taking a chance that he and she would not be together at his place. I was at work by then and didn't know if Alison had gone home. Records gave me Holland's number at the guest house. He was bright, polite, not rushed as if he had company. He didn't seem to recognize my name or face.

"Just some checking on behalf of records. Dr. Holland," I said. "We just want to confirm that some of your time has been devoted to an intensive study of one James Logan."

Holland looked puzzled. "Don't you people know what I'm studying?"

"We have a listing for Wyatt Earp, Dr. Holland, but you seem to have expanded your researches to include this other person."

"Is that wrong? Is that not allowed? I thought the fee covered whatever researches I chose to make."

"It does. Dr. Holland, it does. We only want to keep our records organized for purposes of cross-referencing. Someone else has requested materials on James Logan, and to avoid duplication of effort we would appreciate knowing how much of his life you intend to examine."

Holland shook his head. "Very little," he said. "If someone else is investigating him, they won't profit by my studies. Who is it, anyway?"

"I'm sorry, Dr. Holland, but we can't give out that information. Would you please tell me approximately how many hours of work you have spent or intend to spend on James Logan? An estimate."

"Well, none on him *per se*. I suppose he's appeared in an hour or two of my viewing so far, but just as a bystander. I don't expect to see him at all in the future."

"Thank you for your time, Dr. Holland. Sorry to have disturbed you."

"Not at all," he said. "I'm sorry I couldn't be more help."

I snapped off the connection.

Unless Holland was lying, Logan was Alison's own project. Unless he

was lying. Perhaps the lack of recognition was just a sham, and he knew perfectly well that I was Alison's lover. Ex-lover? Still, I had called unexpectedly; he hadn't had time to prepare camouflage for his reactions. And the more I saw of him, the less likely he seemed as a reasonable replacement for me. Of course, I couldn't be objective on that. I was rapidly discovering that I couldn't be objective on anything where Alison was concerned.

I had tried calling her during her off-shift, at work, at home. Her line had a block on my personal code; she wasn't accepting my calls. It seemed absurd—we lived together, but I didn't see her, couldn't talk to her. Part of that was my own doing, and I decided the time had come to ring at the door of her projection room, even if it meant disturbing her privacy.

I traded shifts with one of my co-workers, putting myself back in synch with Alison. Now I had time to spend in trying to touch her. It took me quite a while to get up the courage to ring. I kept telling myself that the truth couldn't possibly be worse than what I imagined.

I rang.

At first there was no answer, and I thought perhaps she wasn't inside; like every room of the building, it was totally soundproofed. So I couldn't tell if it was occupied by pressing my ear against the panel, though I did that anyway. I rang again. And as I waited, while the occasional company personnel passed by and looked at me curiously, I began to think that she was inside all right, watching erotic tapes with Holland. I hadn't bothered to check on him. And then I didn't care. I rang again, a long, long ring, my finger pressed against the call button until the nail reddened.

The door opened.

Alison wore her new clothes, or perhaps they were her only clothes now. The soft white shirt, the dark trousers, the boots made her look like someone else, someone I didn't know. She wore her hair tied back now, too, with a thin ribbon, not loose about her shoulders any more.

"Oh," she said. "Hello." She leaned against the door, as if to block my way inside and my view of it.

"May. I come in?"

"Why?" she said.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you too much."

"Some," she said.

"I'd like to talk to you. Please. If not now...then maybe I can make an

appointment?" I tried to smile at that suggestion, but my mouth didn't want to cooperate.

She sighed heavily. "All right. Come in." She stood aside, holding the door with both hands, like a shield.

There was no one else in the room. It was a very bare little room, with minimum comforts. A thick rug. A couch in the center of the floor. A four-way projector, for displaying tapes on all the walls simultaneously. Alison walked to one end of the couch and stood there, waiting for me.

"Sit down," she said.

I sat, but she remained standing, I thought so that she could go back to the door any time she wanted and hold it open for my exit.

"Well?" she said.

I tried to smile again, but the effort was too much for me. I patted the cushion beside me. "Come here?"

She shook her head. "I don't have time for a long discussion."

I said, "Alison, what's wrong?"

"I'm just busy."

I leaned toward her. "You know what I mean. What's wrong with us? What's happened?"

She half turned away, looked down at the carpet. "Let it go, Barry. I don't want to talk about it."

"Let it go?" I stood up, took a step and reached for her, but she backed off, just beyond my grasp. "Alison, I love you."

She crossed her arms over her breasts. "Let's not play tag, Barry. Just leave me alone."

"Have you...changed your feelings about me?" The words caught in my throat, and I thought for a moment that they would choke me. Then I realized that the sensation was tears held back. I didn't want to cry in front of her; my pride wouldn't allow that.

"Do you want me to move out?" she said.

"No!"

"I don't want to. It's a lot of trouble." She spoke so casually, so effortlessly, while for me every word was like pulling knives from my belly.

"Alison," I began.

She walked over to the door and opened it for me, as I had known she

would. "You'd better go. I'm very busy."

