

DEAN ING

-SILENT-

THUNDER

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SILENT THUNDER

by Dean Ing

For the brain trust: Tim, Tim, Ev, and Joe.

ONE

March, 1967

Only a man destined for greatness, sergeant Walter Calvin reflected, could keep his alertness up and his temper down on a night as cheerless as this. Even with mature chestnut trees for a windbreak in the gloom of the *Stadtspark*, Vienna's night wind could bite like a Doberman. The major stood slope-shouldered under his heavy European overcoat, with his furred umbrella hooked into a coat pocket. He had emptied his own packet of Pall Malls an hour before and was smoking one of Calvin's Salems now, cursing the menthol in his lungs, the Viennese slush under his feet, and the man who might or might not contact the Americans as promised. *He likes his vices unmentholated*, Calvin told himself, drawing some comfort from the major's inferior showing. Competitiveness had been part of Walter Calvin's legacy from immigrant parents. *If I had oak leaves instead of four lousy stripes, I could tell this guy to go buy himself some Austrian cigarettes. Well, some day....*

Neither man wore military insignia, though both carried Air Force ID. While civilian clothes of European cut did not assure freedom from surveillance, American uniforms would have drawn more attention than a bonfire in the *Stadtspark's* deepest shadows. Their flat little German-made, nine-millimeter automatics in shoulder holsters were government issue. Though he had been reposted to Air Force Intelligence for less than a year, after someone noticed his fluency in German, Walter Calvin had heard his share of stories about Vienna during his familiarization with the pistol. A man who looked out of place in Central Europe might pick up a half-dozen tails: one KGB, one CIA, and four free-lancers who made precarious livings by selling tidbits to all sides. The free-lancers, it was said, rarely carried firearms. As the joke went, cloaks were out but daggers were definitely in.

This was Sergeant Calvin's fifth field sortie from the air base near Wiesbaden, but his first into Austria. He had drawn this duty only because the major did not speak German. And Dieter Mainz, the man who had made contact with a regular Air Force officer leading by stages to this peculiar rendezvous, had claimed to speak no English. Calvin knew that the job should have been taken over by the CIA, but it seemed barely possible that Dieter Mainz could advance a few careers in Air Force Intelligence. At the moment, Calvin did not dream that it would advance *him* far beyond a military commission. Mainz was just a contact, though a peculiar one from the start.

According to the case file, 'Dieter Mainz' was probably a beard, a false name. The real Mainz, an audio engineer with the prewar *Reichs Rundfunk* group in Berlin, had disappeared on the Night of the Long Knives in 1934. Mainz had been one of the many victims of Hitler's first great domestic massacre. To young Walter Calvin it was the stuff of legend, a web of events that had spun out their courses before he was old enough to read. If the man had not resurfaced in over thirty years, in all likelihood he was long dead. Still, if they failed to make contact on this hither night, Calvin and the major would have to try again in seven days.

The major stamped his feet and grunted in pain, the umbrella a ludicrous pendulum at his side. "Goddammit, sergeant, any man who's two hours late is a man who is not going to show!"

"Yes, sir," said Calvin. Then, more softly: "Should you be mentioning rank out here?"

The major, who tended to be lax about professionalism but knew very well when it was called into question, stared hard at Calvin. "Is that insubordination?"

"No, sir," said Calvin. At that instant he saw a two-U'ged shadow crossing from a footpath in the distance, a slender silhouette that caused distant lights to wink as it approached. In low tones Calvin added, "This could be our man."

To his credit, the major had seen it too. Mainz had been very specific, insisting on his own recognition signals. The major grabbed his umbrella, slung its furled length over one shoulder like a hunting rifle, and walked slowly forward with Calvin beside him. The shadow began to re-solve itself into a man of slight stature, hands in the pockets of his greatcoat, hatbrim hiding his face. When they were ten paces apart, Calvin began to talk conversationally but in German. The major swung the umbrella to his other shoulder according to plan, nodding as if he understood Calvin.

"Herr Donner," said the man facing them, and stopped. It was a common surname.

"Herr Sprache," Calvin responded with an unlikely surname. Together, the names formed a key word. As tradecraft it was dreadfully amateurish, but Mainz had called the shots. *Donnersprache*, thunderspeak, was still among the unsolved mysteries of Hitler's Reich. According to the best guesses of spook historians, *Donnersprache* had pertained to electronics, probably an aid to eavesdropping, no doubt primitive by modern standards but still an enigma. No mention of it had ever been found in official records, though the two men closest to Adolf Hitler had at various times scribbled cryptic references to the thing, or possibly the person, called *Donnersprache*.

A hand came out of the greatcoat, wearing a glove, and the Americans shook it. Rapidly, in German, Calvin explained that the gentleman beside him did not speak the language. Was it possible for them to continue their discussion while riding in a BMW sedan with an excellent heater?

"Naturlich," of course, Mainz replied. "But permit me to retrieve a traveling bag I left among the bushes nearby." Later, Calvin would report the old man's age as nearing eighty, his speech halting and sometimes vague as might befit a man whose mind had begun to fail. Calvin's true impression was that this preternaturally alert little gnome of a man kept all his mental bricks neatly stacked.

The major clearly loathed his role but accepted it anyway, hurrying off to retrieve their rented BMW as the old man half-trotted back to the shadows of anonymous shrubbery. Waiting alone for the car near the *Rechte Bahngasse*, Calvin felt that the old man had still not decided to trust the Americans. One or both of those coat pockets, he judged, was full of handgun—an infraction far more serious in Austria than in, say, the United States. For Calvin and the major, sidearms were more acceptable; above a certain level of business such things were taken for granted.

Dieter Mainz returned before the major did, lugging an old leather valise that, Calvin presumed, held the secrets of *Donnersprache*. Calvin tried not to stare at it, smiling instead at his companion, who kept jerking his head away from the street to scan the shadows. "I think you need not fear for your life," Calvin said, noticing the old man's nervous glances. "How important can *Donnersprache* be, in a time when a radio transmitter can be hidden in the heel of a shoe?"

"Can that transmitter hypnotize ten million listeners?"

Kalvin shrugged. "I suppose it depends on what is said," he hedged, watching a bulky shadow stroll into the street two hundred meters away. He tensed as the distant stranger began to walk in their direction. *This old guy is getting to me*, he admitted to himself.

"No, it does not matter what is said when the machine makes one's words seem absolutely true. What matters is the listener's capacity, and desire, to believe in something." Mainz said it dogmatically, as if lecturing on fundamentals.

Before enlisting to avoid the draft and a rifleman's fate in Vietnam, Walter Calvin had been a mediocre student of rhetoric at NYU. The concept of charisma, the overwhelming power of certain individuals to

convince many others, had never seemed so real to him as it did at this moment. *Maybe old Mainz himself has charisma*, thought Calvin. *He's sure got my nerves twanging. Lord, what if it's a kind of force field, and he has one in his pocket?* Chuckling at his own fanciful notion, Calvin said, "Perhaps you will tell me exactly what Donnersprache is, and what it does. Do you have it with you, Herr Mainz?"

"I should not be offering to sell the machine to a man who does not already know such basic things," Mainz protested. "The Bolsheviks know that much, at least."

The major was taking an infernally long time, and it seemed to Calvin that the old man was rethinking his decision. To keep him engaged, Calvin asked, "How can you be certain the Russians know something I don't?"

"Because they have no other reason to ensure that poor, addled Rudolf Hess rots alone in Spandau Prison," the old man said.

The man walking toward them seemed to loom, now, though he was a hundred paces away. "I don't understand," said Calvin, reaching into his coat for his Salems, caressing the butt of the pistol for added confidence. He decided he did not need the cigarette.

A sigh. "Last October, the Nazi criminals in Spandau were released; von Schirach and Speer," the old man went on. "All but Hess, whom everyone knows has lost his mind. But even a crazy man can make sense at times. That is what the Bolsheviks fear. Schirach was a fool, and Speer only a hapless architect. If that swine Hitler would not trust his own Gestapo with Donnersprache, why would he entrust its secrets to such as those? No; only a few knew. Those of us who developed it, and of course Goering—and Hess."

Sergeant Walter Calvin began to feel as if he was floundering in a nightmare, one dreamed many times before but only partly remembered. This old German was rattling off the names of men who had produced and directed the most savage war in human history. It was true, Speer and Schirach had recently been freed from Spandau to great hubbub in the German press. Now, jailers of four nations continued to operate the castle-like Spandau Prison for a solitary inmate: Rudolf Hess. Three of those nations claimed that they would be happy to release Hess, a man they did not regard as a war criminal. Only the Soviet Union insisted that Hess remain imprisoned in that vast pile of stone on the outskirts of Berlin without possibility of parole. To Calvin, the issue had never seemed very important until now.

Was it imagination, or was the hulking stranger walking more slowly? Gazing at the face of Dieter Mainz, Calvin asked his question softly: "Can Donnersprache be that important today?"

For the first time, Mainz turned to scan Calvin's face at close range, and in the lined old face Calvin thought he could read utter despair. "You would not ask," he said slowly, "if you had seen its effect on an audience. Perhaps you are immune; some are. Some more, some less."

Kalvin's chill had become internal by now. "I'd like to see this gadget," he said. "Does it still work?"

"No. Only a vacuum tube, I suspect, but the case is—you would say, boob-trap? To open it conventionally is to blow it, and yourself, to pieces." Now, headlights swept across them, high beams flicking twice, the moan of the BMW a familiar voice to Calvin, who took the old man's arm and stepped toward the street.

But someone did not want them in that car. The big stranger was no longer strolling, but running forward now, holding a small device to his mouth with one hand as he fumbled in his coat with the other.

As the major sizzled past the running man, he must have seen Calvin draw his pistol. He made the right move, swerving onto the walkway as he braked heavily so that the running man caromed off the right front fender. The man fell hard, cursing in a language Calvin did not recognize, and came up sitting ten feet from Calvin, a silenced handgun in his right hand.

The major was shouting, leaning over to fling the front passenger door wide, and Calvin took two steps as if adjusting his paces for a field goal before he kicked the man's weapon in an arc that sent it spinning far into the darkness.

Kalvin heard a sound like a fist striking a melon, and old Dieter Mainz collided with him from behind. "Get in, get in," he snapped to Mainz, aiming his pistol at the prostrate stranger. At the instant Mainz fell into the front seat, the BMW windshield resounded with an impact that left a hole in its center. Calvin fought to open the locked rear door, and he saw the yellow wink from a distant line of shrubs a split second before a portion of the windshield imploded, the major's torso slamming back into the seat. The BMW engine began to roar, impotent.

Kalvin raced around the car, hearing another impact as he squatted to open the driver's door, and with the help of Mainz he somehow managed to thrust the major's body aside enough to huddle low at the controls.

They hurtled away in the damaged car, Calvin obeying the curt instructions of Mainz as he turned this way and that. Once over the Donau Canal, Calvin turned onto the *Praterstrasse*. "No one is following us," he said, blinking in the breeze through the ruined windshield. To his amazement, the BMW had not yet attracted the *polizei*.

"The gentleman is dead," Mainz replied, and coughed. "Soon, I shall be."

"I got you this far," Calvin seethed, trying to recall the telephone number he must call only in a situation like this.

"They shot me, you fool," Mainz said. "Someone hidden in the park."

"No, they wouldn't work alone," Calvin thought aloud. "I'll get you to a hosp—"

"Quiet, let me talk," said Dieter Mainz with soft urgency. "The decision has been made for me. Have you a recorder?"

"Try the major's pockets," Calvin said. "You must tell me where the nearest hospital is."

Mainz told him, coughing occasionally, fumbling with the little tape recorder until Calvin punched the right button for him. Mainz spoke for perhaps three minutes before he began to labor for breath, describing a concrete storm drainage sump on the outskirts of Innsbruck, and how a man assuredly would be crushed to death if he failed to observe certain precautions as he climbed down below the grating. The old man began, then, to talk about Donnersprache, and the ways it had been used to weld Germany into a monolith of hatred. Past a certain point of unified public opinion, Mainz was saying, it was no longer a necessary. . . . Mainz left that sentence forever unfinished. Calvin did not know Mainz was dead until he saw the staring eyes and felt for a pulse.

Accompanied by two dead men in a BMW that featured several obvious bullet holes, Walter Calvin parked in shadows and made the necessary telephone call. While waiting for help, he hefted the old

man's leather bag. It seemed very light, its contents soft, and its brass hasp came loose while Calvin was handling it. Since the thing had not blown up then, Calvin checked inside.

It held a change of clothes and a passport. No device with radio tubes, not even a schematic drawing.

Kalvin thought about charisma while he replayed the last testament of Dieter Mainz. Then he replayed it again, starting to hope that the damage assessment team would take its time. Sergeant Walter Calvin knew, now, where the last surviving Donnersprache device lay hidden. Incredibly, the city of Innsbruck was near enough to his father's beloved Tirol that Calvin's own accent might go unremarked there. Using the gloves of Dieter Mainz, Calvin found spare tapes in the major's coat, exchanged the used tape, and wiped the recorder down with great care before cupping the major's dead hand around it. With one gloved hand, he inserted the recorder back into the major's coat. If anyone doubted his initial story, Calvin knew, he was destined for the tribulations of a lifetime.

If no one did, and if he managed a vacation as far as Innsbruck—and if the last living act of Dieter Mainz was not merely the fantasy of an old man—then Walter Calvin was destined for greatness.

TWO

May, 1997

The water was clear and numbingly cold, most of it fresh runoff from the snow that still clung to peaks of Wyoming's Absaroka Range. Secretary Bowden let one of his matched pair of State Department men hold his boron fiber flyrod as he began to tighten the straps of his chest-high waders. Very spendy waders, the latest mid-nineties technology. Very spendy bodyguards as well, both dressed for fly-fishing in clothes similar to the secretary's. *Nothing's too good for the Secretary of State*, Bowden thought, *except being allowed to do my job.*

"I wouldn't, Mr. Secretary," said his third companion, a dark, wiry national parks man named Martin. "Keep the straps loose enough that you could get out of those waders in a hurry."

Bowden's glance was more quizzical than irked. Most of his trout fishing had been done from powerboats in tame lakes while politicking for Harrison Rand's candidacies over the years, so these waders were a new experience for Bowden. Kenneth Bowden had selected this outing, in part, because he felt deeply in need of some kind of experience that took little thought, and no politicking. And for another reason, too, a contact who had not yet surfaced....

Martin, whose coloring and high cheekbones suggested he might be part American Indian, went on, "The Yellowstone's not much over crotch deep here, gents, but it has a stiff current and the rocks are rounded. If those waders fill with water, you'll want to shuck them in a hurry."

The senior agent frowned. "In three feet of water?"

"People drown," Martin shrugged to the agent. "But not with me beside them. Anyway, that's where the lunkers are, out there in the current. Of course I'll go first. Part of my job," he added.

The younger agent sighed audibly and stared at his hiking boots. "I'll go," he said.

Bowden waved the men away. "No. Martin's dressed for it, gentlemen, and I promise we won't go more

than fifty feet out."

They didn't like it, but they permitted it, moving downstream at Martin's suggestion. If Bowden went under, his bodyguards would already be in position to scramble for a rescue. This was Bowden's first three-day vacation since Congress had voted to accept him as Harrison Rand's Secretary of State, and he was tiring of it before he'd even tied into his first trout. Bowden knew he had become physically soft, and at age sixty he did not want to feel ashamed to grip Martin's shoulder as they edged out, feeling the tug of the Yellowstone River.

Nonetheless, he felt shame. *Just one more little reminder of impotence on top of all the rest*, he admitted to himself. *My God, I haven't even made it with Lucille in over a month*. Bowden wondered if the sex lives of the Secretaries of Defense and Commerce were suffering as well. Who would have believed that an outsider like that goddamned Walter Kalvin could usurp so much power, so fast, from the position of White House Chief of Staff?

"Let the river carry your fly," Martin suggested, as Bowden tried a sweeping backcast. The guide stood facing away from shore, his voice barely audible in the white noise of rushing water. "That way we can attend to business."

Bowden glanced around, read Martin's faint smile, and pretended he was still interested in fishing. "What business is that?" he asked.

Without preamble: "I'm your contact, sir. We're convinced that Undersecretary Parker's death was a deliberate hit," Martin said, seeming to study the river. "We're not questioning whether Parker was killed by that mugger: he was. But we've done a careful profile on the mugger, and he'd been a suspect on two previous contract killings. He became an addict, but he wasn't the kind to take a deliberate overdose. Needle mark in his arm was a nasty one, too; maybe the guy was struggling. In any case, he can't give his end of it now that he's safely dead."

"Safe for whom? Richard Parker was a good man. He resigned as a protest on my behalf, Martin. If he wasn't safe, who is?"

"Everyone at cabinet level, we think, so long as they don't step out of the game."

Now, Bowden drew in slack line and glanced at Martin as he made another leisurely cast. "You mean, if I should resign, I might wind up like poor Dick Parker?"

"Any member of President Rand's cabinet who walks out complaining that he's a rubber stamp for Walter Kalvin could wind up on a slab, sir. I wouldn't tempt fate by trying it if I were you. Just hang in there. These things take time."

"Whose time is it taking? All I have from you people is a handshake and a promise," Bowden said.

"That handshake's been good enough for centuries," Martin replied. "If it makes you feel any better, this little meeting is expensive for me; it's my last day as Cody Martin, and I'd got to where I liked it here. I was DIA for twelve years before I became a sacrificial lamb."

The Defense Intelligence Agency was an arm of the Defense Department, therefore not under control of State or Treasury. Bowden made a test connection: "You're telling me Secretary Canales runs your group?"

"No, sir," said Martin; "because he doesn't. Consider us privately funded, and please don't imagine that we're some kind of radical death squad. Where due process is concerned you can think of us as a *life* squad. We've all been professionals in one agency or another. But someone botched the job badly for Mr. Parker. We don't believe in coincidence. Somebody left Mr. Parker unprotected."

"You'd think," Bowden said, "a man in my position would have some muscle of his own he could call on."

"No sir, beyond your Bureau of Intelligence and Research. What I think is, all your men but one could be yours, and you'd still be in trouble. Same with Defense, Treasury, and Interior. It's a bitch," he said, smiling as Bowden turned a vexed glance on him. "That's why I'm here, sir."

Bowden nodded and remembered to wave a thumbs-up toward the men on the river bank before he tried another cast. "Why haven't you simply gone to the President about the problems with Walt Calvin?"

"Why haven't *you*, Mr. Secretary?"

Bowden's laugh was short and mirthless. "Good point. We don't know what else Dick Parker was hinting about to the press, and he didn't see fit to confide in me with it. First damned thing Harry Rand would do is call good old Walt Calvin in and ask him."

"Exactly." Both men glanced across the shallow river as another fisherman played a hefty trout. "Better reel in and let me change flies, Mr. Secretary. It could look odd if you don't get a strike."

"By God, that's right," Bowden said. "Why haven't I?"

"Something I smeared on the fly," Martin said, and laughed as Bowden cursed. "Figured we needed to concentrate on business."

Martin selected a fat black-and-yellow fly from the assortment stuck into his shapeless hat as Bowden retrieved the end of his line. "This McGinty should get you some action, sir."

"So far I haven't heard what other kind of action I can expect," Bowden said.

"You may not believe this, sir, but we really do believe in the system. I was told to ask you for a decision. Because of Mr. Parker, it's your decision—and whatever you say, believe me, we will do."

"That smacks of power I'm not sure I want, but ask away," Bowden said, holding a scarlet and black Royal Coachman fly that seemed suspiciously oily and, even after it's dunking, exuded an unpleasant musk.

"Mr. Parker was a computer hacker; a hobby of his," said Martin, running the loop of the new fly onto mono-filament leader. "If he had anything on Calvin that was important enough to get him offed, he just might have put it into his private disk files."

"Surely they've been collected," Bowden exclaimed.

"Not from his girlfriend's apartment."

Bowden stared. "Dick Parker was a model husband! We had him checked six ways from Saturday, Martin, and he wasn't into hanky-panky."

"He was into an old classmate, is what he was into," Martin said, releasing the McGinty as if he expected it to fly away of its own volition. "Good friend of long standing; she just didn't remain standing when he visited her apartment. Actually, he sometimes went there without her, alone; that's why we thought the place might be worth a subtle toss."

Bowden made a cast, let out more line; cast again. "Well, I hate to say it, but if you can find any of Dick Parker's loose files, go ahead. Just try to do it legally."

"We've already copied everything, sir. That wasn't the decision. The decision will come if and when we do find something Mr. Parker hid away on disk files. We have computer hackers, too."

Bowden thought he felt the faintest hint of resistance on his line before the sudden shock, almost electric, of pure energy down sixty feet of fishing line. He set the hook and saw the rocketing response as a sliver of light danced into the air for one jump, then another, then a third, shedding a spray of droplets in dazzling bursts.

"Nice one, sir," Martin commented. The two agents stood in the distance, shading their eyes as they watched. "Keep that line taut. Play him awhile and think this over: where do we take such information?"

For the next three minutes, Secretary of State Kenneth Bowden fought a rainbow the length of his forearm and loved every second of it. Then: "Reel in, he's making a run toward us," Martin exclaimed, Bowden hurrying to comply but too late.

"Damn; lost him," Bowden said, flicking the line, both men staring at the bright bumblebee shape still attached to the leader. He cast again. "I'd like to tell you to bring the information to me, Martin, but that would put me into an ethical bind."

"Depending on the kind of information, sir, it could put you into a casket. We just don't know yet. But I don't think anyone would put out a contract on a major newspaper," Martin said.

Bowden chewed his lip. "Mm-hmm. Just let the media blast it out. Well, Thomas Jefferson told us the press was more important to us than government. But Jefferson never heard of X-rated holovision. He might have a different opinion today." At that moment his flyrod bowed. A moment later, a second fish cleared the river's surface.

"It's your decision we need, sir," said Martin. Then, as he watched, "You've got a showboater there," he observed as the trout leaped again.

The fish was somewhat smaller than the first, but a fine specimen. Martin netted it deftly and let Bowden admire his catch. "Not supposed to keep him, but I won't tell," Martin grinned. "How about it, Mr. Secretary?"

"Let him go," Bowden said, his tone changing as he went on, "We need something that still runs loose in this country besides Walter Kalvin. That goes for media people, too; and I can think of one who's like that rainbow there. Something of a showboater, fun to watch and far from tame." His smile challenged Martin to guess.

"The 'Nightline' crew?" Martin took his time removing the McGinty's barb as the trout gulped helplessly.

"Too responsible." Bowden laughed at Martin's expression. "They'd spend a lot of time checking things

out, Martin. We need someone with a track record for letting it all hang out. I was thinking of Alan Ramsay."

The man who had been Cody Martin, and before that another identity, and after this another still, placed sixteen inches of rainbow trout into the Yellowstone River with the care of a doting parent. "That hotshot on NBN with the lopsided nose; I know the one you mean, sir. We need someone with high credibility who'd chase a Yellowstone grizzly with a willow switch. Does he have a family?"

"Divorced, I believe," said Bowden. "He surely takes a bachelor's chances with his career. Yes, the more I think about it, the more I'm certain. Your man is Alan Ramsay."

THREE

Alan Ramsay shouldered his way through the front door of his Hyattsville apartment on a muggy Thursday evening carrying two armloads of groceries, a mouthful of keycards, a handful of personal mail, and a letter bomb in a manila envelope. The envelope contained no percussion snapper or thin sheet of hexyl explosive; only words that were to detonate Ramsay's life into smouldering fragments.

He made coffee in his usual manner, the way he'd learned in the jock dorm back in Lincoln, Nebraska, twenty years ago. Right arm snakes out to the dregs container while left hand twists the faucet handle; lean to the left and haul in a fresh dollop of coffee grounds while the right hand raps the container to dump the old dregs; quick double-handed rinse of the container, three seconds max, then cross arms. Ladle fresh grounds with *right* hand while left sweeps Pyrex pot under faucet. A handball champ named Jacque Flory had coached him in the move that installed fresh grounds and hit the percolator switch while the pot filled. Flory had owned the Cornhusker record for coffee setup: thirty-seven seconds flat.

Ramsay whisked the pot across, poured its water into the machine, set the empty pot in place, wiped his hands on his video-blue shirtfront, and consulted the digital readout on Mister Coffee: almost fifty seconds. Hell, he was getting slower every year. The process still delighted his daughter, Laurie, on nights the kid spent with him. Daddy's trick, she called it. Kathleen had called it macho; claimed it was typical of the million little acts that abraded a marriage to shreds. Alan Ramsay called it second-rate because he would never beat Flory's record.

The truth was that Ramsay had always been driven by self-doubt, the kind of pitiless internal criticism that can drive a man to perform beyond all reason—and then to conclude that he should have done better. If Kathleen left him, then it had to be his fault. If his three-times-a-week calisthenics made him capable of seventy pushups, why, then he had to work up to eighty-five and inflamed tendons. If his craggy good looks and humming vitality made him a popular NBN face on the Washington beat, he promptly began to worry that his value was only cosmetic. And to dig a little harder for a story; keep asking the next question; keep wondering if the answers made sense. NBN had discovered that when Alan Ramsay wondered out loud, from scripts he wrote unaided, thoughtful viewers loved it. Those commentaries were not news, but not quite editorials either. NBN identified them as pages from 'The Ramsay File' and did not worry too much about precisely what category they fitted. They were popular, and that was enough. So long as Ramsay retained his appeal as a thoughtful gadfly, network nabobs could bask in reflected ethics and take Ramsay's cachet to the bank. They paid Ramsay well, though not exorbitantly, and wisely avoided reining him in too much.

He laid the mail out on his kitchen table as if dealing a hand of solitaire, then shoved the bills aside. One evening a week, he devoted an hour to such stuff; and thank God, his influx of forwarded fan mail had nearly ceased two weeks after that 'True Believers' commentary of his on NBN affiliate stations. The downside of feeling your commitment, he had learned, was the impulse to read fan mail and, sometimes, to spend time responding. At age forty-one, Ramsay was starting to count the ticks of life's clock.

While stuffing his refrigerator with groceries—including sticks of string cheese for Laurie and soy Cheddar for himself—he made quick guesses about the personal mail. One piece, in a manila, had been forwarded from the Overseas Press Club. That happened perhaps three times a year and usually came from someone with savvy who wanted to avoid the vagaries of a network's internal mail system. Ramsay opened the manila with the short, dull blade of the mail-slitter in his money clip. Kathleen had been leery of weapon-like gadgets, and he'd let this one stay dull, as if he expected Kathleen to return.

Wheels within wheels. The letter inside bore a Baltimore postmark and contained a note on the elegant buff stationery of one Matthew Alden, attorney, and still another envelope with 'Alan Ramsay, NBN' scrawled across it by someone in a terrible hurry.

Alden's cover note was brief. *Dear Mr. Ramsay: I am forwarding the enclosure by request of an acquaintance of long standing whom I shall call Cody Martin. Evidently his letter is his response to your recent video commentary on the influx of so-called 'True Believers' in the new Rand Administration (congratulations, by the way; I saw it). Beyond this, I know nothing of the contents. Mr. Martin made it harrowingly clear that I must not read his letter.*

He also hinted that you might doubt his bona fides. I can attest to his steadiness, his courage as a witness in a string of federal prosecutions some years ago, and his sense of commitment to his country. 'Cody Martin'—his most recent name—was long active in the intelligence community, and his titles changed irregularly. Make what you will of that. I doubt that I ever knew, or ever will know, his real name. In the present matter his concern seemed unusually acute. He is not a man who strains at trifles. Sincerely, Matthew L. Alden.

Ramsay tapped the edge of the envelope against his teeth, fighting the urge to discard it, wondering whether Alden was a real person and, if so, whether he was the dupe of some subtle loony. Washington had more of those per acre than any asylum. Then he sighed and slit the little envelope and unfolded the sheet of paper, with its single spacing on both sides.

Two minutes later, Ramsay dropped the page and vented an almost silent whistle as he stared at the wall above his microwave oven. Then he resumed reading. He then reread the whole thing slowly while sleet ran along his spine. The paper accentuated the slight tremor of his hands.

At least one assertion, Ramsay had heard as non-news, the kind of fact you edited out unless it became important enough to warrant the ruin of a dead man's reputation. The now-deceased Richard Parker had frequented a woman's Bethesda apartment, motive unknown but presumably not for prayer meetings. That corroboration made it possible for Ramsay to half-believe in an Austrian woman who had, for a price, delivered a copy of her father's recently discovered diary to a State Department aide to Undersecretary Parker. Innsbruck meant little more than skiing to Ramsay, and the name 'Dieter Mainz' meant nothing at all. As the police liked to say, at least it listened; it seemed plausible.

It was the body of the letter that became so wildly implausible that Alan Ramsay could almost see H O A X between the lines. And yet—Walt Kalvin, the incisive chief of Rand's White House staff, had not been born an American, so under the Constitution he could never run for President. He could, however, help groom a Missouri preacher named Harrison Rand for a senatorial slot and, later, for the race to the

White House.

Ramsay also had to admit that there had been scuttlebutt to the effect that Calvin had been offered a cabinet position. Why had he refused? According to the files of Richard Parker, Calvin did not want to undergo the kind of scrutiny Congress could bring to bear if he were President Rand's choice for, say, Secretary of State or Interior. In short, Congress could have smirched Calvin's image. But Congress had no such power over Rand's choice of his Chief of Staff—which was increasingly a crucial position in the White House. Ramsay's 'True Believer' commentary had touched on the dangers of zealots in government, and the zeal with which Calvin attacked his job. In passing, Ramsay had observed that Walter Calvin, a zealot without a cabinet position, was becoming Secretary of Everything in the Rand administration.

"He wouldn't have to step down when the President does, either," Ramsay murmured aloud. "No Senate confirmations, no votes to worry about. If succeeding presidents wanted him, Calvin could hover over the Oval Office as long as he lives. But he'd have to have the devil's own charisma for that. More than Rand himself." Ramsay looked down at the page, not really seeing the print; realizing that if there was any truth to this tale, Walter Calvin already had the devil's own charisma in something called *Donnersprache*. Maybe that was the source of Rand's personal magnetism, too.

If this Mainz diary could be believed—if indeed a Dieter Mainz had ever existed!—it was possible to add the kind of vibrato and timbre to a voice that brought overwhelming credibility to the speaker. Ramsay cudged his memory and came up with two names from Cornhusker rhetoric classes. George Whitefield; William Jennings Bryan. And another which he had heard on old sound tracks: Adolf Hitler. Who was it—yes, randy old Ben Franklin had written about Whitefield, a circuit preacher of modest intellect but with such compelling emotional impact in his voice that most listeners turned out their pockets on the spot—hypnotized, set afire with zeal, utterly convinced of Whitefield's message. Other orators had specifically mentioned their envy of the Whitefield tremolo.

Bryan, a Nebraskan himself, was easy to remember because every school-kid in the state found the man on their exams. Early in the Twentieth Century, William Jennings Bryan had gained tremendous popular appeal with his oratory: half with the words, half with his great, emotion-laden voice that trembled and fulminated. If the popular vote had counted as much then as it did now, Bryan would have been President. Even then, he damned near made it, despite an intellect that was tepid at best.

The charisma of Adolf Hitler was too well documented to doubt, and anyone who cared to could audit old recordings of the man's fiery oratory. Ramsay's natural skepticism asked it for him: *could it really be that simple?* Was it possible, before 1930, to construct a vacuum tube device capable of taking a man with a strong message and adding overwhelming credibility with enhanced resonance at the right frequencies or filtering of unwanted voice tones?

Well, certainly it would not work on everyone; Parker's notes acknowledged that. The question was whether it had worked on enough people to elect a Missouri senator—or an American president. All you had to do was patch that device into a loudspeaker system. And Walter Calvin had been Rand's campaign manager.

The notes of Richard Parker, building on this possibly mythical Mainz diary, cited suspicions by German moderates in early 1933 about the loudspeaker system of the Reichstag, the German Parliament building where Hitler had risen to power. It became impossible to check on those suspicions after the fire which leveled the Reichstag in February, 1933, and a tunnel had been found from the Reichstag to the personal home of Hermann Goering.

Mainz—again supposing the man and his diary had been legitimate, Ramsay reminded himself—had claimed that only a few Donnersprache devices had ever existed. And that Rudolf Hess, realizing the tremendous damage his idol Hitler had done through Donnersprache, had stolen one of the sealed units and defected to the British in May, 1941.

One of Parker's notes cited a quote from the famed Shirer text in which Hitler, discovering the flight of his most trusted accomplice, shouted, "I've got to talk to Goering right away!" *No wonder*, Ramsay mused, *if Goering and Hess had been the curators of the Donnersprache machines.*

But Hess, in a stolen Messerschmitt 110, had not landed as he'd intended in Scotland. Bedeviled by weather and without a landing field for the skittish Messerschmitt, Hess had parachuted to safety while the aircraft crashed. This much was history. According to the Mainz account, Hess had either been unable to bail out with the Donnersprache unit, or else it had been wrenched from his grasp when the chute opened. In either case, when the device hit the ground it disintegrated, and after the ensuing explosion nothing could have been left but scattered, anonymous debris. By the time Hess was interrogated the man was an emotionally shattered wreck, lapsing into madness, speaking of strange forces by which men could be moved.

Richard Parker's suspicions were that, during the brief alliance with Stalin, Hitler or one of his staff had told the Soviets something about Donnersprache. Hess himself had loathed everything Russian and had gone from internment with the Brits straight to Nuremberg for his trial, then to Spandau Prison where American, British, French, and

Russian jailers had watched Hess when they were not watching each other.

"That'll play," Ramsay mused aloud. "The Sovs couldn't get anything out of Hess so they made damned sure he'd never leave Spandau. Yeah. Yeah?" He barked a short laugh at himself and let the page drop onto the surface of his kitchen pass-through, as if by this gesture he could just as easily drop the whole matter. Ignore it as the ravings of a lunatic; several lunatics, in fact, all with the same paranoid fantasy.

He microwaved a passable Fettucine Alfredo and made himself a salad, dicing the tomato into cubes so small that Kathleen had called them lumpy catsup, snipping green onions over the romaine because he wouldn't be breathing on anyone this night, thinning the Roquefort dressing with yogurt to limit its calories. He chose a Lowenbrau from the refrigerator. From time to time he caught himself glancing toward the pass-through, keeping a wary eye on that single page as though it might burst into flame at any moment.

He ate at the little kitchen table, too preoccupied to select a recording of what he called wallpaper music, the sort of music made famous by Tangerine Dream which Kathleen had scorned but which helped Ramsay unwind. Time was when he would have talked this out with Kathleen (never Kathy, never Kate, never *ever* Katie, always insisting that a reporter named Katie or Kathy would never get the respect of a Kathleen, and asking who would ever have unburdened himself to a Babs Walters) because Kathleen was a better investigative reporter than she ever was a wife. Well, he still could debate it with her, as easily as picking up the phone; but he wouldn't. Their only bond now was Laurie, if you discounted occasional leches between ex-spouses who feared AIDS more than they craved variety.

No, not Kathleen. Who might he bounce this against at NBN? Britt? Ynga? No, this was too unlikely, yet sogoddamn *big* if it had any legitimacy at all! He'd just have to research it himself, source it to hell and gone, as the spooks liked to say, or simply brand it as a curious hallucination and forget about it, a feat of which Ramsay was simply incapable; and Ramsay knew it.

He reached out for the memocomp notepad at the kitchen phone and began to list items that might be

verifiable. If, and only if, everything tallied he might start checking on the likelihood that a human voice could be massaged and enhanced enough to make it, effectively, the voice of charismatic appeal. A George Whitefield voice; a Bryan voice. Perhaps even a Judy Garland voice, begging only for love.

Or an Adolf Hitler voice, commanding hate.

Dieter Mainz, Innsbruck; daughter? he wrote.

German electronics advances 1930, he added.

And Goering — *Reichstag tunnel*, and *Hess flight*, and *Shirer quote*, and finally *Kalvin bio*. This last item would be in NBN files and was as simple a matter as patching the modem in his study into NBN's computer.

But if, by some tremendous long shot, this tale had any substance, then the government's own electronic ears might be alert for anyone who became curious about Walter Kalvin. It was known that the National Security Agency's electronic monitors could flag a key word from a hundred thousand simultaneous telephone calls, maybe more. It followed that the monitors might also flag a request by a private modem. How much power could a White House administrator assemble in six months; enough to set requirements for NSA and CIA? Not unless he had the obedient help of the President of the United States.

Ramsay had attended many a White House news conference, and had seen the new President off the record, in unguarded moments. It was Ramsay's feeling that Harrison Rand's mental wattage would not run a nightlight, though he was certainly a likeable cuss. As likeable as Harding, or Reagan. A vagrant tagline tugged at his mind: *The paranoids are out to get me.* . . .

"Christ, it's catching," he muttered aloud, and reached for the phone.

He did not call NBN, but punched the number on Matthew Alden's elegant buff stationery. He reached a message recorder and had just given his name, halfway through a recitation of his own unpublished number, when he was interrupted by a brisk New England baritone. "Mr. Ramsay? Matt Alden here. I recognize your voice." Alden did not bother to apologize. Ramsay often did the same thing, listening to a caller before choosing to go on-line. One of the prices of celebrity....

"I just got your envelope, Mr. Alden. If you prefer, I could call another—"

Alden: "No, no, perfectly all right." Then the silence of a man who knew how to wait.

"I think we should speak in generalities, Mr. Alden."

"Matt, please. Just a moment; there. I'm no longer recording and we can consider this a privileged conversation, Mr. Ramsay."

"Alan will do. What I need is some way to contact your friend, the one who doesn't strain at trifles. Do you have any idea, any at all, what his letter was about specifically?"

"Specifically? Not the foggiest, but I presumed it had something to do with one of your—"

"Okay, good. I'm serious about generalities, Matt."

"Uh—understood. My acquaintance did imply that if I chose to answer any questions—and I suppose

that would apply to you as well—I could regret it."

Ramsay, with a chuckle: "If I were amateur enough to tell more than I asked, yes. Not a problem, Matt."

"I suppose not. And I don't want to wander into a can of worms."

"Not if I can help it. But I'd like to contact your acquaintance directly. It would take you out of the loop," Ramsay added the inducement.

Alden: "Uh-huh. I can give you something along that line, if he concurs. Actually, he'd be more likely to contact you than the other way around. It's just as well because, frankly, I'm beginning to want out of this loop. Ah—if acting as an innocent conduit somehow puts me at risk, you *will* be good enough to warn me?"

"The chances are one in a million, but it's the least I can do," Ramsay replied.

Alden: "I didn't quite hear you say yes."

Ramsay, laughing: "Yes, and yes again. My sources are privileged too; I never made this call. Anything more?"

Alden: "Just keep up the good work. Good to meet you, Alan."

Ramsay: "And you, Matt. Good night."

Ten minutes later, Ramsay realized he was still standing by the phone, and by then it was too late to call Laurie. It wasn't too late to do some research from an anonymous computer terminal in the National Press Building, though. These days the historic old structure at Fourteenth and F was open around the clock. Like as not, a gaggle of domestic and foreign press people would be arguing, working, and boozing until the early hours.

He cursed the lock and the balky door of the garage he rented a block from his apartment, promising himself for the hundredth time that he'd install an automatic opener, knowing he never would. The shovel-nosed little Genie coupe, his one adult toy, squatted inside with the gleam of a yellow opal in a tarnished setting. Five minutes later it was fully warmed, squirting southwest on U.S. 1 while Ramsay inhaled cool night air. Soon he could smell the reek of the Potomac tidal basin, and minutes later he found press parking.

His ID was enough unioncard to get him past all the reconditioned bric-a-brac to the National Press Club's lair on the building's top floor. Few of his colleagues in electronic media spent much time here, but a reporter could call up any number of data services at any hour—including the Library of Congress—on an unused terminal without using his personal ID. He spied a terminal carrel in a corner, exchanged nods with a pair of newsmen who scarcely interrupted their discussion in fluent French, fed coins into an espresso machine, then took the bitter, steaming brew to the carrel and unfolded the small rectangle on which he had made his list.

The Shirer citation was the simplest to verify. Using a fast-search program through the full text, three-quarters of a million words, Ramsay soon verified a quotation and, moments later on page 192, learned that Nazi thugs had traversed a tunnel from Goering's residence to torch the mighty Reichstag.

Nor was Shirer the only source to describe this event as Nazi arson. *A pretty drastic way to remove evidence of wiretaps in a building*, Ramsay thought. *But Goering was known for his drastic measures.* The motive offered for the fire was a manufactured provocation to round up German leftists. Ramsay reminded himself that an act may have more than one motive, and kept checking.

Three sources described Rudolf Hess's uniform disguise—as a captain—when stealing the Messerschmitt he piloted to Scotland. Only one mentioned the fact that he carried a smallish piece of luggage, ostensibly in case of an emergency landing. Ramsay thought about that for a long time before he shut down the terminal, wiped the keyboard down with a tissue, and strolled to another terminal some distance away.

The state of the electronics art in Germany in 1930 was not as easily learned by computer terminal. Parent companies seemed to have sprung like weeds from the polytechnic institute at Karlsruhe after the pioneering electronic work of Hertz; Badenwerke and Telefunken had grown from such work, cross-pollinated by Marconi, force-fed by military research in World War One. By 1928, Germany had fallen behind in commercial applications, but her research in electronics was paving the way for the independent development of radar. And in the psychological responses to audio stimuli, the few research papers before 1930 were virtually all German. No German citations in the field after 1931; no replications, no refinements; almost as if the German interest had abruptly died. *Or as if it had been curtained off*, Ramsay thought.

He wiped this terminal down, too, and decided against calling up the biography of cool, self-confident Walter Kalvin. NBN would have such stuff printed out in a file anyway, where Ramsay could read it anonymously. Now that Cody Martin's letter was starting to look like the story of the century, every step in researching it would have to be made on tiptoe.

If anyone had tried to share the elevator, Ramsay would have refused to enter it. He stepped outside, only two blocks from the White House, into a chill midnight wind bearing too much rain. It was no match for the blizzard howling through the mind of Alan Ramsay.

FOUR

Though the hour was late in the cloistered room adjoining his Oval Office, the President remained fresh and clear-eyed. Cabinet and council members often remarked on the stamina of Harrison Rand, unaware that their President's afternoon 'study hour' was really a ninety minute nap. Harry Rand had once joked to good old Walt Kalvin, his closest friend, that from two-thirty to four every day, Walt himself was President. Kalvin had not seemed to enjoy the joke, perhaps because others were present.

Harry sometimes regretted this lack of risibility on the part of his friend; had even prayed to the Lord to give Walter Kalvin a sense of humor, though it was plain He had more important things to do because, while Walt knew how to laugh in public, he retained the cold intensity of dry ice and all the good humor of a headstone. People said that Harry Rand, in private, was exactly the same as President Harrison Rand in public, and this pleased him because, as he used to tell his Missouri congregation, what you see ought to be what you get.

Some had forced comparisons between this Harry and another Harry from Missouri who had occupied the White House half a century before. It only bothered Harry Rand when they suggested that the other

Harry had been a little swifter of thought, and more his own man.

Nobody had ever accused Harry Rand of special beauty, with his ruddy, round and open face, free-swinging expansive gestures, somewhat larger than life, given to bright vests that kept his belly in. He envied Walt Calvin for his waist measurement, which had not changed on that wiry frame in the years since the two had met in Kansas City.

And Calvin's friendship had led here, to the Oval Office—and, at the moment, to the small adjoining conference room in the West Wing. Lyndon Johnson had called it the little office; more recently it had been called the think tank. Beatrice Rand, in one of her first acts as First Lady, had refurbished it in euromodern style and now, alone with his chief advisor and half reclining in a pillowy lounge chair, Harry Rand rested the heels of his loafers on the top of a coffee table that floated on permanent magnets above its base.

Snazzy, weird and wildly expensive, Harry mused. *Lord, where would I be today without old Walt? Delivering benedictions back in KayCee, most likely.* He gazed with affection across the table at Calvin, who was talking as he always was; explaining this, urging that. Often, Harry listened, sometimes with rapt attention when Walt called from the Executive Office Building just across the drive. You had to hand it to Walt, on a telephone or radiophone call the man was a demon of persuasiveness. But at other times—now, for example—Harry's mind tended to wander.

Why the heck didn't Walt accept an office in the West Wing, where we could talk face to face anytime his President wanted him? Well, Walt had a fetish about that; he had always, from the early days of that first bewildering senatorial race in Missouri, depended more on a good intercom system than face-to-face discussion. In fact, most of Walt Calvin's special ideas seemed to develop best over the intercom. Which one of them was he pushing now? Harry Rand tuned his mind back to the man who sat facing him in a Barcelona chair, and caught Walt's drift after a moment. The Federal Media Council...

"...Must have a more responsible press," Calvin was saying, "if we want strong grass-roots support for your programs. There's nothing like bushels of mail from the public to move those hidebound bastards on Capitol Hill."

"Now, Walt," said Harry, with the sad little smile he always used when Calvin became profane. "There's plenty of time to work that out."

"No, there isn't." Other presidential advisors were far more circumspect, would at least precede a flat disagreement by 'with all due respect, Mr. President,' but not old Walt when it was just the two of them. "Those codgers on the Hill are experts at wasting time. We've been in office five months now and they haven't brought the media council to a vote. Do you want an end to abortion and pornography and ecology freaks hamstringing good old American industry, or don't you?"

"But they won't be voting on those," Harry said.

Calvin took a long breath, looked away, took a sip of his watered bourbon. Then, slowly and carefully, he said, "Harry, you won't get those programs enacted as long as the media is free to say absolutely anything that comes into its head, including things that amount to sedition. What have I been saying for the last twenty minutes?"

For the last twenty minutes, Harry Rand had been thinking about many things: which negligee Bea was

wearing tonight, which talk show might have the most interesting guests, whether he should have liposuction in the fall—things like that. Surely a man who was devoting twelve hours a day to promoting a more decent Godfearing America ought to be allowed to let his brain rest before bedtime.

But no-o-o. Still, there was absolutely no question that his career depended on listening to Walter Calvin. Walt even saw to such final details as microphone checks for press conferences, which irked Evan Showers, the Presidential Press Secretary, no end. And every time, *every blessed time*, Harry publicly proposed some program that Walt had warned him against, the response was lackluster at best. At worst, it was hostile. Lord, Lord, how your flock can jostle you at times! "You've been saying you want to control the media," Harry sighed.

Kalvin's hand went up quickly, like that of a cop directing traffic. "No, no; one word you never use about media is 'control,' Harry. I mean, everybody loves you, that's what I realized fifteen years ago, that's how we got here; but by everybody, I don't mean *everybody*. Think how a Jew reacts to a swastika, and you'll get some idea how a newspaper editor or a TV commentator reacts to the idea of control. And unless I'm very much mistaken, the kind of person who tends not to love you is a cynic, and that's exactly the sort of person the media is full of."

"Don't you mean, 'are full of'? Media is plural, isn't it?"

Another long pause. "Are full of, Harry. I don't care, Harry. Harry, can we just... just focus on the problem here? The only grammar rule I'm interested in right now is that you never use the word 'control' in a sentence dealing with media. What you talk about instead is *responsibility*. We've had responsible media during wartime, more or less. And we've had temporary commissions, federal bodies with the teeth to chew ass, during those times.

"What you want, Harry, is teeth that aren't temporary.

We don't call it a task force or a commission, that sounds too much like, ah—"

"Mustn't say it," said the President, smiling, reaching for his own highball.

"Right. You call it a council. The image of a deliberative body, one that mulls things over and recommends things. Only this one can levy a fine—pick a number—or jerk a broadcasting license. That, Harry, is how you get a bunch of uncontr—unGodly media liberals to go easy on the criticism."

Harry Rand took a sip. "Then we sweep pornography from the shelves," he said.

"Yes."

A larger sip. "Then we cast out the coat hangers."

"Wha—ah, the abortionist's coat hanger; sometimes you come up with unexpected connections, Harry. But yes; out with the coat hangers."

Harry drained his glass. "It sounds good, Walt, I'll get back to you on it."

"Or I can call you."

"I was sure you would," said the President. "But I don't see why the urgency."

Kalvin swirled his drink and took his time answering. "It gets a little complicated. Call it a window of opportunity. I thought it would stay open, but it won't."

"Don't go cryptic on me," said the President.

"All right: I know how you worry about people and I didn't want to bother you. And he would be very upset if he knew I'd told you, so this doesn't go out of the room."

Harry drew a cross-my-heart on his vest. "Who'd be upset?"

"Terence Unruh. He has an inoperable cancer, Harry. He'll be dead in six weeks."