I couldn't move for a moment. Watching her walk—no, *stride* was the word to describe it—jarred me. Clothes, manner, even walk, this was a new Alison indeed. She didn't even stand the way she used to. Her step was longer now, harder, though maybe that was a result of the hard high heels on those boots, like the boots that Earp and Logan and Whitney had worn, the boots that hammered so hard on wooden sidewalks. She walked like the men of Ellsworth, Kansas, those men whose natural habitat included dusty, unpaved streets and wide prairie pounded flat by the hooves of buffalo. And she stood as they did, legs wide, hips canted as if a pair of forty-fives rode on them.

Standing by the couch, I felt as though time itself had come between us, as if some strange avatar of a man dead a century had come out of the Bubble to stand in Alison's place. I sagged. I, a mere mortal of the Twenty-first Century—what did I have in common with this creature from the past? I shook my head sharply. No, I told myself, this was just Alison, no matter how deeply she had immersed herself in vanished days. Perhaps, I thought, too deeply. I glanced sidelong at the projector, at the tapes racked in its holders. Four were in playing position; Alison had probably been running them one at a time, but I had only to touch a button to show them all simultaneously. A serious breach of operator etiquette.

"What's been keeping you so busy?" I asked softly, and my finger stabbed the button.

"No!" shouted Alison. But it was too late. I saw what she had been seeing until she opened the door for me.

Four walls of Logan was too much for me. My head spun.

Logan in the dusty street, star on his chest, facing down a waiting gunman, tension evident in his straining stance. Logan with chest bared and running sweat in his father's forge, muscles glistening with the ruddy light of the coals. Logan making love to his wife in the bed I had seen once before. Logan by a brook, lying on green grass, obviously far from Ellsworth, and with him someone other than his wife, laughing, holding her arms out to him.

Alison reached the projector then and punched the OFF button. "Get out," she said, her face white with anger, her eyes hard. But she was so close as we both stood by the projector that I couldn't help encircling her with my arms, pressing her against me. She turned her face away from my kiss and tried to push me away; for a moment I held her tight, my lips

against her hair, and at least she smelled like the old Alison. She hadn't changed her shampoo. She broke free. "Out," she said, her hands making fists at her hips, and I could have sworn that if those forty-fives had been there she would have drawn on me. I had seen that kind of anger before, in the Bubble.

I didn't move. "What's going on, Alison?" I whispered. "What are you doing in here? Making tapes for public consumption? Or maybe just...for private?"

"What I do in here is none of your business."

I shook my head slowly. "What have I done, Alison? We used to confide in each other. We used to trust each other. We used to...love each other."

"I don't love you any more," she said. "Now leave me alone."

The words were like bricks dropping on my head, but instead of being beaten down, I felt myself drawing the strength of fury from them. "Who is it then?" I shouted. "Who is it? Holland?"

"No, it isn't Holland. It isn't anyone. Now will you leave before everybody on the floor comes running to see what the shouting's about?" She pointed peremptorily toward the door.

I went to the door, but I kicked it shut instead of going out. "He isn't worth it," I said, turning back to her, my voice a bit more under control. "He'll bore you out of your mind!"

"I told you I'm not interested in Holland," she said. "And I'm not interested in continuing this conversation."

"Who, then?" I demanded. "Who are you making these tapes for? Who are you going to enjoy these choice bits of erotica with? Is it someone I know?"

"It isn't anyone," said Alison. "And even if it were, you have no right to ask who."

"I have the right to know who the competition is. I have a right to know what he's doing for you that I haven't done."

She turned away. "Go home, Barry. It's over, that's all. Since you feel this way, I'll move out as soon as I can find a new place."

"I don't want you to move out, Alison!"

"Well, what *do* you want?"

"I want...to understand." I took a step toward her and held my hands out, pleading. "What have I done wrong?"

She sighed. "Nothing, Barry. Nothing at all. I'm just...not interested any more. You're going to have to accept that."

"Then what are you interested in?" I looked at the projector. "This? Watching dead people make love? When you can have someone live and warm?"

"I'd rather not discuss it."

"What kind of replacement is that for me? Am I so...repulsive?"

"You're not repulsive, Barry."

I eased up behind her, touched her shoulders tentatively. "I've changed my schedule, Alison; we're back in synch. Why don't we go out for dinner and then home? Or whatever you want. I'll do whatever you want. Anything." I squeezed her shoulders with stiff fingers, trying to be gentle, knowing that I was too tense to be so. "Come home, darling. Please come home."

She shook her head.

"I'll wait for you, till you're finished with whatever it is that you're doing. You can't stay here around the clock. You've got to eat, to sleep. It's all so much more pleasant with a warm body nearby. I won't even talk if you don't want me to."

Again, she shook her head.

"Alison, please."

"Barry," she said quietly, "I would rather stay here with him than go anywhere with you."

"With him? Who?"

"Jim Logan."

I glanced at the projector. "You'd rather watch a dead man than spend any time with me."

"Please don't take it as an insult."

"No?" I swung her around to face me. "How else can I take it?"

"He's fresh, Barry. He's different. He fascinates me."

"I can see that."