Harry Rand frowned his way to a connection. "Oh; that CIA deputy you're so chummy with. Family man?"

"Yes, but they're taking it well. And the Director of

Central Intelligence will pick the next man. And whoever he is, he won't be as, um, friendly as Terry Unruh. We have a month, Harry. After that, if we've lost our unofficial friendly provider and we can't make sure the media are responsible to us, I couldn't guarantee anything."

Harry Rand knew that Walt's definition of 'friendly' leaned toward the willing and useful; the manageable of whatever Walter Calvin wanted managed. "Don't look so glum, Walt." Pointing at his breast, smiling: "This is still where all the bucks stop."

Walter Calvin's glance was almost dismissive. "I wouldn't guarantee even that, Harry," he said. "You never know what ridiculous charges might get ballyhooed into an issue by some gonzo newsman. But with a Federal Media Council, you can stop the ballyhoo before it gains momentum."

Harry Rand could feel himself flushing with irritation because, while he bowed to no man in his basic goodness, this council idea was the sort of thing that might work for men whose supply of goodness was severely limited. He stood up, walked to the ritzy rosewood panel and waved a hand where the capacitance switch would sense it, so that the panel slid aside to reveal the ice and the bourbon. "I've always wondered if cancer was God's justice. Is Terence Unruh an evil man, Walt?"

Speaking to the President's back, Calvin said, "He's one of your most ardent supporters. But no man's closet is entirely without its skeletons. You wouldn't deny that, you of all people."

Harry Rand wheeled, ignoring the slosh of Wild Turkey on his fingers. "No, but I can sincerely regret it. God has forgiven my youthful sins, Walter. Why can't you?"

The use of the full name, 'Walter,' was not lost on Calvin. Harry did not use it often. "I forgave you. Bea wouldn't, but I did. I've even pulled a few strings to help the, um, vessel of your sin in her career. You didn't know that, did you?"

Harry started on the fresh drink, no longer feeling so fresh himself. "No. But now that I do, I bet you could reach her any time you wanted to."

A shrug. "She's somewhere around, I think."

"In Washington?" "With the sensation of ants chewing their way up the back of his neck, Harry was

definitely feeling wilted.

"I think so," Calvin said as though it were of no importance. "Can't expect a pretty Albuquerque girl to stay there forever. Besides, this is where the jobs are. And she thinks too highly of you to ever be a problem, Harry."

Harry Rand made a silent prayer, not for absolution but for deliverance. The girl had been his only stray step from the straight and narrow, but try telling that to Bea! And somewhere around the District of Columbia tonight, that pretty little time bomb was ticking away.... "Who does she work for?"

Walt Calvin rarely smiled, and when he did, it made him look sly. He was looking sly now. "Interested in her again?"

"No! Not the way you mean. I could always ask someone else," said the President, knowing full well his old friend Walt would rather be his only channel of information.

"She works for a man named Tate."

"Who's he?"

Standing up, speaking quickly now: "Who does consulting for us through Showers, but Tate's made it plain she should listen to a man named Lathrop, who works for Terry Unruh at Langley."

"You're telling me that sweet little creature is a CIA employee," said the President.

"She doesn't know it but indirectly, yes. She does know that she works for you."

"Loyal little thing," murmured Harry Rand, thinking, *If I'd been single and twenty years younger* "Well, I'm glad you saw to her welfare, Walt, though I wonder what you were thinking of, getting her a job in this town. And I repeat, I don't want to face that temptation again, so you just see to it that I don't." He knew that Calvin was sensitive enough to his moods that, when his soul was uneasy, even Walter Calvin trod with care. "I'm going to bed now."

Calvin stood up, drained his glass. "Just keep in mind that we'd better have a media council before Unruh starts sipping morphine cocktails. When we can nail a reporter for sedition, we won't need a replacement for Unruh. If we can't—because Unruh could be your Ollie North to an irresponsible press—consider packing your bags a couple of months from now."

Tugging at his vest, preparing for the walk from the West Wing back to the White House proper, the President paused at the door. "I suppose you've given some thought to the people I might appoint to that council."

"Some," Walt Calvin agreed. "And to chair it, why, as it happens I have a little spare time I might devote to it. Any problem with that?"

"No," said the President moodily. "I was just hoping you might surprise me."

Ramsay awoke with a possible solution foremost in his mind, the perch his sleep had clung to, a springboard for a Friday morning scrubbed clean by the rain; and its name was T. Broeck Winton. Ramsay made it out Connecticut Avenue to the studios before nine, not driving hard but with a sense of urgency. One day NBN would abandon this sprawl of offices across the second story of a suburban shopping center; go for status like ABC. And then Alan Ramsay would really have something to bitch about: parking, congestion, formality.

No need for a guard at the back entrance because his key-card was his pass through the steel-faced door, and Ramsay took the stairs three at a time. A cheery greeting to Ellen at the reception desk, a quick scan of the big board in the middle of the 'bullpen,' a room larger and noisier than it should be for professionals sweating deadlines. He was in time for the early conference session for the evening news—here in the studios they called it *thenice capades* because several tough *prima donnas* managed to put broadcasts together every day by simply nicing like hell, being objective about the length and placement of their stories. That, like working in an atmosphere of simulated chaos, was also part of professionalism.

His next piece wasn't scheduled until Monday. He even had time for the call to old Winton, so Ramsay swung into his glassed-in cubicle and punched the information number for Georgetown University. Professor Winton, with only two classes to meet and a penchant for popping in on fellow academics, was seldom in his office. That's why the old man carried a pager on his belt, calling Ramsay back from the faculty lounge.

"Thought we could have lunch," Ramsay found himself saying after mutual greetings. Jesus, he couldn't just blurt this kind of thing out without preamble! "I'm researching a piece on the laser-boost cargo system"—that much was true enough—"and wanted to tap your head on the international relations angle."

Winton had done a CIA tour back in the sixties. An old family friend, Broeck Winton had developed wisdom with his caution and he had more solid gold contacts than Bell Labs. The familiar gravel-dry voice was vibrant as ever. "The view of an unimpeachable, low-tech source, Alan? I'm no engineer."

Ramsay agreed, chuckling, that he needed something from a generalist with credibility, and mentioned their last talk six months previous without referring to its substance. Winton would realize instantly that the intelligence community was again, somehow, part of the topic. Winton was booked for lunch, sorry, but would be in the Med School library after that. "Until cocktail time," the old fellow added. "If you'd care to join me at my club?"

"Booze breath is a no-no when I'm on deadline," Ramsay said lightly, though his own deadline was very personal, promising to drop by the campus in midafternoon.

He put the phone down feeling better, then hurried to collect his materials for the *nice capades*. Irv, the producer, would forgive anything but lack of preparation.

Ramsay's upcoming piece would deal with the fleet of laser-boosted pilotless cargo vessels now in development in central California. Dubbed 'Highjump,' the system featured a fleet of small orbital vehicles that would soon be delivering half-ton cargoes to America's half-assembled space station on an hourly basis. A National Public Radio feature had already hinted that, while Highjump's laser-boost was nonpolluting and many times cheaper than chemical propulsion, it could also become the basis for an orbital bombardment scheme.

Ramsay thought Highjump no more warlike than the Sov and Japanese spaceplanes, yet he was far from any conclusions. That's what research and videotaped interviews were for.

He fidgeted throughout the session with Irv, unable to concentrate, remembering the letter in his jacket pocket. He carried the session off, though, with promises and memocomp notes. One of those notes, on a line by itself, was simply BIO. As if he could forget.

Despite the handy terminals, Ramsay went straight to the station's wall-length array of file cabinets. NBN had found that some people simply worked better from paper than from a screen, and let the obsolete file system remain. There, he found several updates to the bio on Calvin, Walter Franz, beginning with the Missouri primary back during the eighties.

Instead of letting an aide do the photocopy work, Ramsay made inferior copies in Irv's spare office using his pocket copier. The problem with pocket copiers was that they either made reduced copies that only a kid could read without squinting, or they required that your pocket be the size of an attache case. Ramsay chose to squint rather than carry a purse. He took the copies with him to lunch, gnawing an order of barbecued ribs while parked in the Zoological Gardens with the Genie's top retracted.

He knew most of the Calvin bio already from the Martin letter, though he was both excited and frightened to find Martin's details confirmed. Foreign-born but naturalized, degree from NYU. Enlisted in the Air Force, served in Germany, fluent in German. Later a master's from Cornell in electronic engineering, a totally different discipline from his NYU bachelor's, but military training sometimes broadened a young man's horizons and educated him in the process. Postgrad work at Stanford, experimental psychology and psychoacoustics, but no doctorate. Several years in Southern California in the recording industry. Then a staff member in the political machine that had elected a dark horse latino as mayor of Los Angeles. The mayor had later been recalled.

Calvin seemed to have had no work for the next two years but surfaced next in Kansas City—in the retinue of a crusading preacher who ran, successfully, for the Senate, then captured the Republican nomination and the White House itself. Walter Franz Calvin, White House Chief of Staff, was now enjoying the perks of an indispensable man. Pundits had joked for nearly two centuries about the informal Presidential advisory groups that functioned parallel with official cabinets, but in Calvin's case some wag had dubbed him Rand's entire pantry.

Ramsay rechecked his notes; yes, Calvin had switched from Demo to GOP—but so what? He'd also switched from rhetoric to Air Force intelligence to electronics to experimental psychology to recording studios, and finally to politics. It seemed to make no sensible pattern. Unless you plugged in the wildest tale imaginable, a man who somehow recovered an electronic device a half-century old with the potential to persuade people—a hell of a lot of people.

A man with a master's in electronics could have miniaturized a breadbox-sized rig of the thirties, especially with the facilities of a recording studio at his disposal. He could also have tried his stuff out with the speeches of a mayoral candidate; evidently with success. *And after that, what? Took your time, didn't you, looking for a likeable cuss who had the right background, the right voice, and a willingness to be led.*

Ramsay drove back to the studios with more care than usual, viewing himself objectively as a man who must not come to harm before passing on what he had. Then he managed somehow to channel his mind toward the High-jump piece, taking one telephoned interview and making two appointments.

But midafternoon found him nosing the yellow Genie off Reservoir Road toward the Med School library.

As promised, Winton was waiting. The very image of an erect, tweedy old lecturer, Broeck Winton kept his white hair cut short, almost military, and Ramsay envied his tan. Winton's long legs easily outpaced Ramsay up a long stair to an enclosed carrel, both men chatting about family ties as they went. Once inside the air-conditioned room they moved on to a brief interchange about uses to which the Pentagon might put the Highjump program, and the reactions of other nations to the system. Ramsay unlimbered his little videotaper, got Winton to expand on a few points before a wide-angle lens, the Georgetown U. hospital building a sturdy background prop through the carrel window.

"The most common response is a waiting line among small nations to piggyback their own experiments on High-jump vehicles," Winton finished, "except for Canada. She's building the orbital dock facility for the system, so the Canadians are, shall we say, high on the concept." The gray eyes twinkled with his double entendre, and Ramsay grinned as he reviewed what he had by fastmonitor through the auxiliary eyepiece.

"Perfect," Ramsay murmured, and slipped therecorder into a pocket. "So much for reality. There's something else, though. Maybe I should've worn a straitjacket."

"Might cause talk," Winton smiled, studying the younger man with the patient alertness of an old falcon. He stood up and flexed his arms, then folded them, still looking into Ramsay's eyes. "Oldbusiness, or new business?" he prompted. The lines around his pale eyes crinkled in lively curiosity.

"New to me, and goddamned disturbing," Ramsay admitted, and took a deep breath. "Is there any question of, um, domestic political intrigue so potent that you wouldn't want to hear it?"

Winton's smile grew cool and distant. He hadn't thought in such terms for years, he replied, but he guessed not. Ramsay asked if the name Cody Martin rang any bells; Winton said no, but he knew hardly anyone at field agent level these days. Was Martin one of the retired spooks he'd met at some high-level seminar?

"I gather it's a beard anyway," Ramsay said, without mentioning the Alden connection, and reached inside his jacket. "The guy sent this to me in care of the Overseas Press Club. It works," he shrugged.

"Good cutout for sensitive information," Winton nodded, accepting the folded paper, tugging a set of half-glasses from a pocket. He read without visible reaction for a few moments, then glanced over the tops of his glasses with an exaggerated lift of both eyebrows.

Ramsay knew that sign. One raised eyebrow equaled clear skepticism; both raised meant dangerous ground. He watched the old man sit down, attention riveted on what he read, scratching absently at loose folds of skin at his throat.

Winton read to the end, then swiveled in his chair and gazed across the building tops of Washington for some time. Then: "Kalvin," he muttered, and his smile was accusing. "I watched your 'True Believer' commentary, Alan. This is such a pat answer, all aside from the, ah..."

"Wacko element?"

"Well—a sendup, perhaps."

"Goering burned the Reichstag. Hess escaped Germany with a piece of luggage that was never found or explained, and the Sovs let him rot in Spandau. Walter Kalvin was in Air Force Intelligence in Germany and speaks fluent German, did you know that?"

Winton shook his head, his gaze expectant.

"Kalvin is bright, nobody denies that; but how many guys get a degree in rhetoric and then a second one in electronics? Takes extra courses in psychoacoustics, then spends a few years gimmicking bad music for teenyboppers in a recording studio?"

"Facts?"

"In his bio," Ramsay shrugged. "Then got Latino elected mayor of L.A., maybe for practice, and finally showed up joined to Harrison Rand like a Siamese twin before Rand made his political bid in Missouri. Now this accusation turns up in the secret files of a murdered Undersecretary of State. You see why I've got sweaty palms?" Winton's face was now a study in impassivity, carefully noncommittal. Ramsay took the letter back, folded it, and continued, "This guy Martin wrote to me because of my big mouth on NBN. I need a face-to-face with him, and somebody to pass this on to while I'm still healthy. You'd know whether I should hit on somebody—cabinet member, one of the Joint Chiefs—*who?*"

Winton had always given clear signals when reluctant to pursue a topic. This time, he promised pursuit at his own rarefied levels, and also promised a reply. The old man ended by reassuring Ramsay: however high the pile of evidence, it was all circumstantial. A real connection between the murder of Richard Parker and the clout of Walter Kalvin was a million-to-one shot. Not to worry, Alan.

Ramsay hurried downstairs with Winton, agreeing as they parted that they must keep in closer touch, assuring Winton that little Laurie was indeed becoming a young lady. Alan Ramsay would have embraced his mentor had he suspected that this might be the last time he would ever clasp the hand of the old warrior-savant.

After feeding the Winton interview tape into his active files at the studios, Ramsay sought more high-tech expertise on Highjump. His third call turned up a civilian analyst at the nearby Naval Observatory who was willing to give him an interview. The best time would be tomorrow, Saturday afternoon, when the major activity on the site was a basic youth tour—a new public relations gambit stressing the excitement of space development. Ramsay agreed; rang off wondering how he would shoehorn the interview into his weekend with Laurie, and suddenly realized his windfall. Moments later, he had Kathleen on the telephone.

"Nothing to do with military stuff," he objected to Kathleen's objection. "Basic astronomy, science, orbital industry. We both know Laurie's a little pacifist, thanks to you. Why not let her decide whether she wants to go?"

There were blonde voices and brunette voices, he thought, and for a blonde, Kathleen had a very dark voice when provoked. "Why not help her decide, you mean."

"For a parent, it's no felony. You know how I feel, Kathleen."

"You bet I do, you feel with both hands. Not too bad for an old lecher, if memory serves." Here it came; at the damndest times, but not unwelcome.

"Uh, you could get served, maybe serviced is more like it, tonight, and I could stay over and take Laurie tomorrow—"

"Busy tonight," she said quickly. Kathleen always resorted to quick telegraphic phrases when hoping to pass over something. A date, no doubt, with some schmuck she wouldn't let into bed. But she'd dazzle him, get herself primed, and then use Ramsay to pump her empty a day later.

Well, it could be worse; the other way around, for example. "So when can I be of service, madame?"

She took the cue, saying she would play the madame on Saturday night, and he jollied her into putting Laurie on the phone extension, feeling as if he'd peddled his cock for the privilege. Then Laurie came on-line, faintly surly as usual when he hadn't called for a day or so. *All right, three days. Is that a crime?* He knew that in Laurie's statutes, it was. "Hi, pudd'n. How would you like a live multimedia show after lunch tomorrow?"

"If you have time," she said, making him come to her.

He did: "Pudd'n, I couldn't call earlier," he slurred, courting the damn kid with kid talk, powerless with his own daughter. Then he invented a reason for not calling, a story so patently and transparently false that Laurie was soon giggling, helping him invent it. By then, he knew that Laurie would be stumping her plump eleven-year-old buns off at the U.S. Naval Observatory the next day, while he ducked out for half an hour to tape an interview.

And by then, as weekend traffic began to clog highway arterials in the nation's capital, Professor T. Broeck Winton had begun to inquire about the Martin letter; very cautious, wise inquiries near the very top of the old-boy network, although he knew that caution and wisdom are pale qualities in the beam of raw power.

Kalvin, who seldom put in less than a twelve-hour day between the White House and this office he had requisitioned on the third floor of the Executive Office Building, was not surprised when his own secretary's chime sounded on his desk intercom at seven p.m. Millicent knew better than to leave before he did. The surprise was that this particular caller was standing in her office.

"Certainly, let him in, Millie. Oh, I'll lock up tonight. I'll bet you've got some man waiting. You be on time Monday," he added.

"Thank you, sir," was the dulcet response. Millie might be as unlovely as snow tries, but she had a voice cultured by generations of Virginians and she knew when she was being told to get lost. The door snicked and Calvin stood up as his caller walked in.

The first thing Calvin said was, "Was this wise? You could have called by scrambler."

"Not for this," Unruh said, sitting down unbidden as though made of some brittle substance. "Terminal action always takes a face-to-face, Walt."

"Have a drink? You're looking good," Calvin remarked, turning toward his ornate bar cabinet.

"I look like the wrath of God and you know it," said the CIA deputy. "This fucking hairpiece doesn't fit, and I wonder why I let them do the chemotherapy anyhow. Nothing for me, thanks," he waved the

notion aside as Calvin raised a bottle aloft.

"What's this about terminal action?" Calvin asked, dropping ice into his scotch, sitting down with robotic precision. Privately he admitted that Terry Unruh looked like bloody hell, his blonde hairpiece failing to match the remaining wisps of gray at his ears, the lank frame more cadaverous each time he saw the man. But Unruh knew how to keep a bargain, staying on the job as long as he could stand up, satisfied with the weekly deposits to the Bermuda bank because they would serve as a magnificent widow's pension.

"One of my colleagues sent a rocket up my arse not a half-hour ago. There's an ex-Company man, an academic near retirement, zeroing in on Parker and connecting us with him. I don't know the old boy's source."

His posture frozen, Calvin said it as a simple fact: "We have to find out. Fast."

"Apparently the old fellow hinted that major media is asking. He knows everybody in this town so it could be anybody."

"Shit. Just when we think we've put a lid on it," Calvin said into his glass. "Okay: you must have a cure, or you wouldn't be here."

"You could call it a cure: surgery. I have the scalpel en route from Quebec. Foreign, plausibly deniable, and a very, very subtle interrogator. Doesn't leave marks." Unruh cocked his head, regarding Calvin without pleasure: "Did you know that the most terrifying thing a man can feel is slow asphyxiation? Utter panic sets in, you have to see it to—"

"That's enough," said Calvin. "You do what you have to, and so do I."

"I wonder about that," Unruh murmured.

"Wonder and be damned," said Calvin, "so long as you provide for your family, and that means providing a few things for me." He took a long appreciative sip. "Do I know your, ah, expendable academic?"

A shrug. "Name's Winton; moderately strong profile in some circles. But we may be looking at some *really* high profiles, maybe in media."

"For that you have to bring in an outsider?"

"Some things the Company can do. Some, it subcontracts to certain provider groups. A few things, the Company just doesn't condone, and my assets on this are three people, four if you count this Canadian mercenary, because you wanted to keep it small and manageable. The Quebec scalpel does things nobody wants to know about, but you can bet two things. He'll be sanitary, and he won't terminate the interview until he gets all there is to get,"

Unruh said in tones that were dead flat. "I can call it off, of course. I'm here to get your orders."

Kalvin studied the features of the dying Unruh through the flat facets of his glass. The pale face remained mask-like, but Walter Calvin felt a sudden intuition about what was going on behind that mask as Unruh, with the effort of an exhausted man, stood up. Terence Unruh would probably much rather terminate Calvin himself than have it done to some doddering old onetime spook. "Then do what's necessary, Terry. Just make absolutely certain you get to the root of this. We can't start laying waste to everybody in

Washington. And get back to me as soon as you have the results of the, um, operation. By scrambler. I'll be here."

Unruh nodded; turned toward the door.

"Oh, and Terry?" The man stopped at Calvin's words, twisting at the waist as if too tired to take extra steps. "Don't come here again. You do look like the wrath of God, that's a fact. You take away a man's appetite."

"Thank you very much, your Excellency," said Unruh as he moved through the doorway.

Alone, Calvin tapped his teeth against the edge of his glass and checked his watch. He'd have time for a good dinner, something light with a sparkling wine, maybe pick up a historical novel from the Waldenbooks place on the mall, and then return to the office. He felt certain that even Unruh's deniable scalpel would not be operating at full speed before dark.

SIX

Late in the evening, Ramsay hauled a snack from the kitchen microwave unit and took it back to his half-read book in Laurie's room, which doubled as his study since the divorce. He'd had the choice of a ballet, a party, or an evening with the book. A good party outranked most books, but not the three G's, Goddard, Goldman and Greenleaf; and a leg man with Ramsay's eye would only have been frustrated by ballerinas. He picked up the Goddard paperback and succumbed to its sinister influence, and cursed himself for jumping when the phone jangled at his elbow.

"Yes," he said, giving nothing away. Then: "Did the station give you this number?—I did?—Oh, right, I did," he agreed, suddenly beaming. Damned right he had, not expecting her to call. That party at Ynga Lindermann's over a month before; he'd seen Pamela Garza among public relations people a couple of times but never knew her name until that party. Well, now.... "No, Pam, I really meant it. Soccer's a favorite of mine, give me the Diplomats over the Redskins any day."

Pam Garza sounded more sunny and less smoky than she looked, if his memory was accurate. "I have passes to watch this Bolivian guy's try-outs with the Dips. Very hush-hush," she said, tentatively, almost shyly, with a soft southwest drawl.

"Don't miss it," he advised, and listened for a moment. "Me? Uh, yeah, love to. And I'll spring for a bite to eat afterward, *quid pro quo*—so long as I don't have to wear a tie." *Why the hell do I always have to say dumb things like that?*

"It's a deal," she laughed. "Tomorrow afternoon at three."

"Wups. No, wait, we can make it if you don't mind a third party. My kid, Laurie; she spends alternate weekends with me."

"There's always another woman," she said with a theatrical sigh. "Actually, I'd be honored, Alan. We can meet at RFK Stadium, main entrance, they said. Marvelous," she added. He had been about to say that himself.

Ramsay thanked her and put the phone down near the fake poppies on the desk—Laurie's present, her 'forever flowers,' a false gaiety to brighten the room she had vacated. "Hell," he muttered, suddenly remembering that he'd promised Kathleen a therapeutic lay on Saturday night. But Pamela Garza was not likely to be in the picture after dinner, certainly not with Laurie in tow. Whatthehell. If this lovely southwest praline got *him* excited, Kathleen would be the beneficiary. Titty for tatty. He picked up the Goddard, smiling, and congratulated himself for staying home that night.

Saturday began well when he drove to Kathleen's place, she smirking sexily and mistaking his guilty look—he said nothing about gorgeous Garza—for restrained lust as they shared herb tea in her Georgetown condo. God *damn* but he hated herb tea! Ramsay wondered if there was any better tip-off to the belief that all nations truly wanted freedom, peace, and equality than a weakness for frigging herb tea. He was too canny to wonder out loud. Kathleen wore smart gray slacks and low heels, knowing he liked skirts and highheels, probably certain that he was a conquest regardless of what she wore.

Then Laurie whirlwinded down from her room with a single overnight bag, scissored her legs around his waist as he lifted her, smothered him with an innocent, frantic kiss-kiss, and all but dragged him out of the condo. Her blonde ponytail was the same, but the apple cheeks were losing some baby fat and she was growing relentlessly taller. In two years, he joked with Kathleen, the kid would need a steamer trunk for a weekend and would take her majesty's sweet time coming down a flight of stairs.