"I can watch him for hours. He's struggling to move from one world to another. His father wants him to be a blacksmith, but he wants to be a peace officer. He has a very strong sense of right and wrong. And courage. Barry, I've never seen such courage."

"And his body isn't bad, either," I said. "Which do you watch more—the body or the courage?"

She shook her head. "You don't understand. He fulfills my highest expectations. I couldn't expect more from a human being than I see in him."

"There was Earp."

She dismissed him with a wave of her hand. "Earp wasn't the wonderful person legend would have him."

"And this guy is wonderful. It just makes you go all warm inside to watch him be so terrific."

She pushed away from me. "I knew I couldn't discuss it with you."

I stared at her for a long moment. At last I said, "Alison, do you have a crush on this guy?"

She stared back at me, her lips a thin, white line. "Don't be silly," she said.

I looked her up and down, slowly, and everything I had seen and heard since she opened the door began to make a sort of bizarre sense to me. "I don't think I'm being silly," I said. "I think you're acting like a teenager in love with an entertainment idol. Only this... this one isn't even accessible through the stage door. You'll never touch him, Alison. You'll never even get close enough to find out if he has bad breath."

"That's nonsense."

"Then tell me who's really taking up your time. Tell me that I'm wrong, that it's a live person edging me out. I'd rather believe that, Alison."

"Barry, you're wrong on both counts. Look—you have your hobbies, your favorite historical people. I remember very clearly all those stories you used to tell about Augustus. I didn't accuse you of having a crush on him."

"This is different! I didn't trade time with my fellow operators to spend all my waking hours following his life. I didn't tape his orgies for later replay. I didn't wear a toga."

"So I traded a few hours; so what?" Her brows knit. "You've been checking up on me?"

I nodded. "I'm fascinated by *you*, Alison."

"I don't think I care for that level of curiosity."

"I missed you. I was jealous. Isn't it understandable?"

She strode to the projector, pulled out one of the four tapes and inserted a replacement from the stack in one of the holders. She hit the ON button, and Logan flashed onto one of the walls, life-sized, standing spraddle-legged on the empty prairie, one hand raised before him holding a gun. He was shooting slow and steady at something—a target, I guessed, beyond the edge of the picture. He wore no hat, and a sharp wind ruffled his hair, his shirt collar. He made a striking figure against the endless expanse of prairie and cloudless sky.

"All right," said Alison, not looking at me but at the image on the wall. "There's your competition. Now get out of here. Or I'll call for help and have you thrown out. I signed out this room, and you haven't any right in it without my approval."

"Alison," I said. "This is all wrong."

"I'll be out of the apartment as soon as I can manage it."

"You don't have to move. I want you to stay."

"I don't want to stay," she said.

"Alison.. .he's dead. He's dust."

"Get out!"

I felt my whole body slump, my legs carry me toward the door without any conscious volition on my part. I touched the panel with my fist before opening it. "I love you," I said. "I'll wait this thing out."

"Goodbye."

I closed the door softly behind me, leaned against the wall beside it. Then I just slid down to the floor and sat with my knees up, my head pillowed on my arms, and I wept. I didn't care who saw me. Several people passed in the ensuing minutes, most of them operators I had known for years, and each one of them asked if I needed any help. I did, but none they could give. At last I got tired of hearing their offers and staggered away. I locked myself in a bathroom for a while, and eventually I was empty enough to go home.

Alison moved out three days later. I wasn't home when it happened; she took a day off while I was on shift, and she cleaned her room out so thoroughly that it looked as if no one had ever lived there. When I got home I discovered her bedroom door ajar and went in and stood in the bare room for a time, not thinking anything at all. It was like our relationship had never been. Even the music collection, when I looked

through it later to put something on the system, was missing the recordings she had selected. As I sat and listened to one of my own choices—I didn't really know which one—I couldn't help wondering if Holland had been angry at missing a day with the Bubble.

The next afternoon, Myra was sympathetic, everyone was sympathetic, though not all were verbal about it. Everyone knew that Alison had left me. But Myra assured me that she hadn't moved in with anyone else; she had taken a small place near the company building. I guessed that Myra thought she was being kind to me, to tell me that, and I didn't have the heart to explain that I would have been happier the other way, any other way.

I called Alison a couple of times in the following weeks, after Myra gave me her number, but her line was blocked to my code as before. I didn't know what I would say anyway; I just wanted to see her face. I didn't see her at work at all, though she was still there. I wondered briefly if her next step would be to transfer to another office, but then I realized that only in Kansas City could she watch Logan—he was out of range anywhere else. I was assuming, of course, that he spent his whole life in Kansas. After a while I thought she might transfer when she had tracked his life to some point where he moved to another base's range. Earp had done it, gone to California eventually, as Holland would have to do if he wanted to follow his quarry all the way.

I realized I didn't know very much about Logan. But Alison's interest in him was mesmeric. I *wanted* to know. I wanted to understand her fixation. So in my independent time I began to study him. If the records people thought it was strange that two operators were spending a lot of time in the same milieu, they never said anything, even when I, like Alison, traded away my future independent time to other operators willing to give up their present allotments.