"You always liked a girl to take her time," said Kathleen, reaching slender arms overhead in a languid stretch that tightened the fabric over her breasts.

He laughed, advising her to hold that thought, while Laurie tugged him toward the Genie.

Saturday seemed to get better when, after shopping, he left Laurie with a harried tour guide at the Naval Observatory. Because the analyst, a dour Carolinian from Scotland Neck, gave a hell of an interview with hand-held models at his desk. A Highjump vehicle, he showed, was dedicated to a very special orbit to serve the space station. The laser-boost needed accumulated energy and could not cycle the vehicles much faster than one every hour; a possible weapon against one target, but wholly impractical as a mass bombardment system. Ramsay put away his video recorder and went to find Laurie's tour group, feeling better about Highjump and world peace as well.

Laurie, ponytail swinging, bounced away with him to the parking lot, chattering of her new-found interest. "Jooknow, Dad, I could kick a ball a mile on the moon?"

"Did *you* know, pudd'n, that we barely have time for a slice of pizza before you watch the Diplomats try out a new forward from Bolivia who can probably kick a soccer ball clean around the moon?" She squealed with delight. Despite Kathleen's best efforts to make Laurie intolerant of any kind of violence, the girl played grade-school soccer with the total abandon of a mounted Cossack.

As she wolfed pizza, Ramsay fed her the itinerary, carefully casual when he mentioned Pam Garza. Laurie could bridle at the idea of his keeping company with strange women. *Breeding will tell*, he thought. *She's a natural competitor, like her old man.*

He let Laurie toot the Genie's horn in the Mass Ave underpass and, near Union Station, noticed a dun Ford Probe behind him. Hadn't he seen one just like it in the parking lot of the pizza joint? A Probe lacked the visual pizazz and the nitrous oxide injection kick of his Genie, but with the right equipment it

was one hell of a machine; maybe the best choice you could make when trailing a maneuverable Genie in traffic.

He waltzed the yellow Genie through the congestion onto Independence, grimly aware that the Probe was still visible in his rearview. He refused to change his plans, drove to the huge lot of RFK Stadium, and saw the Probe commit to the bridge leading to Capitol Heights. Someone had a map unfolded in the passenger seat; almost certainly tourists. *Or passing for tourists. Stop it, fool,* he chided himself. *They'll be chasing you with a butterfly net any day now.*

At first sight of Pamela Garza, Laurie slitted her eyes as if keying on a goalie. Black loafers, denim skirt, high-collar white cotton blouse of a silken sheen almost as sleek as Pam's long black hair which she wore in a loose bun. Her dark eyes shining under luxuriant brow arches, Pam traded a smiling glance with Ramsay that suggested she would take a child's jealousy with aplomb.

Once inside the echoing corridors of the stadium: "Hey, I need to find the powder room," Pam announced, adding, "I could use company, Laurie."

Laurie went with her, still standoffish, but returned five minutes later chatting with Pam as if they were old friends. Ramsay caught Pam's wink as they filed into the lower tiers of the stadium, and wondered if a shared *pissoir* made sisters of them all. The woman knew her soccer, delighting Laurie with tales of the sport back at the University of New Mexico. As well as the day had begun, it seemed to keep getting better; the Bolivian gave a heady demonstration of his skills on the field.

"We can sure use him," Pam enthused later as they strolled toward the parking lot. "Laurie, did you see how—what's wrong, Alan; forget something?"

Ramsay patted his pockets convincingly, with a slow turn as if to retrace his steps. If that brown Ford had been a rough tail, there might be a smooth one following them out of the stadium, but no one followed them. He shrugged off the feeling and said he'd found his keys after all, smiling down at his companions.

Pam, suddenly: "Laurie, do you get a crick in your neck from looking up at your dad?"

"Sometimes. But I can jump up on him and you better not," Laurie said artlessly.

"No fear," Pam said, her laugh unfeigned and throaty. "But I can wear heels and *you* better not, missy. That's my Honda," she pointed to a dusty red coupe. "I'll go over and fix myself up. Why don't you two drive that yellow lightning bolt over and collect me?"

Walking hand-in-hand to the Genie, the two Ramsays spoke of food, of Bolivians, and only once of Pam. "She says her company has the government for a client. What's a client?"

"Somebody who gives you a job, but you don't work for them all the time," Ramsay said. "Practically every company in Washington could say that, pudd'n."

"Like NBN?"

He chuckled and squeezed her hand. "Not yet, but they're trying," he said. "They're always trying." He did not expand on the idea, nor mention this Federal Media Council foolishness that most media were watching cautiously. Even if the council became law, he reflected, it probably would not exert any more power than the defunct Federal Communications Commission had.

Laurie brought him back to the present with, "She's pretty. But I like her," explaining volumes with the 'but.'

As Ramsay pulled up beside the red Honda, Pam stowed something, perhaps an extra compact, in her glove box and exited the car with a flash of turquoise. Now she wore spaghetti-strap heels and a kerchief side-tied at her throat, all of a blue to complement the skirt and Pam's natural Latina color. Ramsay caught Laurie studying his face for reaction and hid his awe with, "It's never too early to think of food." It was much too early, he added silently, to be ogling Pam Garza as if she were dessert.

Then they argued, hilariously. Pam suggested La Nicoise.

Ramsay, flicking his open collar: "No tie, remember? And I deeply mistrust any meal served by a waiter on roller skates." He suggested Beowulf Pub.

"There's enough Beowulf in you already," Pam teased. "How about Old Budapest?"

Laurie: "Do they have cheeseburgers?"

Ramsay: "Probably, with an unpronounceable name and seven surly gypsy fiddlers. Isn't it halfway to Dulles?"

"Halfway to *Dallas*," Pam admitted, and pointed a finger at Laurie's nose. "You," she accused, "have probably never had a buffaloburger. Betcha. And you, sir, have never had a choice of two hundred beers."

"Not at one sitting," he hedged, "but there's always a first time." So they drove nearly to Georgetown and ate at the Brickskellar, a family saloon with a game room that kept Laurie squandering half-dollars long after dinner.

In that time he sketched some of his background for Pam, including his boyhood on a Nebraska farm and his entry into media as a sports announcer. He claimed the blame for his divorce, saying that Laurie made all his mistakes worthwhile.

He learned in turn that the Garzas had sharecropped near Tucumcari, and that Pam's revolt against tradition had included leaving the Catholic Church. "I'm not sure whether I'm a Methodist or a Baptist," she laughed. "I've tried both."

Working her way through school in Albuquerque, Pam said, she had then worked her way up the ladder of a local public relations firm and, offered a chance at similar work in the nation's capital, she had leaped at it. She also alluded to a youthful affair with an older man in Albuquerque an alliance that he soon broke off with the genuine mixed emotions of a family man. "I was dumb, of course," she added, "and he was dumber, but really a sweet man. I had no idea how important he'd—ah, well. No regrets, Alan." And adeptly, she changed the subject.

Then Laurie was standing at their booth. "Five more bucks," she promised, "and I can beat the golem."

"You *are* the golem," he said. "Isn't that a lot of shooting, kid? I thought it was against your principles."

"It's not real, Dad." She had always called him 'Daddy.' Was it possible that the girl was maturing before his very eyes? She cocked her head and looked at the adults in turn, then leaned like a bartender on the

table." 'Course , I could play World Cup against Pam on your set at home, for nuthin'."

Pam, mirth dancing across her high cheekbones, made her face deadpan: "You train her to say these things?"

"Absolutely. Start 'em early, sez I."

She made her eyes huge, innocent, and whispered, "Shameless." And then agreed, on condition that they detour to pick up her car at the stadium. As he was peeling off bills for the tab for honest-to-God buffalo steaks and classic Kulmbacher beer, Pam said, "It just occurred to me: you big TV stars have to get up very early. Maybe we should do this another time?"

She was making it easy to disengage—and Jesus, what about Kathleen? Well, screw Kathleen, or rather unscrew her, unless Pam left early. There was no question in his mind about dalliance at his place, not with Laurie there, and he didn't give a damn because this delightful woman affected him like champagne. He wouldn't abandon the bubbles just yet, and as they squeezed into the Genie, he told her the evening was young. He promised himself that he would simply have to call Kathleen later.

Laurie, to his surprise, wanted to ride with Pam. He let her, laughing to himself as he spotted the Honda following him to Hyattsville because now he had a tail who was *really* tail, if he wanted to be raunchy about it. And he did, and he didn't; Pam seemed the kind of forthright good woman who made a man ashamed of his own readiness, but ready nonetheless. Using hand signals, he directed Pam to park behind him at his garage and then walked them to his place, easing into their argument on Great Video Games I Have Known once inside the apartment.

Laurie proved the more knowledgeable player, defeating her father and Pam in turn until Ramsay finally edged her at Pele. "I'm sleepy, is all," she excused her loss. "Okay if I crash, Dad?"

"You were double-teamed, kid," he said, hugging her and grinning as Pam got a quick hug too. He poured skim milk for them all and took a razzing from Pam on the spartan contents of his refrigerator.

"Next time you raid that fridge, Laurie," she said as the girl headed for the study, once her own bedroom, "grab a baseball bat for the attack of the mold monster in there."

"Weapons are un-American," Laurie recited seriously, and yawned off to bed.

"Now, there goes a well-rounded liberal," Pam said.

"Ten pounds too well-rounded," Ramsay responded. Pam assured him that Laurie would lose her chunkiness, watching him at his coffee making game, applauding softly as he managed it in forty-three seconds, closer to the record. "You inspired me," he said. "Maybe there's life after forty, at that."

"Think of years as seasoning. I do," she said. And kissed her fingertip and placed it against the tip of his nose.

If Saturday had worn well, it only improved after late coffee. Pam showed him what happened when marshmallows were briefly microwaved, sprinkling walnuts on the grossly swollen puffs of sweet nothing, enmeshing her small fingers in strands of goo to feed him a bite. He found one edible strand stretching from her lips to his, and they vied for it, and the kiss began with shared merriment but quickly turned solemn. The kisses that followed were sweeter, he said, than warm marshmallow.

"And a whole lot "less caloric," she said, her smile faltering. "I don't usually, uh—"

"Fool around," he supplied. He was nuzzling her throat at the time.

"When a woman says that, no one believes it," she said, her hands in his hair, wriggling with pleasure. "Especially when it's true. No, I was going to say I'm not usually one for the fast quip and *toujours gai*."

"I'm not sure I care. But why are you doing it, then?"

"I—guess I didn't expect you to be so uh, compatible, dammit! It scares me a little. A lot. Here I am hiding behind repartee, because it's not as dangerous as honesty but it's not as satisfying, either." She thrust her fine breasts against his hands.

Now he was stroking her nipples gently through her blouse, gazing into her face, their open mouths touching as they breathed in unison. He said, "I want to do something with you that is very, very satisfying, if I can get my goddamn couch unfolded."

"So do I, so do I." She crooned it in bittersweet agony. "But I will not do it tonight. Don't look at me like that," she pleaded. "If you have any idea how possessive a young girl can be, you can imagine how Laurie would hate me if she walked in on us. I want her to like me, Alan!"

He had not removed his hands. "This wouldn't bother her?"

With the pleading, a wicked smile. "Kissing she might handle. Fondling, maybe. If we go onto that couch, Alan, I get a triple-X rating."

He let his hands fall away, touched her hair which had fallen to a cascade over her shoulders. "Bitch," he said fondly. "You're right, sure, of course. I want her to like you, too. Shit, hell, damnation. I wanted you for breakfast tomorrow."

"I want you right now. For a midnight snack. And I promise—ah, you meant to have breakfast."

"You'll drive me berserk. Yeah, pancakes, bacon, all that domestic crap."

She drew her hands slowly from his shoulders, letting her formidable nails rake gently down his pectorals, then took his hands in hers. "Nothing could be simpler, but I've got to go now. For the sake of all three of us. I'll be back around mid-morning. For breakfast; the three of us. Okay?"

With mingled longing and anticipation, he agreed; helped her collect her things, enjoyed a head-swimmer of a kiss at his front door and listened to the tic-tac of her quick footfalls to the sidewalk. Then he steeled himself for a call to his ex-wife.

Kathleen was an iced vitriol cocktail on the phone, but accepted his story that he'd been interviewing a woman and yes, Laurie had been with them constantly.

He put down the kitchen phone extension, wondering if a bourbon-and-water would make him sleepy enough. The sooner he slept, the less time he would spend waiting for Pamela Garza. One helluva day, he decided, was Saturday. Could Sunday fail to be better?

He seldom remembered, later, how well Sunday began, with Laurie setting the table and mixing batter while waiting for Pam's arrival; because it all turned to ashes when he began to scan the Sunday paper.

'Georgetown Savant Succumbs' might have been anyone, but it was Broeck Winton. Found by housekeeper, blah, blah; apparent heart attack at his Chevy Chase house, blah, blah; history of heart trouble, survived by sons, and so on; for years a respected figure, decades of service, author of, *et cetera*. Stunned, Ramsay walked to his study like an automaton and tried every channel, cursing each sermon and commercial, then calling his own station.

The paper had it all, evidently. Winton's seizure must have come on Friday evening, some hours after their meeting. Was there any chance that Ramsay's mad scenario could have brought it on? But hell, the old man had spoken of cocktails at his club, and a follow-up at leisure. Ramsay was calling an order for a wreath when Laurie answered the door buzzer. It was Pam Garza, with a bottle of crackling non-alcoholic cider.

Pam glanced his way and, misreading his face, assumed guilt. "I've brought some—oh, Alan, did we make a mistake?"

He finished the call, took the bottle from Pam, and hugged her while Laurie frowned at the mystery. When he showed them the paper and explained, Pam seemed relieved. "If you'd like to talk, I'm a good listener," she said, starting to share the breakfast chores.

He remained morose until halfway through the pancakes. "I need to talk to somebody," he admitted then, "but I don't want to involve you."

"Let me worry about that, Alan. I'm not a schoolgirl."

Laurie, around a syrupy mouthful: "What's wrong with schoolgirls?"

"Not a thing, honey. But your dad's responsible for you, and I'm responsible for me. Never forget that," she said in Ramsay's direction.

He nodded, realizing that Pam Garza was a woman of great pride and self-confidence. Then he told her of his long friendship with Broeck Winton.

Later, while walking off their meal in a nearby park and watching Laurie pump great arcs on a child's swing, Pam remarked, "I'm terribly sorry this man's death hit you so hard."

"It might not have," he sighed, "if I didn't feel that I might've put some stress on him. I picked up an unsubstantiated rumor and asked him about it last Friday. Can't pass it on now. Sorry, but that's the way it is."

"Surely you can't blame yourself for an old man's heart attack!"

"It was the kind of rumor that spreads guilt around," he said glumly.

"Not around you and me," she teased, then saw the long, level look he gave her. "I see; maybe we should talk about something else."

So they ambled back to Laurie and proposed a late lunch. Without spoken agreement, the two adults accepted that theirs was to be a conventional courtship, and that it had already begun. Laurie, to

Ramsay's surprise, seemed to accept it without rancor.

Pam left them after lunch and, when dropping Laurie off, Ramsay had a brief, defensive talk with Kathleen. He niced himself out in that exchange and did not recover his on-camera affability until shortly before the broadcast.

Afterward, he sped home at a pace that risked a ticket, wondering if his answering machine would have a call from Pam. He found her parked at his garage, dozing, listening to music behind the wheel of the red Honda.

Ushering her into his apartment he asked, "Do you realize that I haven't even scrubbed off my makeup or taken off this stupid tie?"

"I shouldn't be so predictable," she purred, and helped him with the tie. Good luck charm or not, she said, that tie had seen better days. But as it turned out, Alan Ramsay had never known a better night.

It had been many years since a young woman had turned Ramsay's priorities upside down, but he could not deny the facts. He did not attend Winton's funeral, and begrudged the time spent on his profession. For a few days and nights he suffered the symptoms of a benign disease best known among the young: romantic love.

Most of his waking moments, he felt feverish. He forgot appointments, changed his mouthwash, cleaned his refrigerator out, and bought new shorts. He changed his sheets every morning and Scotchgarded his couch. And every night he and Pam Garza soiled everything again after late, light dinners, playing out their mutual fantasies.

Monday she became his 'casual' pickup in an Ethiopian restaurant in the Adams-Morgan district, but he failed the charade after she asked about Laurie. Tuesday they devoured seafood at the Pompano, later devouring each other on his couch. Wednesday she entered his apartment wearing savage spike heels and, he soon learned, a garter belt in deference to a kink he'd admitted. She wanted him submissive for once, or so she thought, but joyously abandoned the idea after five minutes of satiation with her fully clothed and him dutifully naked. "Some victim you are," she said with a pretend pout. "I don't think you care who's having who."

He agreed, rolling her over. By the time they fell asleep Wednesday night, each knew virtually every sexual provocation that delighted the other, and they spoke fervently of love. Yet, while Pamela Garza could navigate his apartment in the dark, he still had never seen the Washington apartment she shared with another young career woman. He knew everything she wanted him to know, and nothing more.

He did remember to call Laurie Wednesday evening. He would always treasure that call.

Thursday morning at the studios, he signed for a slender package brought by one of the private messenger services so popular in Washington. Those messengers were sometimes slow to deliver but they were very, very private, and they had not received the package in the mail until Tuesday.

Inside the package was a microcassette from Broeck Winton. Ramsay locked his cubicle, stuffed the tiny cassette into his pocket memocomp with fingers that shook, and stuck the playback unit's earpiece in his ear before playing the tape.

Over the faint background hiss, Winton's voice: "Well, my lad, I just happened across someone who should know about, shall we say, the sinister machinations of Professor Henry Higgins. And I just happened to bring up your little zinger. Amazing what the old-boy net can do. Apparently the elders have heard the rumor, and we both know they have their own lackeys in trenchcoats .

"The rumor is without foundation—I'm almost sorry to say," the voice chuckled. "But of course I'm relieved, really. Otherwise, all weekend I'd be cudgeling this old head over it, instead of enjoying my new Grumman canoe. More likely, I'll be swimming in Deep Creek Lake, depending on how well I remember how to handle a one-man rig.

"My *Lord*, how I drone on! At any rate, just thought I'd pop this off to you before I leave. By the way, this messenger service is a pretty fair cutout too. Remind me to give you their address. And any time I can help, I'm happy to. Be well."

Ramsay hid his face in his hands during the second playback, half in grief, half in concentration. The old man had loved double entendres and jargon. By 'elders' he meant the National Security Council itself. Evidently his informant had been someone attached to that august group, someone well-entrenched in the pipeline, perhaps CIA.

And the Henry Higgins reference had to be from Shaw's play, *Pygmalion*; the speech teacher who had groomed a student all too well with recording machines—which explained the phrase, 'sinister machinations.' How like Winton to discharge a responsibility to a friend, and by a devious route, before charging off to his cabin in western Maryland.

At least, thought Ramsay during his third playback, Broeck Winton hadn't sounded edgy or harried. Surely the fatal seizure was not connected with the favor he'd done. Ramsay slipped the microcorder into his pocket and hurried back to the organized bedlam of the studio, leaving one corner of his mind to chew on this message from Broeck Winton's grave.

Ramsay was walking off his lunch, watching a frail old woman perform an act of great courage in hurrying across a Washington boulevard, when that tiny mental corner spewed out what he should have realized on Sunday morning. Old Winton had set a hot pace up and down those library stairs when an elevator was handy. And canoeing, with a history of heart trouble? Not fucking likely! Winton had been a cautious man, and his physical pace would have been plain insanity for a man who knew he had a heart problem. Maybe his heart had stopped, but had the stoppage been natural?

"No, by God," Ramsay said aloud, and hurried back to his office.

He made a spot decision and called the office of General Nels Magnuson from his office phone. Legal fictions aside, joint chiefs weren't all equal but the Army's Magnuson was the only chief Ramsay had ever got drunk with after NATO exercises. Magnuson was not in, but an aide who valued media was happy to help and made the usual promises. Ramsay rang off, pocketed spare microcassettes for his memocomp, and took another walk.

In the mall parking lot fifty yards from the NBN studios, an unmarked utility van resounded faintly with an internal knock. The van driver craned his head to peer back into the gloom. "Got something?"

"He just called a general at the Pentagon, Bobby."

"About what?"

"Wouldn't say, but my stress analyzer says he's climbing walls. The general was out. Do we wait 'til he's in?"

"Christ, no! But call it in, first, Harman. If we move without clearance it's your ass and mine both."

The van thrummed away half a block from where Alan Ramsay sat, the Genie's top sealed as he murmured into his memocomp.

SEVEN

Ramsay's revelation took up less than one complete cassette. He did not refer to Martin or Alden by name though poor Winton could no longer be harmed, and his name added credibility. Ramsay edited the tape until, step by step, he built a damning circumstantial case. Harrison Rand might be simon pure, and Walter Kalvin an angel of guidance, but some nameless force was ruthlessly seeking the carriers of that rumor. If Alan Ramsay was not already on an erasure list, he expected to get there soon.

He made a copy of the tape before leaving his car and hurried back to the studios seeking postage. In each of the two padded envelopes he placed a tiny cassette with a note: TO BE MADE PUBLIC IN THE EVENT OF MY DEATH, DISAPPEARANCE OR DISABILITY, signed with his legal signature. Luckily he'd entered Alden's address into the memory of his pocket memocomp. It was not luck but premonition that made him leave his name off the studio's return address.

He entrusted the second envelope to the nightly news producer, cautioning Irv to squirrel it away at home and forget it until the day he, Ramsay, became conspicuously unable to do NBN's work. Irv merely nodded, folded the envelope into an inside coat pocket, and made a wry comment about threats from jealous husbands. Ramsay did not enlighten him; the people Broeck Winton had contacted did not seem to deal much in threats.

Ramsay had thought himself calm and controlled for his segment of the evening news, describing the plight of Costa Rican families whose sons fought on the Nicaraguan border while death squads stalked those families. Then, unbidden, his mind flashed: *Holy God, there are death squads nearer than Costa Rica; they could gun down my daughter*, and viewers saw Alan Ramsay struggle through an instant of what seemed to be sudden stage-fright. He overcame it with rigid self-control, completed his piece, then ran for the nearest telephone.

He reached Kathleen's recorder and blurted, "Kathleen, you and Laurie could be in terrible danger! For all I know your line is bugged. Grab the kid *now*, right this minute, and, and oh hell, uh, you know where I proposed? Go there and wait for me to page you or meet you! No police; I'll explain later. Listen, Kathleen: if you still have that little snub-nose equalizer, take it with *you—and don't trust any strangers!* I apologize to you both, and I'm sorry for this and, and I'll make it up to you. But do it right now, this instant! 'Bye."

He rejected several plans while flogging the Genie toward Kathleen's place. He knew where Laurie's key was hidden. Once inside the condo he could reach Kathleen by phone if she was at work. And he would ransack every drawer until he found the little Smith & Wesson she claimed to hate so much. But

Ramsay double-parked behind a Metro Police cruiser and, sprinting to the condo, knew he was too late.

Even as he showed his ID to the uniformed cop at the door, he saw past the man's shoulder. Kathleen Ramsay lay sprawled within a neatly taped outline on her living room carpet while a plainclothesman circled her with a video unit. "My daughter," he croaked, ignoring the man's question, then shouting: "Laurie! Laurie, pudd'n! Where's my kid?"

Lieutenant Wayne Corwin, Third District, was a rectangular balding man who dealt well, if brusquely, with stunned citizens. He introduced himself and warned Ramsay against touching the pathetic slender shape that lay face down on the carpet. "The only way you can help her now is to let us do our jobs," he said.

Then he ushered Ramsay away from the protocols of Homicide forensics and into Kathleen's kitchen. Even though Kathleen had fought, there was very little blood. Both of her head wounds, said Corwin, were probably from a silenced twenty-two caliber handgun at point-blank range because no one had heard shots. "Did the victim own such a piece, Mr. Ramsay?"

"I don't think so. A thirty-two revolver, if she still has it. My daughter Laurie: where is she?"

A long studied silence before Corwin said, "We hoped you might tell us. There's no ransom note."

Ramsay slumped against the wall, flooded with weakness and nausea. "Oh God, oh Laurie—" And then he decided that he must be very careful talking to Corwin. He rubbed his hands, which had become icy, and stammered out a hope that Laurie could be somewhere safe.