I can't say I grew fond of him, though his wife was very pretty. The other woman I had seen him with on Alison's tape turned out to be a second wife, acquired after the first one died in childbirth. He was a very moral person, this Logan—never gambled, rarely drank, sent his children to Sunday school. His contemporaries considered him a pillar of the community. He moved back to Ellsworth soon after Earp left Wichita for Dodge, becoming its marshal in 1876. The town was past its days of glory then, but still a rowdy place, and there was plenty of work for a man with a fast gun hand and more courage than I could comprehend. I didn't compare to him there. I had seen a lot of guns pointed in my direction in the Bubble, and my mouth had gone dry at every one of them, though the

bullets couldn't touch me; I probably would have fainted at the same sight in reality. Or at best, frozen. I had the wrong reactions to be a frontier gun-fighter. I knew she compared me to him and found me lacking. But how well would James Logan function in the Kansas City of the Twenty-First Century, where the skills he had spent so many years honing would be useless? He wouldn't even be able to function as a contemporary law officer now that the police no longer carried guns.

I worked forward through Logan's life, watched his children grow, watched the trees that shaded his white clapboard house rise up and up till the street beneath them was moist with shade instead of dusty in the summer. Ellsworth aged, too, softened, settled down to quiet anonymity. In 1889 he and the family moved west to Colorado, where the town of Lamar needed a marshal. Life was more exciting for him there. He seemed to thrive on excitement, to be restless when things were quiet.

And then, he disappeared.

The standard procedure for a quick Bubble survey of the life of a historical figure involved a delicate and almost intuitive use of the device. The operator had to guess where people were going, how long they would be there, when they would return. The operator had to skim through events at a speed that made them virtually incomprehensible to the layman, halting the process by some instinct that sensed significance. It took a long time to develop that instinct, but every good operator had it. I established my baselines immediately—the house Logan lived in, the marshals office. I saw him pass in and out of them like a wraith, almost insubstantial against the long-lasting solidity of the walls and furnishings. I could run through the days of his life in the minutes of my own. Sometimes I lost track of him and had to retrace laboriously—when he escorted a prisoner to the next state, when he took a posse out after stage robbers, whenever he left the town for an extended period of time. Then, the process of following him had to slow enormously, and sometimes I didn't bother, merely returning to the house, trusting that he would come back there eventually and I could take him up again.

I did that this time. I didn't know why he vanished, but I stationed my view in the bedroom, sure that he would return to the room where his wife slept fitfully every night he was away.

He didn't.

After going through a dozen stages of worry, his wife persuaded the mayor to send a search party out for him—which was when I learned that he had gone to check on some rumors of cattle rustling among outlying

ranches. I backtracked to the day he left and followed him.

I watched him die.

At that point I had spent months on Logan, and I had had enough. Alison was right about him, completely right. I could see how attractive he was—charming, handsome, with all the qualities that his era valued. And in addition there was that touch of sadness about him, especially after he lost his first wife—just a touch of vulnerability to make the rest all that more endearing. And I was tired of watching such a paragon.

Alison, however, was not. Records showed that her use of the Bubble was still as heavy as ever in the period between 1873 and 1885. She kept returning to certain time segments, replaying them. She could have taped them, of course, probably had, but I could easily understand her desire to see them in the Bubble instead—the near-reality of the Bubble. She was selecting from his life, the high points, the cream. But not after 1885.

Out of curiosity, I tuned in the last 1885 date myself. That turned out to be the day that Logan was shot by a drunken cowboy, shot from behind, from cover—a practice that occurred more often than admirers of the Classic West would have liked to believe. It was not a serious wound by modern standards, but in a world without antibiotics it came close to claiming his life. He was bedridden for a long time, but he recovered well under his wife's diligent care.

She was avoiding the shooting, the period of convalescence, the life afterward. Even though that life wasn't very different from the one he had led before. He hadn't let the shooting faze him.

I thought...maybe...he had come too close to death for her taste—his mortality had suddenly become too real. And I thought, too, that maybe now I had a way to pull her away from him and back to me. One last attempt, I told myself, now that she'd had some time to herself. I was hoping that, perhaps, she was beginning to get lonely for someone real. She still lived alone, and according to Myra, there was no one in her life. No one, at least, but Holland, whose grant had been renewed because of Alison's excellent work. I hated Holland by that time because he was seeing her, even if in a professional capacity. Holland; unattractive as he looked to me, he was still real and available for whenever she wanted reality. And Alison, even the new strange Alison, must have provoked some kind of reaction in him. Unless he was as fixated on Earp as she was on Logan. It was possible. I no longer knew what to believe, what to scoff at. Even my own clients seemed to have unnatural interests in their subjects. I found myself in a mental prison, and I had to escape somehow, and take

Alison with me.

I taped about twenty minutes of James Logan, and with that tape I went to Alison's apartment. She had given up on the projection room after moving out of our place; she didn't need that extreme of privacy any more, didn't have to concern herself with the annoyance of encountering me in the kitchen or living room at home. I knew her door wouldn't respond to my code, though I tried it anyway. And I knew she wasn't there, but she was due soon, her shift having just ended. I waited for her, waited a long time. She must have gone someplace else before coming home, perhaps to dinner. I waited. She arrived at last, alone as I expected, alone for an evening with *him*.

She saw me when she stepped out of the elevator. She stood stock still and stared at me.

"Hello, Alison," I said. "It's been...a long time."

"Whatever you want," she said, "I haven't got it."

I shook my head. "I have something to show you."

"Another time, Barry. Catch me at work." I blocked her way to the door, but she elbowed me aside—harder than necessary—to open it.

"Please let me come in, Alison. It won't take long. Just a few minutes."

"I'm very tired," she said. "I'm going to take a bath and go to bed. I don't want any company." She stepped across the threshold, turned, and started to slide the portal shut in my face.

I leaned into the opening, blocking the door's closure. "Please."

"I don't want to see you, Barry. Now, go away or I'll call the police."

"Oh, Alison, it can't be *that* bad between us."

She looked at me rather sadly. "I don't know what you expect me to do, Barry. I'm really sorry, but it's all over. Why can't you understand that?"

I said, "Alison, have you changed so much...?"

"These things happen all the time. Look at how many men Myra has run through."

"Myra is Myra, and you're you."

"And you're you, and I've had enough of it. Barry, don't try to recapture something that's gone. Can't we part friends? Can't we just...part?"

I put one hand on the door. "You're not being very friendly, Alison."

"You're being pushy."

"I haven't bothered you lately."

"You've tried to call."

"Why not? I'm still interested."

"And I'm not. So why don't you go home and get a good night's sleep instead of standing in my doorway?"

I pulled the tape out of my pocket, held it up. "I have something to show you. It won't take long."

She sighed, shifted her weight from one leg to the other and put one hand on her hip. "How long? That's a two-hour tape,"

"Not full," I said, "maybe fifteen minutes. Twenty at most."

"Of what?"

"You have to see it."

"Why?"

"Because I'll keep bothering you until you do."

"There are ways of dealing with that kind of harassment, Barry."

"Just view the tape. After that...I'll let the next move be up to you."

"It's not going to change my mind. I don't care what it is."

"Afterward...if you still want me to leave, I'll go. I promise."

"You're betting a lot on this tape," she said, eyeing it suspiciously. "What is it?"

"You can find out right now."

She pursed her lips, then sighed so heavily that her shoulders heaved. She stepped aside. "All right. Come in. But I'm just doing this because you promised. I trust you, Barry—I trust you'll keep that promise. If you don't...."

"I will."

This was Alison's apartment, no compromise with another human being; as soon as I entered, my eyes were assaulted with Logan—Logan on the living room walls, Logan visible through the bedroom door, even in the kitchen. Alison went into the bedroom to fetch the projector, which she placed on a low table beside the living room sofa.

"You sit there," she said, indicating the sofa. She seated herself in a chair some distance away. "You can project over here." She pointed to the wall facing the chair, the only wall with a large blank space.

I nodded, slipped the tape into the slot and flicked the machine on.

I heard her sharply indrawn breath as Logan bloomed into view; he was on horseback, riding among rolling hills near a wide river. He was heading westward, and beyond him we could see the lowering sun above mountains purple with distance.

Alison gripped the arms of her chair with white-knuckled fingers. "What is this?" she demanded.

"You said you'd watch."

She pushed herself deeper into the chair, and I could see the flexion of her jaw where the teeth were grinding. "All right," she murmured. "All right."

As Logan topped the next rise, we were behind him and saw what he saw— a cabin set well back from the river. A thin plume of smoke drifted from the chimney. Logan rode down to it, tethered his horse at the rail before the front porch, climbed the two steps to the door and knocked loudly. The panel swung open, and he entered, with us at his back. He was hardly a pace past the threshold when someone who had been concealed to one side of the aperture struck him over the head with a club. He fell without a sound and lay still upon the floor. The two men—the assailant and the one who had opened the door—picked him up by the shoulders and the heels and carried him outside. There, they draped him across his horse, and while one of them led the animal, the other steadied the unconscious body in the saddle. They walked toward the river.

I watched Alison. She was tense, but she never spared a glance for me; once she had begun to concentrate on Logan, she didn't seem to notice anything else. Her eyes were wide, staring, and her expression was stark.

At the riverbank, the two men pulled Logan's limp body from the horse, and between them they hauled it into the stream until the brisk current swirled about their waists. Then they held his head underwater for a long, long time before letting go of him. He sank.

The rest of the tape was disjointed, jumping forward in time, skimming the surface of the river until the body washed ashore, bloated, scarcely recognizable. In fast motion we watched it decompose, watched buzzards pick the carcass, watched the skeleton separate into a scatter of bones as the last ligaments gave way. Dust alternated with snow in covering the remains, and before the tape ended they had disappeared from view.

Alison stood up when it was over, when the wall was blank once more. "Get out," she said in a low, tight voice.

I looked at her for a long moment, looked at the white face and wide eyes, at the fists working convulsively at her sides. "Don't you see? I said softly. "He's dead. He's dust. Before you were born he was dust. If you love a man like that, you might as well be dead yourself."