"I'd like to think so," Corwin sighed, and told Ramsay the worst. Moments after a neighbor heard a woman's screams from the condo, two men had been seen lugging a big plastic garbage can from the condo to a double-parked van. "Unless Mrs. Ramsay owned any heavy art objects? That's a possibility."

Ramsay shook his head. "Can you trace the van?"

There was always hope, said Corwin. "You could help if you have any idea why the girl might be taken. Beside the obvious ransom motive, of course."

For all I know, this guy is a direct pipeline to Laurie's captors, Ramsay thought. Invigorated by anger at the idea, he looked into Corwin's eyes. "In my business you make enemies," he conceded.

"Including ex-wives who have custody?"

Ramsay: "You can go—sorry. Kathleen and I get along. Got along," he amended, and squeezed his eyes shut from the pain of it. "I see Laurie often. Why the hell would I kidnap my own kid?"

"It happens," Corwin said gently. "Then you deny that you and the deceased had recently quarreled over custody?"

"Damn' right I deny it! Oh, sometimes we argued about this weekend or that, or where I took Laurie. My God, be reasonable, I'm not—"

"Homicide and kidnapping in broad daylight aren't reasonable crimes, usually," Corwin interrupted. "I gave you a chance to tell me what happened here. You know, but you're not helping. What am I supposed to think, Mr. Ramsay?"

Whispered: "I don't know." Then more strongly: "I just want my kid back. I'll say anything, or not say anything; whatever it takes to have my daughter safe," Ramsay pleaded.

Corwin rubbed his nose as he studied the distraught father standing before him. "I don't think you set this up deliberately, but you knew you had big trouble before you got here. What kind of trouble?"

Of course, Ramsay thought: *the phone recorder!* "I'm, not sure. I've had some—threats, indirect threats, really, and during a telecast today I realized that someone could go after my family instead of coming directly to me."

"But you didn't call nine-one-one and tell us," Corwin persisted.

"I couldn't. I still can't. I left a message for Kathleen so I could—hell, I don't know. Protect them myself, I guess."

Corwin lifted one corner of his mouth without really smiling. "A man wouldn't do brain surgery on his family, but he'll try to do a cop's job." Pause. "Where did you expect to meet them?"

"A scrubby little McDonald's, a couple of miles from here. I figured they could hide in plain sight."

Corwin: "You proposed to your wife at a greasetrap?"

"It was her best proof of my proletarian tastes," Ramsay said, and the two exchanged the wan smiles of men whose wives had never quite house-broken them to elegance.

From that point on, their interchanges became warmer. Corwin agreed that, at this point, publicity could not help Laurie. For that matter, the Metro Police could truthfully say they had no real proof the girl had been abducted. But Ramsay, said Corwin, was no pro at dealing with kidnappers. It was impossible to overstress the importance of getting in touch, and keeping records. The police would be contacting Ramsay again, sorry but police work had its rituals, one being that victims were encouraged to cooperate with the police; was that clear?

When Ramsay moved from the kitchen he saw that Kathleen's body had been removed so quietly, so professionally, he hadn't known when they did it. She belonged to them, now. So did he, if they chose. And Laurie: whose chattel had she become? He seemed to be moving in a very exclusive circle now, in which he alone was an amateur in matters of sudden death.

En route to his apartment, Ramsay began to think clearly again. Committing a murder, then taking Laurie from a Georgetown condominium during rush hour, was itself a message of power—and of restraint. It would've been simpler just to kill her. And they would kill without hesitation, had perhaps fired two bullets into Kathleen's head for no better reason than to prove it. They'd get in touch with Ramsay to make their demands, no doubt about that. And by this time, they might have taps on his phones at home as well as at the studios. So might the Metropolitan Police—*and they might be working together. I'm bucking the White House*, he thought. Christ, there was almost no limit how wide a net could be cast from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue!

But the operative word was 'almost.' Ramsay knew a little about electronic bugging, had researched it for telecasts, but thought it unlikely that the National Security Agency's automated monitors would identify him from random phone booths. It might depend on what he said.

He swung the Genie around Logan Circle, shot away and drove to Glenwood Cemetery where he watched for surveillance before doubling back. It seemed that he was not being followed, but perhaps they no longer considered it necessary. With Laurie as bait, they could reel Alan Ramsay in anytime they liked.

He parked at Gallaudet College and got a fistful of change from Student Services, but had to place the call from off-campus. He reached Matthew Alden's home recorder but this time, no friendly voice broke into Ramsay's spiel. "Matt, I'm calling from a public booth. You recognized my voice before but I've got my thumb pressed against my larynx just in case voiceprinted are as good as I hear they are.

"You also said to warn you, just in case. I'm afraid your old friend was onto something incredibly big, and powerful, and it has cost the lives of two people close to me. Maybe three. Maybe me, if they want to. I may be under a *magnifying*, glass, phone taps at home, the best that high-tech can offer. I don't know for sure and I don't want to risk leading anyone to you.

"And my daughter is missing; probably kidnapped. If there is any way on God's earth you can contact your friend for me, do." Momentarily, he was near weeping. "My eleven-year-old girl, Alden; they've killed her mother and I don't dare open up to the police, that's how big this is!"

He took a shaky breath, then several quick ones, and added, "Don't trust anyone on any government payroll, and don't take my word that you're safe. I could've slipped up, somehow. And please, *please*, if you can, tell your friend. I'll give you good odds he's under someone's death sentence, so maybe I could trust him. That's all. Watch your step and your family's." Ramsay was leaving the booth when he remembered he could call from any booth and query his own apartment's message recorder.

He found another booth, called his apartment, punched in the playback signal. Pam Garza had called, suggesting that she cook *antojitos* in his apartment to avoid restaurant food. Some Pentagon staffer of Magnuson's had called to say the general would be out of the area until Monday but would be available at two-thirty that day, if Mr. Ramsay cared to confirm.

And then another call; a harsh unisex voice that had said only, "This is once, Ramsay. Go home."

Finally the same voice calling again, and this time he— more likely, she—was more instructive: "That's twice, mister. We know you can get these calls if you want to. We won't run all over hell calling you from here and there. We'll just start sending you bits and pieces. Go home, Ramsay."

Ramsay made it outside the booth before he vomited, broke a dozen laws getting home, parked in front of his garage to save time, and stormed into his apartment as the telephone began to ring.

It was Pam. "You know what *antojitos* are, mister?" She was utterly unaware of his panic. "Little delicate morsels you nibble with your teeth. As it happens, I have some," she said, sensuously teasing.

"Come on over," he said. "I have to keep this line clear for an important call."

Pam was only half amused. "Important? What am I, chopped liver?"

All but shouting: "Great, bring chopped liver!"

"You're a very weird man," she said, vexed, and rang off.

The injection had taken effect fast, but Laurie awoke very slowly. Her joints hurt, and it was dark. "Mom?" A flat echo mocked her. She rolled off the bed—no, only a bedroll on a wooden floor—and padded barefoot toward the slits of light outlining a door. It opened with a suddenness that made her squint.

"Hello, Laurel," said the woman, in a voice that was barely a woman's. She was not tall but thickset, with short bangs and a square, wide jaw, and the hands that steered Laurie into the fluorescent-lit room were terribly strong. "I'm Johnnie," the woman said, smiling, touching her breast as if sign language were required.

"I hurt a lot. Where's my mom?" Then, as recent memories pushed through the fuzziness: "Those men were hurting my mother!"

"Your mother's all right, Laurel," said Johnnie. "She said you must hide here with me for awhile. I'm a friend of hers, you see."

Laurie did not see much that encouraged her. The larger room sported only collapsible furniture and portable amenities: card table, two chairs, a large cot. A small portable TV and other equipment lay on the table; magazines mounded under the cot. Three small fruitwood logs burned in a glass-fronted fireplace for heat, most of the light coming from a battery-powered fluorescent lamp on the table. No light would get past the heavy drapes, which had been sealed against the walls with broad-headed roofing nails. Opposite the small room where she had slept, Laurie could see through a doorway where a camp stove and canned goods lay strewn across a kitchen countertop.

Laurie studied the woman with the mannish clothes and the stout arms of a bus driver. She wanted to use the telephone. She didn't understand why she was here, and she said so.

Johnnie explained in simple words, the words one might use to a simpleton or a six-year-old. Laurie thought Johnnie's smile might have been baked on until Johnnie claimed that Kathleen Ramsay was in trouble with the police, and Laurie hotly disputed that. Suddenly, in place of the smile, there was only the glittering flat gaze of a pit viper. "Don't call me a liar, Laurel," she said in that voice like something from a cartoon, yet not in the least laughable.

Fists on her hips, Laurie proved she was an only child: "It's Laurie, not Laurel, and I don't know you. If Mom's in trouble, I wanta call my dad. You better get me a telephone or—"

If the red flag was 'you better,' Johnnie was the bull. Wrenched off balance by the woman's thick fingers in her hair, Laurie found herself dragged to a chair. Johnnie pinioned her arms with ease and thrashed her ample bottom. "You—will—behave," Johnnie punctuated some of those heavy slaps. The louder Laurie screamed, the heavier the slaps became until Laurie collapsed, sobbing, bent over Johnnie's lap.

Then Johnnie quit paddling and began kneading, stroking the bruised buttocks, speaking more softly. "Nobody can hear us out here, Laurel. If you behave, I can make you feel good. Real good. *Stop that,*" she lashed a single slap again at Laurie's renewed struggle. "You're Johnnie's girl now, and you do as I tell you."

A half-hour later, Johnnie taped the girl's mouth, wrists and ankles securely and locked her in the dark room. Soon after, Laurie heard the sounds of a door closing; a lock snapping. But long before that, while lying across the woman's lap, Laurie had begun to understand and to loathe exactly what it meant to be Johnnie's girl...

Ramsay's phone did not ring again until he had greeted Pam and apologized. At first he would only tell her that Laurie had been taken by persons unknown. He said nothing of Kathleen's death, but Pam's lovely dark features remained frozen in horror for many long seconds as she stared, shaking her head. "No, oh no, they couldn't," she moaned. Shaking, she buried her face against his chest.

Touched at her reaction, he said, "We just have to wait and hope." They did not have to wait long.

He answered on the first ring. "You're smart enough to follow orders," said the not-quite-male voice that was now familiar. "Let's see if you're smart enough to keep the girl alive."

"Whatever it takes," Ramsay admitted. "I'll trade myself for her if that's—"

"Shut up and quit trying to keep me on the line. Go right now and check the battery in that yellow sportscar of yours."

"The battery? But—" But he was talking to a dead line. He put the phone down with great care, fighting for self-control, and did not quite hear Pam's question. In any case, she had stammered. He asked her to repeat it.

"I asked you what he said."

A two-beat pause while their gazes locked. Yes, it was natural to assume the caller was male. And it was almost a 'he' voice. But hadn't Pam almost asked 'what did *she* say'? Doubt, as heavy and cold as a fragment of a dead star, came to rest in Ramsay's chest as he turned away from Pam Garza. "He said to check my car battery. Do you suppose they're watching to see if I'll follow orders?"

Pam grabbed her cardigan sweater, tossed his jacket to him, and crossed to the door expectantly. He took the jacket and followed her downstairs, watching the nape of her neck instead of the fine lilt of her racehorse legs. He wondered why Pam Garza had come into his life at this precise juncture; whether she had done it under orders; and then he wondered how he could touch her in pleasure while holding this suspicion.

He let her stand beside him in the driveway while he pulled the inner hood release. She seemed ready to lift the hood herself until he warned her to move far away. If this was a booby trap, at least Pam was unaware of it, he thought. But instead, someone had placed a plastic bag atop his battery. *She probably knew it was safe*, he reflected, holding the clear bag up to study it in the glow of a distant streetlamp, unable to identify its contents.

Hurrying back to his apartment, he said, "They put this here during the past half-hour."

"God, but they're cocksure," Pam said.

He swung the front door shut, ripped off his jacket, folded his arms. "What's your conclusion from that?" He half expected her to say, in awed tones, that his enemies were so all-powerful that he must obey their every whim. In that case he probably would have struck her.

But Pam was emptying the plastic bag herself and did not seem to have heard him. "Oh," she said softly in dismay, handing him the long curl of blonde hair that was Laurie's color but might, after all, have been anyone's. The keyring, however, was more conclusive: its charm was in the tiny spherical magnetic compass. Ramsay had given it to Laurie when she'd gone away to camp the year before. Pam held it up

and looked her question silently.

He nodded. "Hers," he said, and took the note as Pam extracted it. "Until this moment, I never realized I could kill in cold blood. Well, I could. Right now."

From all appearances, Pam did not see the threat as directed at her. "So could I, Alan." She pointed a tapering manicured finger at the folded note as if the paper were a black widow spider. "Tell me if I should see that." Her finger, he noted, was shaking; the skin around her mouth and nostrils was unnaturally pale. *She's not acting*, he realized with a flood of relief and affection. *Whatever she is, Pamela Garza is no kidnapper.*

The note had evidently been printed out on a common pocket memocomp. He read it, paused, then handed it to Pam. Once, while scanning it, she made a noise that was half moan, and the other half was growl. The note read:

WITHOUT YOUR IDLE RUMORS, WINTOON AND THE WOMAN WOULD BE ALIVE. THE GIRL WILL STAY HEALTHY EXACTLY AS LONG AS YOU STAY SILENT. WE COULD SEND OTHER SNIPPETS INSTEAD OF HAIR, AND WE WILL, IF YOU CONFIDE IN POLICE. SOME NIGHTS THE GIRL WILL CALL YOU AT HOME. KEEP YOUR SILENCE AND NORMAL ROUTINES FOR A MONTH AND WE WILL RETURN HER SAFELY.

MAN PROPOSES, GOD DISPOSES.

THINK OF US AS GOD.

Handing Ramsay the note, Pam rubbed gooseflesh from her forearms. "Devils would be more like it. Alan, did they—is Laurie's mother—?"

"Yes. With a handgun. While they were stuffing Laurie into a goddamn garbage can during rush hour today, if you can believe that."

He watched as she traced circles on his carpet with a shoetip, her arms folded so she could grip her elbows. Simply to be doing something, Ramsay went to his kitchen and inventoried the stuff Pam had brought: among other things, soft avocados, brown sugar, and lamb chops. She was standing beside him before he finished, and he failed in his effort to smile. They embraced quietly in sexless mutual need. Finally: "If you need to be alone, I can go," she whispered.

He denied it; dared her to create New Mexico *antojitos* that might make him momentarily forget; and watched her small taloned fingers prepare a feast as they talked. The talons paused as he admitted, "For

all I knew, you could have been one of them."

She'd thought of that, she said. "I can't blame you; you really haven't known me that long. Just tell me how I can help, Alan, and grade me on how well I do it. But I don't think I want to know those rumors, if they're this deadly."

She took chances, he replied, just being with him. "No, I won't saddle you with what I know. Why don't they just zap me and be done with it?"

She set the microwave oven dial and shrugged as she faced him. "I don't know, but I think we might be safe as long as you don't tell everything on national television. I suspect they're just a little afraid of what might happen if they tried to kill someone in your line of work, and got caught at it. I mean, you're a frequent houseguest to fifty million people, Alan. My big boss likes to say the media is an outlaw horse, you can't tame it, but if you tickle its *cojones* it might give you a good ride. Well, that's what he says," she ended, her cheeks the color of a ripe peach. "Actually, he claims it was a quote from Showers."

"Evan Showers?" His glance was keen. Showers, the President's press secretary, did his job well if unconventionally; just the sort of man needed to run media interference for a President whose public performances were reminiscent of an evangelist.

Pam nodded. "My boss's boss, if the truth be known—and that's just between you and me," she added quickly.

"I thought you worked for Elite Research," he began, and then smiled as she nodded. "Ah; then Showers is one of Elite's clients." The practice of government's hiring independent research groups was not widely known, but increasingly common. "Short-term jobs, or ongoing?"

"Ongoing," she said. "Elite does a lot of what we call unobtrusive measures. You know, computer analysis of talk show jokes, that sort of thing. Subtle measures of how well the administration is doing."

"Pretty sharp of Showers," he said.

"Walter Calvin, you mean," she replied, opening the oven door. "I gather from little things Tate says and does that Calvin's the brains behind the stuff we check on."

The son of subtle details he'd pick up in postgraduate work, Ramsay thought. *Oh yes, Calvin's had himself a hidden agenda for a long, long time.* "A regular little intelligence service," he said aloud, "if Showers wants it run that way."

She sniffed at the steaming casserole, gave a judicial nod, and placed it on the table. "Elite's first contract was directly through Calvin; a real internal disaster," she admitted as they sat down. "You know how Harry Rand likes to walk around with a hand-held mike instead of standing behind a lectern with armored glass?"

Ramsay snorted with amusement as he helped himself to fragments of pimiento, lamb, and cheese layered atop corn chips. "It's the preacher in him," he said. "A lot of us think it's as bush-league as Pop Warner ballgames, but it seems to work for him."

"Kalvin wanted a grass-roots opinion before the Presidential campaign," she said. "Tate thought the habit would be a turn-off for a national audience. I'm afraid he cooked our data a little to bolster that opinion," she said ruefully, "but it got harder to cook as time went on. The public just plain liked the President's

style and Tate finally had to admit that, or provide outright false data. Don't you breathe a word of this to anyone, Alan. I'd be in serious trouble."

"I didn't hear it," he said around a mouthful of delicious cholesterol, pantomiming a feeding frenzy. "You cook food better than you cook data," he added.

"Oh, I'm what they call a field analyst; what I really do, mostly, is jolly people into giving us free information. A lot of legwork," she shrugged.

"You're highly qualified there," he leered, chewing happily.

"I don't always like what I have to do. But it's for a good cause," she said. "And where else could I earn oodles of money, and meet people like Alan Ramsay?"

"There's that. But what's the good cause?"

She colored slightly; busied herself with her fork. "Harr—President Rand is a fine man. I grant you he's no genius, but he's a decent person. I've been a supporter since before he ran for the senate."

Ramsay lowered his fork. "You're kidding. You were hardly more than a kid."

"And he was on the evangelical circuit. I went out of curiosity and—oh, I suppose you had to be there. To see him striding across in front of an audience, full of love and hope and anger and joy for us, it just—I guess it was something like a religious experience," she said. "For three thousand people."

Ramsay began to eat again, nodding, chewing, thinking. "That's a big audience." He saw her nod and went on, "Did he use a wireless mike then?"

"I don't remember—oh," she said, grinning. "No, the mike had a cord. He tripped over it once; pulled the jack out of the socket. I remember because it's the only time I ever saw Walter Calvin on his knees, scrambling to fix it."

"Probably still experimenting," Ramsay said, aloud but to himself. Then, snapping his attention to Pam and herentree, he took another helping. "Quite a coincidence, your getting a job here and finding Rand's people are your clients," he said.

She looked at him steadily. "It was no coincidence. And I'd rather not peer down a gift horse's throat, Alan." They both fell silent, savoring the meal, until Pam said, "Aren't there some things about your job that it would be unprofessional of you to talk about?"

"Not many. Some," he admitted. "Sure; a few."

"Same here. I wouldn't have shared any of this with you, especially considering the work you do, if I weren't sharing everything else with you. There are just some things I mustn't talk about."

"Professionally."

"Yes, professionally. What are you getting at?"

"At the last morsel in this dish," he said, smiling at her abruptly, scraping with his fork.

"You're changing the subject. Finish what you were going to say."

"I'm not sure," he said, "but I know it would involve using your position to help me."

She reached out to touch his wrist gently, her gaze sad and steady. "I have a commitment to you and Laurie now. That's not your decision, it's mine."

They sat in silence while Ramsay considered the ways that Pam might help. It was not conviction but desperation that made him ask, "Pam, if I asked you to deliver a note to Calvin personally, could you do it?" After some thought, she nodded. "My career would be on the line if he didn't like it. Tate's my boss, and Showers is in between them," she reminded.

"Just an idea," he sighed. "I'm not sure what I want to say." *If Laurie comes to harm I'll blow you away during a press conference? Or more likely, Give me my kidnow and I'll retire from the business.* No, his best option for Laurie was to prove tractable, to do as the bastards said and keep quiet for a month. *Why a month?*

He puzzled at that question fruitlessly, staring into space until Pam insinuated her toes between his feet beneath the table. She stroked his calf, smiling, and presently he felt arousal for her—a miracle in these horrendous circumstances.

An hour later, after they had titillated each other through the kitchen cleanup and moved into his bedroom with busy hands, they lay spent on his bed. Perhaps not entirely spent, as she used one languid hand to stroke him to a passable erection. "Ah yes," she murmured, "the potency of the press. Would you say I'm holding the wand of power, love?"

"I'll say anything you like if you promise not to stop."

Her chuckle was salacious in the shadowed room. Then, as they lay together, she whispered into his ear: "You're right, Alan. Don't trust anybody; not old friends, not even me entirely. But I'd like to know that you've written down everything for posterity, just in case."

Mumbling: "So you can read it?"

"No. Because it might keep you alive."

"I already did," he said, kissing the long curve of her throat. He felt her relax then.

They were half-asleep when the call came. Ramsay bounded into his study, grabbed the phone. "Ramsay here; hello? Hello?"

This time he heard no adult voice, but a series of clatters and clicks and then, unmistakable, Laurie's voice: "Daddy, she wants me to tell you what I saw on the news." Click, pause, click. "There was this story about a train jumping off, uh, derailing." Click, pause, click. "She tapes this so you'll know I'm okay but," click, pause. Click. "I love you, Daddy and Mommy."

He tried to reply but the line went dead. Obviously, someone had taped and deleted some of Laurie's message.

Just as obviously, Laurie could watch NBN's local newscasts. That meant she was within the local coverage area, and she did not sound as if she was badly injured. "Hell, she could be on the other side of

Baltimore," he raged.

Pam stood in the doorway, fetchingly disheveled, worry lines robbing her face of youth. He ran his phone recorder playback through its speaker for her; watched while she gnawed her fist in concentration and dismay. "She doesn't know about her mother. They may even have some mercy."

He nodded, sitting at his desk now, laying his cheek against her flank as she moved near. "Maybe it won't be as hellish for Laurie as I thought," he said.

Unspoken between them was the knowledge that his own daily routines were going to be utter and absolute hell.

EIGHT

The theatre in the west wing's basement had originally been quite small; scarcely larger than the Cabinet Room upstairs, dwarfed by the nearby Situation Room with its communications equipment. The enlarging of the theatre had been Calvin's idea. The long narrow stage and the new ranks of plush seats, he had told Harrison Rand, would give the President the kind of room he needed when addressing a sizeable group in a private setting.

Standing in the Situation Room with Rand, Calvin tucked a gray wand under one arm as he reached up to straighten his President's tie. *But it won't matter how he looks if he doesn't follow my script,* Calvin thought.

Calvin had spent years trying to account for every significant variable which created that public paragon, that potential monster, the charismatic leader. The Nazis had one thing backwards: you didn't begin with the characteristics of the leader, you began with the typical *follower*. The same voice qualities that hypnotized most people could generate doubt, or even subconscious hostility, in a few. The chief trick was to find what won over the maximum number of followers—especially in one-person, one-vote democracies where the decisions are made by a majority of men, and not necessarily a majority of informed opinions. In 1930's Germany, a certain stridency in tone had done wonders. Americans, half a century later, responded better to deep resonances, among other things.

Calvin had worked long and hard to identify those other things. He had microminiaturized a suitcase full of tubes and wires into a package that fitted into that gray wand under his arm, and finally made the whole thing wireless after a few harrowing accidents. Studying the latest advances in voice stress analysis, which often revealed when a speaker doubted his own truthfulness, Calvin had added defeat circuits that simply eliminated those tonal tipoffs the stress analyzer was designed to identify. And because Calvin never entirely trusted Harry Rand or anyone else to follow orders exactly—to stick to the script, as it were—Calvin slaved the Donnersprache circuits to a wireless enable-disable unit in his own pocket. The instant Rand varied from what Calvin wanted to hear, Harry Rand became only a regional orator, the mike only an amplifier, the formidable Donnersprache circuits only sleeping sorcery.

And when Calvin chose to enable those circuits again, then President Harrison Rand's mighty voice flowed through artificial channels to emerge with rhythms and cadences and resonant tones of self-assurance that most listeners found irresistible. *And all he knows is, whenever he deviates from my script, his results are poor. That's powerful reinforcement to a man who wants to be loved,*

thought Calvin. Still holding the wireless mike under his arm, Calvin tucked the Presidential tie in, nodded at his handiwork—all three-piece-suited, two hundred and thirtypounds of it—and said, "You're letter-perfect on your speech?"

"You know I'm a quick study, Walt. Quit worrying, you just make sure that bunch of congressmen is ready for their minds to be changed."

"I checked the viewport; Showers got them seated a couple of minutes ago," Calvin replied, and withdrew the wand from his armpit, handing it to the President. "Don't forget your mike."

Rand took it, a device longer than most cordless mikes with a faint patina of use on its knurling from Presidential palms after all this time. "Look, I don't need this thing for forty or fifty people," he said. "I know folks kid me about my old-fashioned delivery. Might not hurt to modernize my image a little."

"It would ruin you," Calvin said, understating the truth. "Anyhow, you need amplifiers in a room that size."

"So why not use a smaller room?"

"Because then you couldn't use your own special style. Peripatetic, remember?"

"Walkin' around while you talk. Aristotle. Sure I remember, but if I didn't do it, I wouldn't have to use this thing," he said, shaking the microphone like a party noisemaker.

"Please don't do that," Calvin said quickly, reaching out to the wand. "You could bang it against something. Wouldn't want to damage your lucky mike."

"Your lucky mike," Rand corrected. "You're the one who got all pale and sweaty that time in Atlanta when I—"

"My lucky mike, then." Calvin had invented that explanation years before after his own nervous near-collapse when Rand, speaking live at a Georgia fundraiser, mislaid the device that had taken Calvin years to develop from its ancient German prototype. They had found it in the pocket of a janitor, an hour later. "Humor me, Harry. It's part of you by now and we don't want to change a winning combination."

They began to walk to the reinforced doors, a staffer opening a door smartly, getting a nod from the President. As the two men walked down the hall toward the theatre, Rand tucked the wand into an inside coat pocket sewn especially for this use. "How many representatives you think will change their minds from this little chitchat, Walt?"

"Never possible to say exactly; they're a cynical lot, but you could swing half of this group, maybe twenty, if you do it like this in a controlled situation."

"More than one-on-one by phone?"

Calvin knew that the magic of Donnersprache depended on excellent fidelity, and you could not depend on the fidelity of someone else's telephone receiver. It often worked, but you could not depend on it working well enough, often enough. "Trust me, Harry; this is better. Brings out the old charisma," he said, patting the President's arm, opening the door for his usual informal, bigger-than-life entrance.

Walter Calvin watched the reaction of forty congressional representatives, each summoned because he

opposed the new Federal Media Council, each beginning to slip beneath the spell of the moment, each impressed with his own importance, having been summoned to such a friendly confrontation by the President of the United States. A position of highly visible power, Calvin knew, carried its own magic.

No one noticed when Walter Calvin sat down, hands jammed in pockets, in a last-row seat. That was the way Calvin liked it. He toyed with the memocomp in his righthand pocket, paying close attention to Harry Rand some of the time but to forty congressmen most of the time. Harry was right, Calvin thought, he was as quick to learn his lines as most professional actors. It would not be necessary to press the special buttons that could remotely enable or disable the mike's Donnersprache circuits, at least not until after the sermon. Actually, the only times Calvin needed to disable those circuits was when Harry Rand took it on himself to cajole or bluster his way into a position that put him in opposition to Calvin himself. When that happened, the circuits got disabled.

And so did President Harrison Rand's credibility, without the invisible, silent thunder of Donnersprache.

Kalvin watched and listened as Harry Rand strode across the slender raised stage, thinking that the man had never been in better form. Videotapes of the audience response would tell him more later. And of course, there would be another such meeting with an assortment of the opposing members of the Senate. It was all going according to plan, Calvin decided. They might not have to eliminate anybody else, not even that guy Ramsay.

At least, not until after the Federal Media Council became reality. Then they could ice the bastard, him and anybody else they chose, because even if a killing went wrong, the screwup wouldn't be a problem unless it became news. And nothing would be news if Walter Calvin, chairman of that council, said it must not be news.

NINE

The abuses of Laurie Ramsay were many, though most were no worse than a slap. It was the sexual abuse that would leave invisible scars. The worst part of it, Laurie found, was the cloying, sickening pleasure she felt for brief moments in Johnnie's hands. Forced to rely on her own strengths far more than ever before—even at summer camp—the girl made great use of subtlety.

Johnnie kept treating her like a little kid? Very well, Laurie would take tiny revenges by acting the part. In the phrase of Laurie's school chums: sandbag the bitch. Cold water was the only amenity of the kitchen and bathroom, and Laurie's chores included dishes. Spilling detergent, knocking the propane stove into the sink, and clumsiness to the point of idiocy became Laurie's tricks. She quickly learned that she had no hope of moving the heavy drapes away from the clerestory windows, even in the kitchen: the process was noisy and Johnnie's hearing was good. The sounds from outside included birds and occasional aircraft, but no car traffic. Though Laurie was never permitted to climb up and glance out, Johnnie pulled the drapes aside for natural light during the days, performed indifferently as cook, and meted out swift punishment for 'accidents.'

Johnnie's weapons were open-handed slaps and viselike pinches. Two things seemed to provoke Johnnie to attack the girl sexually, and Laurie soon learned the ugly pattern. One thing was any behavior that enraged the woman enough to spank. The other was binding Laurie's wrists, ankles, and mouth with adhesive tape prior to Johnnie's nightly disappearances. When Johnnie returned, she seemed tempted by

Laurie's helplessness. And always, after the despised caresses, Johnnie would reward herself with tequila. The woman had brought two quarts of the stuff and gulped it straight from the bottle.

Laurie came to think of sex as horrid punishment, but in analyzing her captivity she also found real wisdom. It was clear that Johnnie had a child's ethic: full attention to what was due *to* her, little attention to what was *due from* her. If Laurie could be forced to do every chore, and to make no demands while Johnnie filled her days with TV and magazines, then Johnnie would not fill Laurie's days with so much anguish.

And one more thing entered Laurie's thoughts: weapons. If anything convertible to a weapon was bad, then Johnnie's hands should be confiscated. Laurie wished she could bring a bottle of tequila down on her captor's skull—which proved that Laurie's hands were potentially 'bad' too. And wasn't Laurie's deliberate clumsiness really a weapon? It was, in fact, Laurie's only weapon. Laurie began to wish she had a better one, something with which to defend herself against power both illegal and immoral.

Laurie had begun to question the tenets of pacifism. And to consider alternatives, and then to busy herself with empty food containers which, in camp, she'd learned to make into a tea set.

Johnnie saw her small captive making 'cake' from fireplace ash, and brewing 'tea' in metal cans, and Johnnie returned to her magazines with a shrug. Let the little bastard play childish games, she seemed to think, so long as she was obedient and neat about it. Johnnie did not seem to care that, for the silent, intent Laurie, it was more than a game.

TEN

For Ramsay, the first few days of Laurie's captivity became a challenge to sanity. He canceled the appointment with Magnuson, fully aware that he was choosing Laurie over the future of his country. He found anodyne in his work, driving himself in solemn intensity, telling himself that 'they' would return Laurie in a month—and not believing it.

Incredibly, not even the scrofulous tabloid press penetrated the cone of silence around the death of Kathleen Ramsay, which was duly announced by Lieutenant Corwin as "suffered in her Georgetown home during a break-in attempt." Aside from a few of Kathleen's friends who had never liked Ramsay and did not intend to start now, Ramsay noted that Corwin and two of his men were virtually the only others to attend Kathleen's funeral. "What's really galling," Ramsay said to Corwin later, as they walked between rows of headstones, "is that she was bright, useful, a good mother. And she's been put away without a ripple of suspicion anywhere."

"Put it in plain terms, Ramsay: you mean she's gone, and her murderers are running loose," Corwin corrected. "That's what happens when the people who could help us, won't."

"Sure; I talk to you, and they kill Laurie by inches." Strain made his voice tight, almost shrill. "She calls me every night, Corwin, did you know that?"

Corwin knew. Did Ramsay know that the calls came from different directions? Arlington, Silver Spring, Cheverly. Audio analysis suggested that Laurie's messages were first sent from some single location as scrambled transmissions over ordinary phone lines, to telephone booths spaced around the Washington

area. Then someone would call Ramsay and play the tape. The calls were never long enough for police to fix the exact location.

"All the earmarks of very, very organized crime," Corwin said. "Maybe politically organized. If you said the right things, Mr. Ramsay, I could bring in the Feds. But I won't force you."

If Corwin was part of it, he was role-playing and the hell with him. If he wasn't, maybe he could be pushed back to arm's length. Ramsay asked, "What if it's some lunatic group of the Feds themselves?"

After a moment: "If—mind you, that's an 'if I have seen only rarely in seventeen years—but if it were, I could accidentally drop you and your daughter into deep shit. But I don't like this, either." He jerked a thumb back toward Kathleen's grave.

"I have to protect Laurie. She's all I have, now," said Ramsay. Corwin's sigh and shrug implied understanding, and Ramsay's suspicions of the man dropped a notch. The rest of that day, Alan Ramsay debated himself over courses of action, and ended by choosing inaction.

Each night, Ramsay waited with Pam Garza for what had become both low and high points of his day: Laurie's call. On Thursday, perhaps intending to frighten him, his enemies made a serious mistake: they did not make that call. He slept little that night, and on Friday morning he gave every appearance of settling down, resuming business as usual, accepting the facts. But while lugging his video equipment across town, he made the call he should have made earlier.

He'd intended to send another may-day to Matthew Alden. But Alden's answering service clicked to an intercept an instant after Ramsay began to talk.

The voice was not Alden's. "Take down this number and call from public booths until you get an answer." The number had a local prefix with a three-zero-one area code. Bethesda? He punched the number into his memocomp and decided to keep his interview appointment before making the next call. Five minutes after a deadly dull interview for NBN, he found another phone booth as though at random, blood pounding in his ears.

Two rings. Then a man's voice, a drawl more West than South. "Mr. R., modern gadgets are so good they can be tipped off by a name or a key word, and they focus on that call."

"I know that, but—"

The voice went on, interrupting him. Recorded. "Think very carefully before you speak and avoid key words or names, especially your own. If I like your replies to the following questions, stay on the line." Pause. "Who introduced you last night on the defense appropriations piece; and what kind of tires did you buy for your little Chevy?"

Instantly he said, "Ynga Lindermann gave my lead-in, and it's not a Chevy as you probably know, it's a Genie with wide Pirellis."

A click, and now the voice was live, the same measured gravelly baritone on the recording. "Good enough, Mr. R., I was wondering if you had the smarts to call Mr. A. again. I see you did."

"I hope I haven't put him in the same bind I'm in," Ramsay replied.

"Not as long as you keep calling from different anonymous places. Your home phone is bugged two

ways, conventionally by Metro Police and by less friendly people using small transmitters. Your office lines aren't secure either. You must continue to use a different booth each time you call me. And for the moment, you must talk as if you were wearing a bug on your clothes or even in your hair—because you very well may be. Their equipment isn't good enough to hear through your earpiece, though. Do you understand?"

"Very handy for you," he said with anger he hoped sounded genuine. If he were bugged personally, they would only be hearing his end of the conversation. "NBN has deadlines, you know. So how am I supposed to check your side of the issue?"

A snort that could have been amusement. "Very quick, Mr. R. As for my side of the issue, consider me a very biased observer. Biased in your favor—and you'll just have to take a chance on us. Think about this: I alerted you to the problem with a letter. I've got a new name—again," the man sighed affably in his first show of human frailty. "The other side would never offer you any help, even false hope, because they want you hopeless and docile. And we don't."

"That makes sense. But what can you offer?"

"First thing, we get you deloused," the man said briskly.

"Why d'you say I'm, ah, lousy?" But he felt like scratching himself all over. Even the idea of an electronic bug made him feel defiled, somehow.

"Just a hunch; quit talking and listen. Before your next call, buy a Mantis, it's a sophisticated bug-catcher from CCI. Branches in Manhattan and Washington. Use cash, not credit card; and even if someone you know has one, don't borrow one, you could be borrowing trouble. Don't tell anyone, not even your best girl, that you have it. Okay?"

"Yeah, I've heard of the firm."

"The people you're up against can afford to bug every pair of skivvies you own. Bugs may look like fuzzy weed seeds. They stick to things. You can wash them out of body hair so they get to listen to the plumbing. Launder them from clothes the same way without raising suspicion. If you find one elsewhere, let it alone. They pick up sounds about as well as your ears do. Still follow me?"

"I think so, but how do I use the hardware?"

"Wear it like a wristwatch; it is one, for that matter. But it pokes you when it gets near an active device, so you can even spot a video bug and it won't know you've tumbled unless you do something stupid like taking the Mantis off your wrist and waving it like a flashlight. And I'm afraid we've talked long enough."

Ramsay was giddy from all the cloak-and-dagger orientation, and this man had given him no real promise of help. "No, wait, dammit. I don't want to, uh, interview those people. I might be seen. Why can't you provide the evidence yourself?"

"When your mail is monitored? Nope; bad idea. But you have a point." After the briefest of pauses, as if to himself: "Sure, why not? If this one goes down the wrong way, we won't be using drops anymore. Call again. Give me ten minutes." And the line was suddenly dead.

Ramsay walked out of that booth feeling an almost feverish anticipation, reminding himself not to smile or whistle because it might register on some long lens or tape recorder. Ten minutes later, he had found

another booth. "It's me again. You remember what I wanted?"

"Yep. You'll find joy in the Rexall on Connecticut Ave, a few blocks from where you work. Early this evening, you'll decide your watch is on the blink. Within ten minutes after seven p.m., go into the Rexall. Ask the clerk, *not* the pharmacist and not the cashier but the clerk, for a Timex. Pay him, put it on, and leave. For God's sake don't ask him to demonstrate it, he wouldn't anyhow. Anyway, I suspect this'll be one of your better bargains, pal. But patriotism is the bargain *we* get."

"The truth is, I'm starting to lose that."

"Bullshit. You called this number."

"For selfish reasons," Ramsay said, self-disgust flavoring his words.

"I think I know that reason. People in law enforcement sometimes talk with old friends," the man said. "Well, you can play someone else's game, or you can keep me advised. If you don't call within twenty-four hours we'll take it as a turndown, and no hard feelings."

Ramsay thanked him and replaced the receiver, striding out to Independence Avenue feeling as though he should sprint. The man had made no promises but by God, he seemed to be part of something carefully organized. Maybe that, he decided, was what put the vinegar back in him: the man was a total stranger, but he represented hope. Ramsay saw no gleam of it in any other direction.

He made his deadlines at the studio, complained that his Seiko had developed cardiac arrest, and called his own apartment knowing that Pam would play the message back—and that others would hear it. Running late, he said, thanks to a screwed-up wristwatch, and he'd be home by eight or so.

At exactly five after seven by his flawless Seiko, he walked into the Rexall. The clerk was a wiry dark-haired man in his thirties, an inch or so less than six feet, who fitted his surroundings like Tums and aspirin. He was glad to help and my, but that face seemed familiar. Ramsay admitted his name, kept his casual role, and asked to see something reliable in a watch; maybe a Timex?

With nary a wink or nudge, the clerk produced two Longines and an electronic Timex. Ramsay studied each. The clerk remained maddeningly offhanded and made no suggestions. Ramsay turned the Timex over. "The price of this one?"

"You're in luck. This one's a closeout at thirty-nine ninety-five. Something to do with all those special functions," the clerk replied.

Ramsay realized again that he might actually be carrying a tiny transmitter on himself. "I'll take the Timex," he said, and paid cash.

The clerk made change, smiled, and said to the retreating Ramsay, "I expect it's one of your better bargains." Ramsay, with the discomfort of a man who has inexplicably wandered into a staged play, hurried out.

The damned thing seemed to be an ordinary Timex, if you ignored the tiny bar that lay flat on its underside. He slipped it on, thrust the Seiko into his glove compartment, and drove home while aiming the new watch at various parts of his body. Either he was free of bugs, or the watch was faulty. Too bad he couldn't show it to Pam. Odd, he thought, that it could make him feel so much better when, so far, all it had told him was the correct time.

Because Pam was waiting for him at his apartment, he made no overt effort to check the place for monitors, but soon realized the Mantis worked because it gently poked him several times while he was in the kitchen. He felt a surge of anger about that, but knew a fierce elation as well.

When Pam left his apartment the next morning, he began to use the Mantis with great care. The thing was highly directional in its ability to pick up signals from an active transmitter.

He found the first bug, after a puzzling fifteen minutes, in a crack of cabinetry between his dishwasher and countertop. It lay very near his kitchen phone. He found the second one faster by marching directly to the study and waving his wrist near the desk phone. The tiny device looked more like a furry tick than a seed, and had been planted in the center of one of Laurie's 'forever' poppies. It had lain in full view, had heard every word spoken in his study, for—how long? Had the bastards bugged him even before Laurie's kidnap?

Now his elation was gone. A gradually building ferocity, held in careful check, was all that remained. It did not diminish much during his workday, and he sought a pay phone soon after lunch. The recorded message suggested he call after three p.m. and at one minute after, by his bargain Timex, he called again.

The westerner came on-line immediately. "Did you find anything of interest, Mr. R.?"

"Damn' right. Nothing on me personally, but I found two little gadgets near my home phones. God *damn* these people, I've never even seen them!"

"Oh, you've seen one of them, all right. We're monitoring your little hotsy, Mr. R. I don't know how long you've known Miz G., but she's working for the other side. That's why I suggested checking your body. She probably carries more bugs than Typhoid Mary."

The briefest silence before a gritted, "I'll kill her...."

"They'd love that," said the man. "She thinks she's a patriotic American keeping tabs on a man who needs watching, and I doubt you could prove otherwise to her. If it's any consolation, we gather she's sick over your , um, babysitting arrangements. Her chief sin seems to be naiveté. Keep playing her game, but don't let her lead you into any dark alleys; it's possible they could change their game plan about you."

"Look, I don't give a shit about *my* hide anymore. If my kid were safe, I'd blow this whole thing in the media and take the consequences."

"Not yet!" The reply was instant; explosive. "Eventually that's just what we'd like to see but these people have a timetable and we still aren't sure why. And if you hurt them too soon, they'd hurt you back a lot worse. And you'd blow *our* show."

Ramsay, with sudden suspicion: "And what is your show, pal?"

"It's still called the United States of America, I believe. If we're patient, it may stay that way."

Ramsay grunted assent and changed his tack. "I had a call today from a lieutenant in the Metro Police. He admits they're monitoring my phone. Whose side are those guys on?"

"Yours, apparently, but they can't help much. And if they get lucky, it could be bad news for your daughter."

"What are the chances I'll see her alive again?" He hated to ask. He *had* to ask.

"About fifty-fifty," said the westerner. "Getting better as they keep her longer and get more confident. Your lady friend's contacts must be through her job because she's not getting them at her apartment. With luck, we just might be able to backtrack those calls. If we can, someone may lead us to your little girl."

"Is that really one of your priorities?"

A moment's pause, and now something in the man's tone became less commanding, more intimate; sadder, perhaps. "There's an old Greek physician's code that says, 'first, do no harm,'" he said. "That little girl's troubles began with a decision of ours. We're ethically bound to help free her, you have to believe that. No, you don't have to, do you?" Those last few words had been spoken as if Ramsay himself had already answered.

"I think you're starting to see how I feel," Ramsay said.

"I don't blame you, but I can't do much about—"

"Hell you can't. I do a lot of legwork on my own, pal, and I meet lots of people; informants, interviews, that sort of thing. Why not meet me face to face?"

Now the man's tones were plainly apologetic. "Because if somebody gets you in a spot with needles under your fingernails, the less you know, the better. But your point is taken. Meanwhile, remember: if we do get your daughter back, the instant the bad guys know it, they'll be trying to nail you before you can get to a TV studio. I don't want you to have any false hopes about that."

"The only hopes I have are pinned on an eleven-year-old pacifist, pal. I won't see her for a month, they said."

"A month? Exactly? Why a month?"

"I don't know," Ramsay said. "I hoped you might."

"Maybe we do need a sit-down, Mr. R. But this call has already gone on too long. Get back to me; and stay friendly with your hotsy, but keep checking yourself for bugs, okay?"

"Right," Ramsay answered, and hung up, now more perplexed than before. His allies seemed as curious about that one-month time span as he was.

ELEVEN

At dusk, ten days after the kidnapping, Robert Lathrop parked his rumbling old Firebird two blocks from the suburban home of his real boss, set its alarm, locked the door, and tugged at the vest of his gray three

piece suit before walking smartly away with his attache case. In his vest pocket were cards that introduced him, truthfully, as a salesman of household computers. Beneath the vest and the silk shirt was a gut as hard and flat as Nautilus machines could make it, with the help of steroids. If challenged, Lathrop could have produced brochures from the attache case, and pocket memocomps at very attractive prices. Lathrop made most of his money that way, letting his fine physique, those moist brown eyes and the well-scrubbed fresh features do much of the selling for him.

But Bobby Lathrop did not think of that as his 'real' job. His real job put a small submachine gun in his hands, and put him back into the kind of power that a police internal affairs investigation had taken him out of, years before. No police commissioner can afford a disarming, glib young sociopath in the ranks, if he knows about it; especially a bright one. The kind of man who *can* afford a Lathrop is the kind whose budget can be fudged, and who has ways of learning when a Bobby Lathrop has been found and bounced. Such a man had found Lathrop. Bobby's smile, as he skipped up the front steps of Terence Unruh's home, was unforced.

The door opened for him and Bobby strode in, with a dazzling smile for Unruh who seemed, in the dim light of an unlit living room, much older than he had been a week before. "Take a seat, Bobby. Beer? Iced tea?"

"Nothing, thanks. Mind if I smoke?"

"It hardly matters now," Unruh said, and sank carefully into an overstuffed chair near Bobby. "Quit looking around; my wife and the kids are at a school play. We're secure."

Bobby, with the highest respect for Unruh's security sense, visibly relaxed, pulling a set of pages from his case before he lit the Winston. "Transcripts from Ramsay's phone."

Unruh took them. "Any other copies?"

"No, *sir*," Bobby assured him, grinning again. "Jondahl's tape transcriptions are there too. Johnnie's as steady as a bitch wolf."

"Bitch wolves aren't queer for pups," said Unruh.

Bobby's jaw twitched. It had been a mistake to tell Terence Unruh so much about the habits of Johnnie, beyond her dependability, and doubly a mistake to crack explicit jokes about the Ramsay kid's captivity. "Well, Reba Jondahl can't be charmed by kids and she won't balk at stringent measures," said Bobby. "When we're this short-handed, we're lucky to have somebody like Johnnie that we can depend on."

After a pause, tiredly: "I suppose."

Bobby thought the phrase, sighed like that as if by a defeated man, out of character for Unruh. But Unruh *looked* out of character, as if the thankless job of government—whichever part of it he really represented—had finally caught up with him, aging him a year for every week. *No wonder he keeps the lights off*, Bobby thought. "If you want things simplified," Bobby said, and paused to make his cigarette glow, "let me get creative with Ramsay. Household accidents kill a lot of people, Terence."

"Ramsay has almost certainly written down what he knows and put it in a safe deposit box," Unruh said, his voice soft, lacking vitality. "We want him just the way he is."

"Indefinitely? Why?"

"A month. And I don't know exactly why, Bobby. I just follow orders."

"But if I intercept anything that says Ramsay's going to spill something big—is the sanction still good?"

"Of course," said Unruh. "Just don't hurt that bimbo, Garza, in the process. Someone very high up wants her healthy."

"Small wonder," Bobby Lathrop snickered, and flexed his arms. "I could use her healthy myself."

Another sigh from Unruh. "I'm sure you could. Which reminds me: if Ramsay goes down for whatever reason, at that moment there's no longer any reason for Reba Jondahl to keep the girl. Get the girl away from that crazy butch immediately after that. Is that clear?"

"Yessir," Bobby said quickly, brightly. He saw no point in adding that Johnnie, whom he had busted when he was in uniform and had gotten to know better since, was far more valuable than any snot-nosed kid. Johnnie's features and voice were much too distinctive for even the dullest child to forget or confuse with anyone else. Therefore, the Ramsay kid would be 'taken away' by Johnnie's own hands, just as Bobby Lathrop had already promised the woman. He would simply report the girl missing.