She reached the projector in two strides, pulled the tape out and dashed it against the floor. "Get out of here!" she shouted.

I tried to pull her into my arms; but she struggled. "Alison, you're warm and alive! How can you waste yourself on him?"

She glared up into my face, her fingers curling into my shirt front till the fabric cut into the back of my neck. "Murderer!" she said. "Murderer!" And then she yanked me sideways, and suddenly we were on the floor, rolling over and over, and she was all nails and sharp knees and kicking feet. She went for my eyes, my throat, my groin, but I twisted and freed myself somehow, staggered to my feet. I felt my face bleeding, and the numb places scattered over my body where bruises would rise soon.

"Alison," I gasped, "*time* killed him, not *me!*"

She lay on the floor, her fists striking the rug in a slow, steady beat. "Murderer," she moaned. She turned her head gradually, till her tear-streaked face was visible. Her eyes seemed to look past me, unfocused. "Get out before I kill you." There were no tears in her voice, but there was something that chilled me.

"All right," I said. "I'll go. But I want you to know that I love you. I did this today because I love you. I hope... someday you'll understand that."

She was still beating on the rug when I left.

For three days I nursed my bruises, calling in sick to work. Finally, I had to go in, with a spray bandage covering the gashes on my cheeks. My client was sympathetic when I explained that I had fallen down a flight of stairs. Some of my fellow operators looked at me curiously, but none made any comment; they were much too engrossed in a more vital topic of conversation: Dr. Frederick Holland. As I came off shift, word of his complaints was buzzing through records. A crowd of workers was gathered about the counter there, discussing him. Myra, who was due on shift in a couple of minutes, took me aside as soon as she saw me.

"Maybe you could sub for her, Barry—double shift until she comes back. You must know more about his project than anybody else here. He's furious, threatening to sue, and the front office is giving us all a hard time."

"Threatening to sue? What's going on?"

"It's Alison. She's gone. She hasn't come in to work for three days, and nobody knows where she is or when she'll be back."

"She didn't call in?"

"She didn't *anything*. Her line rings forever, nobody answers the door, and her mail is piling up."

I clutched at her arms. "Maybe something's wrong! Have you called the police?"

"The police?" She frowned. "You think it might be that bad?"

I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what crazy ideas could have gone through Alison's mind after I left that day. "You'd better call them. They'll have to break in. I'll wait for them there. You want to come with me?"

"I can't. I'm on duty,"

"Isn't this more important? She's your friend."

"You'll be there," she said. "What good will two of us do?"

"I don't know. I don't know." I let go of her. "I'll let you know what we find out." I started for the door at a run.

She called after me, "Will you take her shift?"

"Ask me later!"

She started to say something else, but the door cut her voice off as it slid shut behind me.

The police took their time. I paced the corridor outside her apartment for what seemed like hours before they finally arrived. They waved a warrant at me when I began babbling about the delay—"You don't get these things in five minutes, you know," they said. Then they asked for my company ID, to prove that I really was one of her co-workers, that I had some legitimate business witnessing the procedure. They asked me a lot of questions, too, and found out that she and I were former lovers and had had an argument three days before. One of them stood very close to me after that, while his partner rang the bell for a long time before unscrambling the lock.

We went inside. The apartment was just as I remembered it. The police did not seem to pay much attention to the pictures of Logan everywhere. They searched very thoroughly—rooms, closets, even under the bed. When they started on the bureau drawers and the kitchen cabinets, I began to wonder if they expected to find pieces of Alison hidden everywhere. But they found nothing—no blood, no sign of a struggle, and no Alison.

They were obviously disgusted, with the search and with me.

"Maybe she just went home to her mother," one of them suggested.

"She's an orphan," I said.

"Well, maybe she has a favorite aunt." They ushered me out and re-locked the door. "People have been known to leave home for a few days, you know, even without telling anybody where they were going. Maybe she just wanted to get away. Maybe from you. You work together, don't you?"

I shook my head. "Just in the same building. We don't see each other much any more."

"Okay, maybe she just wanted to get out of that building, even out of the town. A little vacation. Why don't you wait a few more days—she'll probably turn up." He looked at me hard then. "But don't go anywhere we can't find you easily until she comes back,

"I didn't do anything to her," I said.

"Looks like she did something to you."

I nodded. "It was a bad argument. Short, but bad. When I left she was very upset. She could have done... anything."

"For example?"

I clenched my teeth. "Suicide?"

The officers looked at each other, then back at me. "Well, we'll keep that in mind. Now I'd suggest that you go home and get yourself some rest."

"You're not...going to take me in?"

"For what? Meeting us at an empty apartment? Having a scratched face? Go home." He shook his head slowly. "Let me tell you, I've seen people gone four, five months and then they come back safe and sound. Drives their families crazy, and the families drive us crazy. You want to file a missing-person report? She has to be gone at least a month for that."

My hands gripped each other tightly. "She might have drowned herself."

"Oh? What makes you think that?"

"She...worked with someone who drowned. She was very despondent over his death."

"Well, we haven't had any reports of drownings lately. Of course, if she threw herself in the river, she *might* not have been found yet. She normally carries identification, doesn't she?"