Bobby spent only five more minutes in the Unruh home, accepting a well-used bundle of cash and swapping his phone scrambler attachment for another. It was important, Unruh insisted, that the Garza woman keep Bobby advised on her movements. There was no telling when she might need new instructions from Bobby, and Unruh was hardly in a position to contact her himself because, for one thing, she had never heard of Unruh.

Bobby left feeling that, for some reason, Terence Unruh did not want him to linger. Almost, Bobby thought, as if he was unwelcome in the Unruh home. That was okay with Bobby, so long as their job relationship remained. Other people might fret over friendships. Not Bobby.

No, *sir*.

That night Laurie thought she was caught, for sure. She had let another batch of her play-tea percolate into the tin can she used as a teapot, and poured it into the cup she'd made from a smaller can. Johnnie had turned off the lamp to save its batteries so that the only light came from the fireplace and the little TV the woman was watching. Then, as she'd done several times before, Laurie moved to the raised hearth and slid the half-filled cup past the glass front and near glowing coals.

But Johnnie was watching. "What the hell're you doing?"

Laurie jerked, then covered her guilty motion by sticking two fingers in her mouth. "Nuthin'. You made me burn myself," she mumbled.

"Don't tell me 'nothing,' Laurel." Johnnie stood up and left the TV to stare at the tin cup. "What's that?"

Now Laurie cowered in real fear—but she often did, with good reason. "I'm, uh, I was just boiling tea."

Johnnie squatted at the hearth, squinting into the heat, and saw the clear 'tea' begin to boil around the cup's edge. Then, as Laurie stared, the woman grasped the cup by the neatly bent metal handle, with

scorched adhesive tape Laurie had salvaged to cover the sharp metal edges. Suspiciously, Johnnie swirled the contents. Then, suddenly, she spilled some of it onto live coals and moved back as if expecting a sudden flareup .

"It's just play tea," Laurie said as the coals hissed.

"Uh-huh. Thought it might be cooking oil," Johnnie said, the threat implicit, watching steam hiss from the coals. Without another word, Johnnie returned to the TV and Laurie repositioned the cup. Soon it would be time for the nightly news, and then for Laurie's report on it.

Presently, after most of the water had boiled away, Laurie's trembling fingers retrieved the cup. She moved back to her pathetic little tea set and began to slurp noisily. Not the stuff she had been percolating through wood ash and then boiled down, of course, but the other cup with plain cold water. Laurie had learned more at camp than mere basic woodcraft.

She'd learned how settlers made soap, too.

TWELVE

The Smithsonian's air and space museum seemed an odd place, Ramsay thought, for his first meeting with an ally. But below those huge exhibits, where historic aircraft hung like the predatory toys of giants, sprawled a basement where a man could get lost, assuming he was allowed down there. Ramsay had to show his ID twice before he could descend into those depths, and consulted his memocomp after taking a wrong turn.

He found the door labeled FILM ARCHIVES at last, walked through with his video equipment, and greeted a graying woman whose smile was at first perfunctory, but widened as she recognized his face. She checked his credentials anyway. "It's very unusual, but you're cleared into the archives," she told him. "That makes two at once. *Very* unusual," she muttered again to herself as she ushered Ramsay into a tomb-like space with multiple aisles stretching away between ceiling-high shelves. He saw the man with the ancient can of sixteen millimeter film immediately, but the man did not look up until the door had closed.

As the man turned, Ramsay's first impression was of a swarthy farm hand in expensive slacks, perhaps part mestizo ; straight longish black hair, prominent cheeks, corded forearms sticking out from half-rolled sleeves and, in a jarring note, gossamer white nylon gloves. He stood and extended a hand, seeing Ramsay's gaze on the gloves. "Just protective coloration, Mr. Ramsay," he said as they shook hands, and Ramsay recognized the voice. "This old nitrate film is delicate stuff. People dart in here every so often, but it's as secure as a missile silo. Remarkable what you can do with the right lodge handshake, isn't it? Call me Tom; Tom Cusick; but if you're more comfortable with a name you know, make it Cody Martin. Both street names." Cusick had a face that could smile and squint at the same time, as though sharing a joke with someone a mile away.

"I'm Alan, or Al if you want to bug me," Ramsay said, and took the vacant chair. "Speaking of bugs, I'm clean." He brandished the wrist with the false Timex. "And thanks. Forgive me for coming right to the point, but anything new on my daughter?"

"No; sorry." A one beat pause. "We have a probable contact, maybe a second, but I can't talk about that yet. If you get picked up by the wrong folks, Alan, *you* can't talk about it. Even though they could make you want to very, very badly."

"Trying to scare me?"

"Yes. If you're already scared, good, and I'll lay off."

"I am. Scared enough that I'm thinking about buying a gun."

Cusick cocked his head, and his gaze was skeptical. "We can't help you there. It's not something we do."

"What, exactly, *do* you do, Tom?"

His hands idly coiling the old black and white film as he replied, Cusick said, "Most people think of lodge brothers as grown children who raise money for charities. True, as far as it goes, Alan. Did you know that nearly every President, until recently, has been a member of some Masonic order?" Seeing the curiosity in Ramsay's face, he went on: "We try to break no laws, but we'll operate in the chinks between laws."

Because Ramsay had seen the grotesque ways in which honest folk had been co-opted by a LaRouche or a Kalvin, his question was pointed. "Party affiliation?"

"None. Personally, I'm a radical centrist; I'd love to see some profound changes, some liberal, some conservative. It's really not an important question. What's important is this Donnersprache thing that Undersecretary Parker called a charisma device. It might somehow be used to help human beings, but in the wrong hands—well, there might have been a *fuehrer* in Germany without it, but maybe not. And Donnersprache is obviously not in good hands the second time around. Think of us as a few armchair sociologists, Alan, working up a list of the unpleasant things that might happen within, say, a month."

"I've pared my list down to one," said Ramsay. "I don't envision it as a factor on the foreign policy side. And you can put it down to my media bias, but the thing I see fast approaching is a Congressional vote on that damned Federal Media Council."

Cusick had a good poker face, and he was using it. "What if it passes?"

Ramsay shrugged. "Maybe nothing much. Might depend on who chairs it, and how they interpret their clout. Eventually it could be a Supreme Court issue, but the court moves slowly. A hell of a lot of censorship could come down the pike before that."

Cusick nodded. "I don't suppose you have any ideas about exactly how Donnersprache works, or what it is," he said, stirring the air with one daintily gloved hand.

"Yeah, I do. Pretty obvious, once you research Walter Kalvin's background—and Rand's," Ramsay said. "You've researched Kalvin. His degrees; the way Rand's career went into high gear after he and Kalvin got together; all that stuff?"

Another nod. "An interesting view," said Cusick, noncommittal; maybe too much so.

"I don't know how many people are in on the Donnersprache idea, but I think it could be Kalvin's alone."

I'm sure Rand knows, of course."

"You are? I for one am amazed at the things our President doesn't know," said Tom Cusick. "And at the things Calvin does know."

"Like how to build that goddamned Donnersprache gizmo into a hand-held mike," Ramsay said. "I'd love to get my hands on one. I'm sure he has a fucking drawer full of 'em."

"For the record, Alan, I think you're fantasizing."

Ramsay grinned. "But off the record?"

Cusick's button-dark eyes were hard as he shook his head. "Under enough duress, everything goes on record. I can't give you anything that isn't for the record."

Ramsay's hand slapped the table with blinding speed, but without great impact. "What the hell *can* you give me, then?"

Tom Cusick's reaction was quick; a defensive motion with both arms, just as quickly relaxed. "Easy, friend. Pretty quick hands, by the way; I like it. Let's talk about something else," he said abruptly. "We aren't as well-heeled as we'd like, but foresight and the right handshake can sometimes beat money. What if worst came to worst, and you needed to—what we used to call exfiltrate?"

Ramsay frowned, then made a connection. "Disappear, you mean? False ID, that sort of thing?"

A nod. "Don't think it can't happen. I've needed it to keep my head screwed on more than once," Cusick reminded him. "Or maybe just a safe house for a few days. Most of that, we can do. What we won't do," his smile was wry and lopsided as he wagged a hand like a listing boat, "others can, and we can point you in the right direction."

Ramsay needed a moment before making a troubled headshake. "I'll keep it in mind, but that's not my style. And it presupposes that something has happened to Laurie."

"Not at all. It just supposes someone decides to take you out. You're the one who's dangerous, not your little girl. And if you decide you need to run for it, call me. If you get the answering machine, whistle the highest, steadiest pitch you can for as long as you can; it's an alert signal. You *can* whistle?"

"Yeah. Look, why the hell don't you just contact some other media people? A dozen of 'em; somebody not connected to me. Then Laurie would no longer be—oh, my God," he said, seeing Cusick's lowered head, and its slow negative shake. "When she's no longer important, you're saying I won't get her back."

"I'm wishing I could tell you otherwise," Cusick said. "I realize now that we should've broken this to a dozen people simultaneously. But we didn't, we chose you."

"Some favor," said Ramsay, his jaw twitching.

"Some favor," Cusick echoed.

TRANSCRIPT OF CONVERSATION FROM
PERSONAL FILES OF TERENCE L. UNRUH
(BY SUBPOENA; UNDATED):

U: Go to Beta scrambler, please.

K: Wait a minute. Okay, on my mark: mark. (BRIEF LINE INTERFERENCE)

U: Calvin, something's wrong with Ramsay.

K: (LAUGHS)There's supposed to be.

U: No, I mean he's not behaving right. He's been trying to talk back to those messages from his daughter, and I've recorded it for analysis. The stress analyzer showed he was climbing the walls. Now he's not.

K: Don't expect him to stay at panic stress levels forever, Unruh. Take my word for it, he should level off at medium to high arousal.

U: Well, he did. But he dropped off that plateau a couple of days ago.

K: Not too surprising if, uh, he's probably taking downers. That would figure, and you could verify it with Garza, I imagine.

U: I had Bobby Lathrop ask her about that. She says not, but Bobby is worried about her dependability. I'm not new on a stress analyzer, Calvin, and I tell you the manis psyched up, wired. I don't know—

K: If that's all that's bothering you, see to it that his kid is crying in tonight's call. Must I think of everything?

U: You'd better, and one thing you'd best think about is just how long you can keep a man like Ramsay on the edge of a nervous breakdown. If he blows his top, Christ knows what he might say, and I don't have enough men to assault a mental ward.

K: Two weeks, Unruh, two lousy frigging weeks. I trusted you to recruit all the assets you needed.

U: Look, I'm, uh, just sending you a flare. There's something going on in Ramsay's head and if it's a short fuse to a blowup, you could be lookin' at that fast flight to Quebec.

K: We covered that a long time ago, Terry. You said my exfiltration was all in place.

U: It is. But it's not exactly your favorite scenario, is it?

K: I was just asking; it won't be needed. Not ever, if everything goes as it's tracking now. You just take care of your assets and I'll take care of mine. Uh, how are you doing? Personally, I mean.

U: Am I still dying, you mean. (LAUGHS) I'll last more than two weeks, asshole. I intend to stick around long enough to see what comes from all this.

K: In the meantime, if you're right, you'll need to run tighter surveillance on Ramsay.

U: I'm spending several hours a day getting treatments, Calvin. I can't be expected—

K: Just handle it.

U: You're all heart. (LINE INTERFERENCE. MESSAGE ENDS.)

FOURTEEN

Laurie knew the agenda all too well. Johnnie never skipped more than one night in making Laurie describe the news, and she had skipped the previous night. So, later tonight, Laurie would be tightly bound again for Johnnie's foray outside and when she returned the hated demon voice would form obscenities while the hands and mouth performed worse obscenities and at last Johnnie would drink her tequila. Laurie felt her lip curl. She knew her teeth were showing; she did not recognize it as a smile. Johnnie switched TV programs on a precise time schedule according to the small comm set by the TV, its digital readout relentlessly counting off the last hours of life. The compact Sony unit was clearly more than a recorder with earphones and clock because once or twice a day, at no predictable intervals, it would emit a series of thin chirps. Immediately, Johnnie would punch a code into the calculator. Laurie had earned a slap for watching the woman operate that pocket comm set. Laurie had realized that the chirps were incoming queries. Johnnie's coded response told someone, somewhere, that all was well.

Johnnie would not ignore that signal merely because it woke her in the night, as sometimes happened. The outstanding virtue of Reba Jondahl was her passion for obedience—whether she was master or servitor. Laurie Ramsay had come to understand this central pillar of Johnnie's existence. Because they were short-handed, Bobby Lathrop could not afford sloppy work and rejoiced to have someone like the Jondahl woman who, ex-con or not, kept highly dependable routines.

Now Laurie, too, joined in that rejoicing. Exactly on time as always, Johnnie went to the bathroom carrying her heavy purse and the comm set. Laurie sat against a bare wall where she could watch the TV. And as usual for the past few days, the girl seemed to be dozing, her blonde head on her knees. Laurie knew how to create a routine, too.

Laurie kept her breathing steady until the bathroom door closed, knowing that she must complete her stealthy work within two minutes or so. She moved quickly, terrified at small sounds; the pop of her joints, the clink of utensils. She had replaced everything and was near Johnnie's cot, with its supply of magazines and bottles beneath, when Johnnie emerged too soon from the bathroom.

Neither of them moved for a moment. Then, "Going somewhere?" from Johnnie in a snarled parody of sweetness.

Laurie, trembling too hard to speak, could only shake her head.

Johnnie deposited her purse and comm set on the card table, then reached toward the cowering girl. "Thought I wasn't watching," she rasped, prying at Laurie's balled fists and finding them empty of contraband. "Thought you could play fuck-around with Johnnie," she went on, ripping at the pockets of Laurie's filthy jumper.

Laurie's denials made no difference. She took two heavy slaps across her face, tried to protect her head with her hands, then fell to the floor and submitted, sobbing, to Johnnie's body search. That was what made the difference, for the woman found a child's handful of corn chip fragments and a small ball of used adhesive tape in Laurie's pockets.

Johnnie, breathing hard, tossed the ball of tape into the fireplace and surveyed the sad little hoard of food fragments she had scattered to the floor. "Clean up that shit," she commanded, assuring that Laurie saw the mess by grasping the girl's hair and shaking her head above it. Then Johnnie seated herself at the table and found a TV sitcom, watching occasionally as Laurie, on hands and knees, carefully removed specks of food and cast them into the fireplace.

At last the job was complete. "Don't do that again," Johnnie warned. Laurie sensed that the woman did not know what 'that' had been. And through her sniffles, behind her cowering as she slumped down against the baseboard, Laurie knew it would not be necessary to do it again.

Laurie saw her dad on the nightly news, and thought that he looked older. At Johnnie's command, she duly recited to the comm set about the pileup on the Anacostia Bridge. When she added, "And Johnnie beat me up for nothing," she collected another slap. She did not know whether that accusation would reach her father. She did know it would make Johnnie mad as hell.

To make matters worse, when Johnnie brought the adhesive tape from her purse the procedure became a struggle. Johnnie always hurried to lock up for her brief absences. The woman was brutally efficient, dragging Laurie to her pallet and locking her in. Presently, Laurie heard the outside door lock and, weeping from fresh bruises, she fell asleep. She knew that she would soon be awakened.

Johnnie's return, and her sick attentions to Laurie, were routines the girl suffered with a sort of ghastly anticipation. This time Johnnie carried her to the cot, removing the tape from her ankles but leaving her wrists and mouth taped.

After ten minutes Johnnie sat on the edge of the cot, her drives assuaged. "Starting to like it," she accused, in that notwoman voice Laurie had come to equate with Satan's. "In prison, you develop a taste for a lot of things. But not the stinkin' chock," she said with her coarse-grind laugh, bringing the tequila bottle from under the cot. "You make chock from cornmeal, sugar, raisins, yeast, anything you can get on the inside. Always tasted like shit to me. Not like this," she added, unstoppering the bottle.

She turned and smiled down, staring into the girl's eyes that, despite the tears, stared back. "This Sauza is good stuff," she confided, swirling the remaining few ounces of nearly clear liquid, and then took a triumphant swig.

Johnnie swallowed over an ounce before the gag reflex closed her windpipe. It had taken Laurie Ramsay over two weeks to collect and evaporate the stuff, percolated through woodash, that became four ounces of a primary ingredient of old-time soap: concentrated caustic lye. It had taken her less than two minutes to substitute it for tequila. It took Johnnie only seconds to realize that the lining of her throat was gone.

Johnnie blinked as she flung the bottle aside, but not fast enough to prevent a splash of lye into her eyes. She leaped to her feet, convulsed with an agony that spread from her throat and face into her belly, then wheeled back to the cot. Reba Jondahl had known from the first that she would have her choice of ways to kill the girl, and had already decided on slow strangulation. Now, even deeper than the fiery pulse in her guts, one intent burned in her brain: to reach the girl's throat. Johnnie, half-blinded and unable to breathe, reached down with both hands.

Wrists still bound behind her, Laurie saw it all, just as she had hoped, and knew what those callused claws were seeking. Lying on her back with knees flexed, Laurie used her left leg to push off and swept her right leg up with every ounce of fury an eleven-year-old soccer jock could muster. Laurie's kick was awkward but her sturdy legs were driven by desperation. Her right heel caught Johnnie precisely on the

jawline, full force.

The woman spun on her left foot; crashed against the card table; fell face-down as the table knelt, spilling the lamp and TV set onto her body. Reba Jondahl was aflame from inside and her ruined throat would not permit the passage of enough air. Rolling onto her back, mouth wide, she began to claw at her own face.

Laurie rolled from the cot in mortal terror and leaped to her feet. She had not expected Johnnie to recover and she knew that, if her hands were not free soon, the woman would certainly kill her.

The tape on her wrists would not yield. She knelt at the raised hearth, her back toward it, and began to worry the tape against the abrasive edges of bricks.

Even though her mucous membranes were slowly being flayed alive, Johnnie somehow began to manage a hoarse whistle of breath. Semiconscious, she rolled over, staring through her agony. She was clinically blind by this time but she could see the girl's vague shape facing her. And her lungs seemed on the verge of getting enough air. On hands and knees, carrying an inferno in her body, Johnnie lurched in Laurie's direction, paced by the whistling rasp of her breath.

Laurie kept sawing at the bricks until the last possible instant, then scrambled up, and her sidewinder kick took Johnnie across the bridge of the nose, snapping her head hard enough to make her hair fly outward. Johnnie fell on her side but, instead of continuing to kick, Laurie ran to the bathroom. Perhaps, she thought wildly, she could slam the door for more precious seconds of life. But her clothing caught on the latch striker plate protruding from the door facing, and the rip gave Laurie new hope. She worked to catch the frayed tape against the little tongue of brass, moaning with terror because she could see Johnnie come up on hands and knees again, blood runneling from her nose.

Then Laurie felt the tape begin to yield, caught at it with desperate fingers, tore harder against the brass plate heedless of the pain at her wrists. When two layers of tape wore through, perspiration helped her slide from the rest. Laurie, tearing away the strips at her mouth, slammed herself into the bathroom.

Which had no exit.

The only light was from the crack under the door, and Laurie knew that the devil herself would soon be at that door, obscuring all of her light forever, and when Laurie wrenched the door open again Johnnie stood almost erect, leaning in the hallway, wiping at her eyes and making that dreadful hoarse gasping noise. It was not so much courage as horrified panic that sent Laurie bolting past, her arms windmilling furiously, her small body slamming past Johnnie to sprawl into the big room in the half-light of the lamp on the floor.

There in full view lay Johnnie's big purse, open, with a small holster clipped inside it. Laurie fumbled the dead-black thing with the thick handle out of the purse and turned to face her pursuer. She had never heard of a Heckler & Koch P7, but she knew it was an automatic pistol. And even a child could see that sighting was no more complicated than alignment of two white dots in the rear with one white dot in front.

Johnnie may have thought that Laurie was only threatening, holding the H&K at a range of two paces. That was because Laurie's hands were small and initially, even with a two-handed grip, she was not fully depressing the squeeze-cocker safety. When Laurie finally succeeded, Johnnie's opinion was revised by a thunderous noise and a single nine-millimeter round just above Johnnie's navel. The woman doubled over as though lashed by an invisible foot, then sat down hard in a way that would have been comical in other circumstances and slowly fell on her side.

Laurie had never fired a weapon and, unprepared for the sound and recoil, dropped the pistol. By the time she recovered it, Johnnie half-lay on the floor, face contorted, fumbling with the little comm set as she tried to operate it blindly.

Laurie knew that the woman was in hideous agony, and that Johnnie was in some ways not quite human. And she also knew what you were supposed to do with animals in hopeless pain. Buoyed by this rationale she found it easy, with the muzzle an inch behind Johnnie's skull, to squeeze the trigger once more.

What erupted from the other side of Johnnie's head was not stuff Laurie wanted to remember, as Johnnie jerked and flopped like something filled with dirt and did not move again. But as Laurie laid the weapon down and emptied the purse onto the floor, the ringing in her ears became a chirping too. Then Laurie realized that the chirps were not inside her head. They were coming from the comm set.

Bobby Lathrop enjoyed tooling the Firebird around, even if its brakes were lousy, and he took the Gaithersburg turn-off from Highway 70 by gearing down so that Harman, his companion, grabbed for a handhold. Jondahl's failure to respond was probably just an equipment failure, the two men agreed. It would take a half-hour to actually reach the isolated house by road, and only moments to rectify the trouble. So much the better; neither of the men enjoyed the company of that reptilian twat, though that wasn't supposed to count among hardened pros. After parking near the darkened country place, Bobby stayed at the wheel while Harman, wearing the thinnest of leather gloves, took his stubby Ingram stuttergun into the house on recon.

Harman came back at a dead run. "Somebody's plucked the kid," he panted. "They whacked Johndahl, man, I mean *recently*! Still warm. All her fucking credit cards and shit spread around—but I didn't see that little shooter she carries. And listen, I want you to come verify something."

Bobby flowed out of the Firebird fast. Harman's observation was easy to verify, but not to figure. If some rescue team had got past Johnnie, then why the fuck would they unscrew the hinges of the back door from the inside, leaving the combo lock untampered?

Not once did Bobby or Harman entertain the idea that an eleven-year-old child, sufficiently brutalized, might have managed such carnage unaided....

FIFTEEN

Ramsay padded into his study and answered the phone as churlishly as anyone would, at one o'clock in the morning. "Uh, jus' a minute.... Okay, I'll tell her if I see her." He disconnected, yawned from his study into the bedroom playing out the old-fashioned phone cord to its full length, flicked on the light and gently shook Pam's shoulder. "Somebody named Carol Heaton; friend of yours. You're supposed to call forward. That's all she said, tell you to call forward."

Two blinks, and suddenly Pam was wide awake, nodding. He handed the instrument to her, then sat on the edge of the bed.

Without hesitation, Pam Garza dialed a number. "I'm here," she said. Pause. "Yes, he is. In the next room.... Of course I am, you should know that by now." Ramsay could hear, very faintly, the timbre of the voice, and it was male. Ten seconds later, he saw the color drain from her face. She pulled the sheet up to cover her, gooseflesh prominent on her arms. "I, I don't think so, I'm not— that's not the kind of thing I—please, no!" Now her free hand covered her brow, fingers unconsciously flexing in her dark hair. She was trembling.

Then, chewing her underlip as she listened, Pam seemed to regain some composure. Twisting the mouthpiece away, her ear still against the earpiece, she whispered to Ramsay: "Get dressed just as fast as you can." Now she resumed talking. "I don't know what I can do, but I'll try," and so on, furiously waving Ramsay away from the bed.

Three minutes later, as he was pulling his shoes on, she put the phone down and fairly leaped from the bed to begin dressing. Her voice was very small: "Alan, Jesu Maria, darling, what have you *done!*"

"You tell me. Where the hell are we going?"

"Different directions. I have to ask where you're going, but you mustn't tell me." She pulled a mascara brush from her purse; showed him the hollow needle that slid from its stem. "I was told this was for me, if I ever needed to use it. But now Lathrop says it's for you. I—even for my country, Alan, you know I couldn't, and I told him so. He must be desperate to even say it indirectly; the police probably heard every word. Then he said to keep you here any way I can until they can talk to you."

He barked a bitter laugh. "I can imagine the questions: bang, bang, and bang. Who the hell is Lathrop?"

"The man I work for, when I'm not doing company business. You don't seem very surprised."

"I'm not. I've known you were on the wrong side for some time." A new thought twisted his face into something ugly. "I don't suppose I could beat you into telling me where Laurie is."