"Yes."

"All right, we'll look into it. But there's really no point in worrying. She'll probably turn up when she's good and ready."

We went downstairs in the elevator together, and they watched me walk to the tram and catch my line before they got into their vehicle.

I had made myself a murder suspect, but I didn't care. I felt drained. Where was she? What had she done? I tried to put myself in her place that night after I had left. I tried to feel what she must have felt. Fury? Hate? Despair? I tried to feel that I had seen someone I loved die. It didn't seem difficult. She had lost someone. I had lost her. What next?

Kansas City fled by as I leaned against the tram window, and I hardly saw it. I saw Ellsworth instead, in my mind's eye, and Logan stalking the streets with a star on his chest and a pair of forty-fives on his hips. Kansas City was cool with November, but Ellsworth was dusty summer, always would be for me, since the first day Holland and Alison had worked together.

And then I knew where Alison had gone.

When I got home I checked out the Kansas air schedules and called in my reservation for the next hop to Salina. The computer answered my query on Alison: she had taken the same route the morning after I left her.

At Salina I rented a vehicle and drove west on old Route 140. The new highway, the rental agent told me, was restricted to wheeled traffic and very crowded. This road was in poor repair, but it was virtually deserted, and my hovercraft made good time over the cracked pavement. In less than an hour I was in Ellsworth, seat of Ellsworth County, population 2000.

Foolishly, I had expected to recognize the town. But a century and a half had erased the old village, and this Ellsworth could have been any county seat of the Great Plains—courthouse in the town square, traffic circle around that, streets extending grid-fashion from that center. The latest vehicles were parked at the curbs, both hovercraft and ground cars, not a horse in sight. And the dust had been laid by the damp November breeze. Citizens walked casually in the cool morning, dressed like anyone in Kansas City, and no one packed a gun, not even the traffic cop stationed by the stoplight in front of the courthouse.

I parked by a meter, fed it my credit card for the eight-hour maximum, then started my stroll around town. I really didn't know where to begin. I was disoriented, trying to figure out where the old street had run; there was a Main Street on one side of the courthouse, but I couldn't connect that with Ellsworth's old Main Street, nor the courthouse with the old

court building. There was no necessity for either of them to occupy the old sites, except perhaps human lethargy. So I just wandered, spiraling outward from the courthouse, thinking that eventually I'd find the place where the Logan house had been. Alison, I thought, would most likely be there.

I walked for hours. The sun reached its zenith and began to sink. I must have covered every street in town. some twice, and everywhere I walked people looked at me, the stranger. But none of them was Alison. At last I realized that I was very hungry, and I stepped into a bar for a sandwich. The town had only two restaurants—lunch counters, really—and by that time both of them were closed. The bartender served me a hamburger and a beer, and though he looked at me rather pointedly, he didn't ask any questions. I asked him: "Is there a hotel in town?"

"Motel," he replied, flicking a thumb toward the south, "On the big highway."

"Any others?"

"No, just the one. Nice place, though. Clean. Truckers stop there."

Thanks." I finished my beer and paid for the meal. I left him a big tip. One motel in town—where else could Alison be?

I took the hovercraft over to the highway, and there the place was, just beyond the foot of the exit ramp, without any name but MOTEL in medium-sized letters on the roof. I counted twelve units and five vehicles; they had room for me. I didn't ask about Alison when I checked in. I didn't want the owner suspicious, and I didn't want her to tell Alison that someone was looking for her. But I glimpsed a familiar signature in the motel's records—she was there all right. In my room I settled down in a reasonably comfortable chair by the window, the heavy drapes barely twitched aside to give me a view of the parking lot. Anyone walking from the town would be visible to me, too, though I didn't think Alison would be walking that sort of distance.

A couple of big rigs pulled in just after dark, their headlights flashing across the building like searchlights. Sometime later, more exhausted than I realized from the long day's activities, I fell asleep. I woke in the chair when one of the rigs revved its engine at first light.

I was cramped and stiff from sleeping in the chair, especially my legs. I had been doing my traveling by Bubble for a lot of years, and that and riding the tramways of Kansas City had not prepared me for tramping all over Ellsworth. In the bathroom, I splashed some water in my face and set the coffeemaker for a couple of cups. If Alison had come in as late as I

suspected, she would still be sleeping and I would catch her as she left. I waited by the window, sipping my coffee.

I didn't recognize her at first. She stepped out of a unit somewhere to my left and climbed into a small hovercraft. She was wearing a ground-sweeping dress of some heavy black material, with long sleeves and a high neck. Covering her head and shoulders was a black veil pulled back from her face for driving. She gunned the hovercraft and swung out of the parking lot, heading for town. I scrambled to follow her. By the time I was in my own vehicle, she was no more than a swirl of kicked-up dust in the distance.

She drove all the way through town, turning west at the courthouse, onto a road as old and decrepit as the one I had taken from Salina. Not far beyond the town limits, the land rose gently. At the crest of the rise, stark amid the endless stubble of harvested wheat fields, a parcel of land was surrounded by a spike-topped wrought-iron fence. The gate, replete with curlicue vines and leaves of age-darkened iron, stood wide open in the morning sunlight. As I eased my hovercraft into the small lot before the gate, I saw the gravestones, row on neat row, and the browning grass that cloaked them.

Alison was inside already, delicately picking her way among the graves, her long skirt lifted in front. She seemed extraordinarily slim in black, fragile, swaying a little as the prairie wind gusted against her. She stopped at a far corner of the cemetery and sat down on a stone bench.

It was an old place, maybe Ellsworth's original Boot Hill. Some of the markers were so weathered that their inscriptions were illegible. Those I could make out spanned the Twentieth Century, reached back into the Nineteenth, forward into the Twenty First. A few were sharp-cut in their newness. None was exceptionally elaborate, none taller than my waist—it was not a place of ostentatious grief, that cemetery. It was just a spot where the dead were laid with some respect. Aside from Alison and me, it had no other visitors that November morning. Slowly, I walked up behind her. Over her shoulder I read the inscription on the marker at her feet.

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF
JAMES LOGAN
1853-1890

REST IN PEACE

It was very new. The space in front of it, however, was flat and completely overgrown with grass. If a grave lay there, it was not a recent one.

"Hello, Alison," I said.

She started at my words, her back straightening, but she didn't turn to look at me. "Good guess," she said.

"An operator has to know how to find people."

Her hands were folded in her lap, and the veil had fallen over her face, dark, shadowing her features. In old Ellsworth they would have called her dress widow's weeds.

"May I sit down?" I asked.

"Do what you like."

I sat on the very edge of the bench, an arm's length between us. "He's not buried here," I said.

"No."

"Who is?"

"Nobody. Does it matter?"

I gestured toward the marker. "You put up the stone."

She nodded almost imperceptibly. Behind the veil, I couldn't read her expression. She said, "His mother would have wanted it."

"Are you...going to try to recover the remains?"

She tilted her head, seemed to be looking down at her hands. "Not much point in that, is there? It's just bones."

I nodded. "Don't you think you should come back to Kansas City now? You've done... all that could be expected here."

"He spent most of his life here. This was his home. This is where I belong."

"You can't mean that, Alison. What about your work, your friends? What about your contract with the company?"

"Let them sue me. I don't care."

"Of course you do. You love your work. I know it. You can't give it up

to... to bury yourself in this backwater."

She turned her face toward me, but the veil was a barrier between us, keeping her thoughts from me. "You don't understand me at all," she said. "And you don't know when you're not wanted. You are intruding upon my grief. I would appreciate it if you would go away."

"Grief over someone you never knew, Alison? What kind of grief is that?"

"A kind you obviously will never know."

"I know the other kind of grief."

"Fine. Go back to Kansas City and practice it there."

"Alison...Dr. Holland wants you to come back."

She let a moment of silence pass, and then she laughed a choking laugh, half a sob. "Holland. How I wish I had never met him! How I wish it!"

"Then...you would never have seen Logan."

"No," she said, looking at the gravestone. "Never." Then she bent forward a little and raised her hands to her face, pressing the veil against her cheeks. Her shoulders trembled, and I couldn't help reaching a hand toward her. But she shrugged off my comfort and slid to the far end of the bench. "He's dead," she murmured. "And I'm dead, too. Why won't you let me rest in peace?"

"Oh, Alison...come home. You're not going to find peace in this cemetery."

"I don't want to talk to you any more, Barry."

I stood up slowly. "All right. I'll go. I just want you to remember that if you ever need me, I'll always be there."

Her back toward me, she straightened up, shaking her head, the veil moving gently about her shoulders. "No," she murmured. "Nobody can make that kind of promise. You'll die someday. Everybody dies."

"Oh, Alison...." I half lifted my hands toward her, but no words would come. What could I say? That, yes, we all die someday—James Logan, Augustus Caesar, and me...and that emotions die as well, eventually—love, hate, even grief. I knew she didn't want to listen. So I consoled myself with that knowledge instead of offering it to her, and I turned away and trudged back to the cemetery gate.

That night I was back in Kansas City. In the morning, I added Alison's shift to my own, tolerated Holland's indignation and gave him his money's

worth. Earp was in Tombstone now, the hearing that followed the gunfight at the O.K. Corral behind him, one brother crippled, another dead. Soon he would be leaving for a new life in California, and Holland would have to move on, too, if he wanted to follow his subject. He was already foreseeing difficulties for the period that Earp would be spending in Alaska—it was out of range of all the company offices. He badgered me for information about new branches to be opened, obviously hoping for Seattle or Vancouver, and he was angry when I told him that all I knew about was the one in Tokyo.

He was gone by the time Alison came back.

I had known she would, known it in my soul. She was an operator first, like Myra, like me. Nothing could make us quit. Nothing.

She didn't speak to me. I passed her in the corridor a few times, but she just looked through me, walking briskly, as if to some important meeting.

She transferred to the Tokyo office as soon as it opened—looking for a new challenge, Myra said. Shortly afterward, I returned to Istanbul. To Imperial Rome. Someone needed an expert on Augustus Caesar.