With whispered intensity: "Softly, Alan, there are audio transmitters in the apartment. You must believe me, I had no idea—well, if I knew where Laurie was, I'd tell you. It's just not right! Have you done something so terrible?" Now she was tucking her blouse in, following him as he headed for the living room closet for a windbreaker.

"Yes. I learned how, without being elected, a man can become the real President of the United States using a psalm-singing figurehead as his puppet."

"I don't understand." Now they were both whispering with quiet fury. "Harry Rand isn't—that can't be true."

He reached for the doorknob. "If it isn't, people are dying over an empty rumor."

She stood transfixed, staring at him, perhaps hoping to see duplicity in his eyes. Then she said, "Look out for Lathrop, he's a bad one. I'm supposed to try and stop you."

In his rage, without a real opponent he could reach with his bare hands, he said the most vicious thing he could: "You'll think of something, you Mexican whore."

She swallowed, taking two steps toward him, tears beginning to course down her face. "Make it look

good. Hit me."

He had already turned away in disgust when she said it another way. "If you ever loved me, Alan, hit me."

He wheeled and struck her with his open hand, then started down the stairs as she fell. He heard his telephone begin to ring and did not give a damn.

Laurie had considered flagging down the car—in daylight she would have seen that it was an old Firebird—as it swung into view, half a mile from the solitary house. But she was cutting across an open field at the time, toward the vague glow of neon in the distance. The purse was heavy with the weapon, and the coins and bills were more money than she had ever had at one time. The contents of that purse gave Laurie a heady sense of power.

A small aircraft, its landing lights arrowing past her, swung into its final approach. When Laurie saw the beacon flash across her quadrant of sky, she turned in its direction. That is why, as the Firebird roared back through the silent neon-lit center of Emory Grove, Bobby Lathrop did not catch her.

Laurie made it afoot to the Montgomery County Airpark nearly two hours later, hoping someone there might have a telephone. The man in the old leather jacket was nice, though inquisitive as a truant officer when he saw the swollen left side of her face; but since she only asked to call her mother, he could hardly complain.

But when she dialed home, a recording said that the number was not in service or had been disconnected. Laurie knew that had to be crazy, but she called her dad next.

The line was busy. "I bet he's talking to Mom," Laurie said, and accepted half a Hershey bar from the man, who said he had a girl just about Laurie's size and he would sure as heck like to know how come she was tarryhooting around the countryside at one a.m. He did not seem particularly satisfied by Laurie's shrugged, "I got lost."

Two minutes later, Laurie tried again and became puzzled immediately. "Who? This is Laurie. You know: Laurie Ramsay? Pam? Hi, Pam. Boy, have I had a day, I'm at the airport—" She listened for long moments, ignoring the interested frown of Mr. Leatherjacket. Then: "Well jeez, why not? ... I don't get it; *who's* listening? . . . Okay, if you say so."

Momentarily, Laurie wore a frown too. Then she said, "Hey, you been crying? Me, too. Huh? Naw, I won't have to hitch, I can take a taxi, I've got money, hundreds and hundreds. And a gun, too." She glanced at Mr. Leather-jacket and saw the gold caps gleaming in his rear molars.

He snapped his mouth shut and began to chuckle as she went on: "Mostly I'm just sleepy, but Johnnie beat me up a lot and," she flushed, catching the man's gaze, "other stuff. Pam, is it okay to kill people like her?" A shorter pause. "Soon as I can. Will Mom and Dad be there?"

She was not pleased with the response and laid the receiver down with, "Durn. She hung up on me."

"Young lady," said Mr. Leatherjacket, "let me congratulate you on the most creative imagination I ever saw or heard of. Can you really afford a taxi home?"

Laurie assured him that she could. "But I'm not going home. And he better take me where I say," she hinted darkly, hugging the purse.

The man said she could depend on it. Herb, the only driver on duty thereabouts this time of night, was a personal friend.

Ramsay couldn't say why he turned the Genie back for a single run past his apartment; but slowing to stare toward the lighted place, he saw the dark Firebird double-parked, one man dashing up the stairs. As Ramsay passed, the man at the Firebird's wheel turned and saw him, then honked several quick blasts. The man on the stairs turned, something squarish and metallic showing through the opening of his coat, and then he was racing back as the Firebird's engine coughed a warning rumble. The driver was hammering on his steering wheel in frustration as he waited for his companion and Ramsay whacked the gear lever, reaching with two fingers for the boost switch on the lever's side. He wasn't sure the Genie's booster was working until his Pirellis began to smoke.

SIXTEEN

He took the first right-hander he saw, thinking that the Genie's maneuverability might make up for a Firebird's monstrous rush up through its gears, and for his own lack of experience in life-or-death driving. With a ten-second head start, Ramsay hoped to make enough tight turns that sooner or later, the Firebird's driver would begin to lose more precious seconds wondering which way he had turned.

But Ramsay soon found himself overmatched. Instead of beginning each turn at the intersection, as he did, the big muscle car was starting its turns efficiently, very early and very wide, ticking the edges of curbs, booming down suburban streets with a surge of sound that Ramsay could hear above the wail of his own smaller engine. And when he divided his attention between the streets ahead and the onrushing Pontiac behind, he managed to misjudge his own path. The big car loomed only five seconds behind when Ramsay, driving beyond his capacity to react to what appeared in his headlights, saw the extreme dip at one intersection too late to avoid it.

He braked in panic when he should have accelerated, the Genie's nose diving, rebounding with a mighty thump of bottomed suspension, starting a sidelong slide. He released the brake, judging that if he was very, very lucky, the Genie might make it between a fence and a brick wall into someone's driveway—which meant that, lucky or not, he would be afoot within seconds.

Except that it was not a driveway at all. He had turned in at an alley, a piece of Americana left over from times when trash collectors drove behind a house, not past its front. Ramsay nudged the edge of the fence with his left front fender as he powered past it, still badly overdriving his lights. He saw a streetlamp's glow a hundred yards ahead, then squinted into his rearview at the twin beams that caught him as the Firebird entered the same alleyway. But the Firebird, still jouncing from that dip in the intersection, had too much weight to recover its poise in such a short distance. It missed the fence but evidently not the brick wall, and then Ramsay caught a glimpse of orange sparks showering an outline of the big car, still pursuing but now with only one headlight.

Someone had left a huge pile of trimmings—leaves, grass and small branches—against a back fence on

the right side, and Ramsay slowed just enough to steer to the left of the mess, brambles screeching down the left side of the Genie as he slammed his foot on the accelerator again. His right wheels, whirling through the edge of the trimmings, bounced hard and then he was past them, risking another look back. The drum and wail of his Genie were too loud now for him to hear anything else, but he saw winks of light stutter from the Firebird as if signaling.

Signal, my fat ass, he's shooting, Ramsay thought as his outside rearview mirror exploded three feet from his face. Then the Firebird driver elected to force his way straight through the trimmings. Ramsay had never seen a car stop so fast in his life.

Below all the grass and leaves lay cordwood, piled in no particular order, flying forward into the Firebird's single headlight beam as the car became a bludgeon. Ramsay did not realize until he was turning left onto the paved street that the Firebird was rocking backward, then forward, as lights began to wink on in bedrooms that flanked the alley.

Ramsay took a right, then another right, then a third, simply because it seemed the last thing his pursuers would expect. As he flashed back past the street where he had exited the alley, he spotted the Firebird lit by a streetlight, turning left as he had done, its entire right side a ruin, dragging its rear bumper. Before he passed from sight, he saw the big car's nose dip under heavy braking and assumed he'd been seen. He took the next right-hand alleyway he found and got a two-second view of a weedy track that was clear as far as the next street. He shut off his lights and continued much more slowly, letting his eyes get accustomed to the light of stars and half a moon, snarling, " Yeahhh," with a raised fist when the Firebird hurtled up the street, crossing behind him, the bellow of its engine rising as it kept accelerating. Somewhere in the distance, sirens hooted.

He proceeded down the alley for two more blocks, using his lights only for brief flashes, and turned right onto a paved street after making certain that no headlights were approaching from any direction. After a few blocks, he turned his lights on and headed for Route 1 and the District of Columbia.

He parked as inconspicuously as possible behind a Seven-Eleven, still trembling, and wondered if his panic flight had condemned Laurie to death. He tried to tell himself that they would keep her as a bargaining chip as long as he maintained his silence, but he remained unconvinced as he entered the phone kiosk and consulted his memocomp. Ten seconds later he began to whistle a single tone into the mouthpiece, a tone as shaky as he was.

He tried another tone less wavering, and when someone lifted the receiver he said, "You called me Mr. C., and you offered me a place to hide. Well, I need it. I'm in trouble."

Someone told him to wait. He waited a hell of a long time, it seemed, before he heard the sleep-fogged voice of Tom Cusick. "Understand you need a safe place. What happened?"

Ramsay told him. "Maybe I should've stayed," he added, "for my daughter's sake."

"You did right," said Cusick. "Something forced them to change plans; something major, I think. We'll work on it. Right now, let's get you picked up. And your rolling toy that anybody can spot a mile off, we'll need to hide that. Um; you know where we met? You arrange a breakdown on the street outside. Can you get there in thirty minutes?"

"Hell, I can do better than—" Ramsay began. He was only ten minutes from the Smithsonian.

"Just yes or no, and I make that yes. Try not to get there ahead of time." Suddenly Ramsay was

monitoring a dead line.

He bought a cup of coffee in the Seven-Eleven and browsed among magazines as he sipped. Then he drove the Genie toward Jefferson Drive, taking it slowly, pulling to the curb near the massive Air and Space Museum with three minutes to spare. A tow truck pulled up behind him two minutes later, three men shuffling from the big vehicle. One of them was Cusick, who pointed at the elevated cab and told Ramsay to stay in it. One minute later they had a huge opaque tarp bundled around the Genie; in two more, the Genie's front end swung gently from a cable sling and the truck was underway again.

Ramsay finished his account as they drove across the Anacostia River into Fairmont Heights, Tom Cusick asking a few questions in the interim. Neither of the other men broke their silence until Ramsay asked, "Why do we need my car, if it's such a giveaway?"

"That's why," rumbled the driver, "bait, if they really want you."

"He can park it at the NBN studios," Cusick said.

"But not too near the building, just in case," the third man said. "And what if they're waiting?"

"We'll run interference with this rig until Ramsay's inside the building," Cusick replied. "But right now, I could use a few hours' sleep."

"God, I'm too wired for that," said Ramsay, but he was wrong. Minutes after they parked the tow truck and filed into the boarded-up service station off East Capitol Street, Alan Ramsay was snoring lustily on an air mattress.

Ramsay was up by seven and tooling the Genie toward NBN by eight, in the shadow of a big tow truck that just happened to turn in abreast of him and loomed so near that parking was difficult. He hurried upstairs and absorbed the impact of a different and more familiar reality, as if the outside world were only a hallucination. He sifted through a stack of callback requests, including one from Lieutenant Corwin that only said, 'We have your girl,' and he wondered why Pam Garza had gone to the cops until he was arguing about a feature with Irv, and then he made the connection that had been too good to imagine the first time around, and he leaped for Irv's phone so abruptly that the producer ducked.

He talked his way past two people before Corwin came on-line. "Corwin, this is Alan Ramsay. Which girl do you mean?"

Gruffly, but pleased: "How many kids do you have, Ramsay? Laurie, of course." At Ramsay's whoop, which drove the harried producer from his own office, Corwin went on, "She called your place and talked to your lady friend, who told her to take a taxi direct to me, and not to budge out of the cop shop without me. She showed up in the middle of the night at Fourth District HQ in a *taxi*, f'God's sake, with somebody's money and somebody's purse and somebody's gun, and it seems she's whacked out some troll who needed whacking the worst way, but it still sounds very much like homicide to me, but not in my district, thank you very much, and—are you getting this, Ramsay?"

"Where the hell is my daughter right now," Ramsay asked, too stunned by this goofy recital to fully believe it all.

"With me, actually. She tells me you play tricks with coffee makers, is that true? Ramsay? Hello?"

But Ramsay was already running for the exit.

The utility van bore a legend on its side, now, with peel-off block lettering: 'REVIVACAR,' and in smaller letters, '24 hr. service.' The man in white overalls had opened the hood of the Plymouth next to the yellow Genie, and jumper cables coiled on the macadam nearby. Had the Plymouth's owner showed up, it would have been simple for Bobby Lathrop to claim he'd made an honest mistake.

Twice, Bobby stiffened, ducking his head into the Plymouth's innards as mall patrons walked past, but no one seemed curious about his work.

The second man was harder to spot because only his feet protruded from beneath the nose of the Genie. His explanation might have been more creative. Harman worked silently under the Genie while Bobby kept an nervous watch, and when he was finished he slid out with very special care. "Switched on," he said, scrambling into the van.

Bobby lowered the Plymouth's hood, retrieved the jumper cables, and hummed an old tune as he drove away. The tune was "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes."

A hundred yards distant, a tow truck driver picked up his all-band unit. "You have your rabbit, Athos?"

"Hippity-hop, Porthos. By the way, I made one of those scufflers, knew him from the old days. He's got my leash on him but it won't activate for an hour. I'll give him lots of room. Aramis, proceed south on New Hampshire. And be careful, Porthos, you wouldn't want to make a report to the nation."

"Didn't know you cared. Porthos out." Tom Cusick put the comm set down, sighed, and drove the tow truck behind the Genie, taking a small toolkit and an astonishingly heavy blanket as he stepped down from the cab. If worst came to worst, the truck would intercept most of the debris and working from the Kevlar blanket, he might lose only his arms.

SEVENTEEN

Alan Ramsay laughed with tears running down his cheeks, holding Laurie to him, inhaling her scent as she hugged him back. "Boy, could you ever use a bath," he said.

"She wouldn't let me. Oh, Dad, is it true about Mom?"

"Some jackass told her, Ramsay; sorry," said Corwin, who stood by.

"Fraid so, pudd'n," Ramsay nodded, and held Laurie again as she broke out in fresh sobs. "I miss her too. We'll get 'em, wait and see."

"Montgomery County mounties found the house an hour ago," Corwin put in. "Laurie got one of 'em

herself, Christ knows how."

"I told you how," Laurie sniffled. "I'm not sorry."

"I don't suppose you'd be averse to making a statement, now that it's over," Corwin said to Ramsay.

"Fine, when it's over," Ramsay said, "but it isn't over."

"I could keep you here," Corwin said. It did not sound much like a threat.

Ramsay lowered his daughter to the floor, one arm still draped protectively around her shoulders. "At first I didn't know where you stood; I mean the police. You—look, can I talk to you where nobody will tape us? Privileged conversation?"

"Right. Not legally privileged, I can't give you that. But I can use my judgment. Come with me," he said, turning. Ramsay took Laurie along. It wasn't so much that he wanted her to hear it; merely that he did not want to let her out of his sight.

". . . Supposed to stay in the studios, Ramsay," said Tom Cusick, calling shortly before noon. "When the receptionist told me to call some police lieutenant I thought someone had nailed you. Why are you—?"

"My daughter escaped last night," Ramsay interrupted. "She wound up with the police and I came straight here by taxi. Maybe that's why Calvin's people were changing plans. Anybody who calls me at NBN gets referred to this number."

A sigh of relief from Cusick. "That's the break we needed. You really have the girl there with you?"

"Sleeping like a lamb; she had a busy night," said Ramsay.

"Then maybe we can step up the pace. I suppose the police are tracing this call, and I'd rather keep a low profile."

Ramsay glanced across at Corwin, who was using an extension. Corwin, smiling, shook his head. "Lieutenant Corwin is on the extension; he says not. Anyway, why would you care?"

"Because I've broken some laws by not waiting for the so-called proper authorities. Disarmed a half-pound of plastique under your car chassis two hours ago. Mercury switch, so it'd detonate when you backed out or hit a bump."

"Lieutenant Corwin here," Corwin broke in. "Have you notified the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms people?"

"No, I just took the detonator out of the circuit and left the damned thing where it was, on the front suspension crossmember. You might get some good prints off the device; but not mine. And two friends of mine are smooth-tailing the guy who seems to be running this piece of the operation."

"All we need is a bunch of amateurs," Corwin began.

"Professionals. Retired, but not all that retired," Cusick said dryly. "You want to take it over?"

"There are some things they can't take over," Ramsay put in. "But I have a contact who could start from the other end. At the top."

"That's dangerous," said Cusick. "Kalvin's thugs are almost certainly some part of the intelligence community."

"We're wasting time," said Corwin. "I have enough facts to start on, but a set of prints on a car bomb would make all this business more credible. And I'd feel better if you let us take up the surveillance you're running. In fact I'm going to have to insist."

"Then you'll want a make on a van license plate, and I've got the number of a certain motel room that'll bear watching," Cusick replied. "Got a pencil and pad handy?"

"We're professionals too," said Corwin. "Shoot."

By late afternoon, Bobby Lathrop began to feel tendrils of prickly heat on the nape of his neck. He'd tried several times to raise Pam Garza at her apartment and at work; had even tried Ramsay's number without success. With twenty-twenty hindsight, he knew he should've grabbed her the night before instead of howling off in that futile effort to nail Ramsay. Harman, who knew better than to go within two hundred yards of the Genie, had posted himself in the mall where he would hear the explosion. He had called twice to say the Genie was still intact, unobliterated. They had to presume Ramsay was still at work, maybe on a remote job, but sooner or later he'd come back for his toy. Bobby didn't want to call Unruh yet, but he knew that Unruh, at home on medical leave or some such, would be furious if that call didn't come. Bobby knew he should go to a pay phone to call, but then he might miss a call from Harman. He did it the easy way, with his scrambler, from the room.

Scrambler or no scrambler, Unruh didn't sound so hot. "No, of course he hasn't called here; he'd damned well better not, without a scrambler. Have you got the girl?"

"Which girl, Terence?"

"Any girl! Or Ramsay. Or any leads on any of them."

Bobby tried to explain, but sometimes there was no explaining failure. He assured Unruh that Ramsay would be accounted for almost any moment now, and that the Garza woman couldn't just disappear. He said he didn't know whether there was any fresh action at Jondahl's place.

"I called in a favor," Unruh replied, deliberately vague. "Sheriff's people have an open homicide there, forensics people borrowed from Gaithersburg. The place is blown, forget it. Unless you left prints there," he added ominously.

"Now you know I wouldn't be that dumb. And the Firebird's stored, beat to shit; we're using the van and a rented 'Vette. Listen, you have to figure that little kid is finding her way home. I could surveil her apartment, maybe pick her up if she didn't go to the nearest police cruiser. Unless you could put someone else on it," he added hopefully. "And what do I do with Garza, if I find her?"

"Hold incommunicado, either or both of them. I'll see if I can borrow some assets to find Garza; you can try the

Ramsay woman's apartment for the little girl, it's already got new tenants, but watch yourself. Somebody else could be around, God knows who. And Bobby: call me again the instant you have the news on Ramsay."

Bobby replaced the receiver thoughtfully, wondering if he was ever going to have good news on Ramsay.

Seventy yards away, in the closet-like telephone service module of the motel, a slender technician pressed a button, then another, then tapped out an instruction. His companion, older and burly, had given up on optimism years ago. "Too quick for you," he suggested to the young police tech.

"Nope. It was all scrambled mush, but whoever's on the other end has very high-tech stuff. And he responded from the rez of one," he consulted the readout, "Terence Unruh. Ever hear of him?"

"Naw. But I figure we're going to," said the burly one, "after I call this in to Corwin."

"... And they're here," said the President's secretary, "and the phrase is Code Blue. General Magnuson said you'd understand. He seems very, ah, intent, Mr. President."

Harrison Rand leaned forward, flogging his memory. Codes yellow and red dealt with external threats; Code Blue had something to do with clear and present *internal* danger. "Well, I suppose it can't be helped. You'd better ring Walt, he's only across the street."

"For your ears only, sir. That's what they said, sir."

Rand sighed, threw up his hands, and handed a bundle of unsigned documents to his aide. "Give me one minute, and show them in," he said to the intercom. To the aide and the two men who stood near the big desk he said, "I'm afraid it'll have to wait, boys. Use that door," he added with a sweep of his hand. He stood up, pushing his glasses away from his nose as he dry-washed his face, wondering what in the name of the Lord God Almighty was so important that the Army's Magnuson had to bring Major General McManus of the Defense Intelligence Agency along for backup.

Magnuson entered with due respect, a rawboned gray eminence with piercing eyes, also gray; McManus stayed half a pace behind, shorter, not so gray but just as grim. They met the Presidential handclasp firmly, the DIA's McManus glancing around with something more than idle curiosity. "Now what's all this about Code Blue," Rand asked, smiling.

"Recordings," McManus muttered.

Magnuson: "Right. Mr. President, what I have to tell you is—well, a little bizarre. I don't think you want it taped. In fact, I think we should talk downstairs in the Situation Room because your own office, I'm horrified to say, may not be secure."

Rand nodded. "Anything you can tell me, you can tell Walter Calvin. I'm calling him now," he said.

"Yessir," said McManus, before Magnuson could respond. "And you may want to call this person, too. With your permission, Mr. President," he finished, and scribbled a few words on the notepad in his hand.

Rand took the paper, saw the words, KALVIN IMPLICATED.ELECTRONICS WHIZ. He flushed, opened his mouth, then closed it again. "Maybe I can handle this alone," he said then, thrusting the note in his pocket. He strode into the hallway toward the stairs and nodded to another aide who crossed his path, but did not speak until they had been ushered into the map-lined Situation Room with its quiet whirr of communications equipment. Then: "How d'you know we're secure here?"

"Because DIA helps NSA sweep this room regularly, and Walter Calvin has no clout here," said Magnuson, omitting the honorific. Then remembering it: "Mr. President, either we've been taken in by the hoax of the century, or—well, Metropolitan Police are backing the allegations up to a point. So far the casualties include Undersecretary Richard Parker; a fine old CIA alumnus named Winton; and a woman who just happened to get in the way. The score could climb at any time."

"General, do you have any idea how this sounds to me?" The President was smiling gently.

"Just like it sounded to me at fifteen hundred hours, today, when I returned a call to a man I trust. Guess I'd better start this like a briefing," Magnuson said. He paused, setting his mental files in order, and then began. "Mr. President, do you ever watch Alan Ramsay on NBN?"

EIGHTEEN

By eight o'clock the following morning, the desktop in Harrison Rand's Oval Office resembled a repairman's nightmare. One of the two men from No Such Agency—an insider's joke for the National Security Agency—began to remove heavy shielding from around a ceramic container the size of a man's hand. Electrical leads from the box were still connected to a maze of wiring that composed elements of the Presidential telephone system. "We can take it out of the system," he said. "Gamma signatures are negative for explosives."

Rand himself had been cautioned not to enter by McManus, both of them remaining a safe distance from the suspect device the NSA had found in the desk. Advised that the Oval Office was safe, the President strode in with stormclouds on his face, General McManus at his heels. "I think this is thin baloney, gentlemen. My closest friend would not endanger me," he said.

As the senior man lowered a screen-equipped device to the carpet, McManus murmured, "Maybe not, Mr. President, but that box isn't a necessary element, and Calvin is one of the few people with access to this room in your absence." Raising his voice: "Walton, what do you make of it?"

The senior man squinted down at the desk. "The thing has an antenna strip. That implies a short-range receiver and relay inside so someone nearby could activate its circuits, whatever they do. All we know now is, it may affect the telephone output, it's hermetically sealed, and it won't blow up."

Harrison Rand no longer trusted anyone entirely. He was not even certain that Walt Calvin had done anything out of line. "How do you know it won't, if you haven't opened it," he said, stepping back a pace.

"Thermal neutron emitter," said McManus, as the junior man began to pull the leads from the ceramic box. "Explosives will return characteristic patterns of gamma rays."

The junior man supplied, "It's the sort of thing they're putting in airports these—Christ," he ended softly,

raising his fingers to his mouth.

They could all hear faint cracklings from the box, and the polymer protector beneath it began to smoke. The junior man used diagonal cutters to sever the other wires as McManus wrestled a segment of shielding into place. The senior man used the cutters and a screwdriver as tongs, dropping the box onto the shielding, where it continued to sizzle for some time. "Energy cell," said the senior man, "one'll get you five. Fed from the bus bar and when power's removed it gives it all back to the internals. Nothing that'd look incriminating on X-ray or gamma return. We should've given it a portable power supply."

Rand approached the device. "Could you put that in English?"

"Yessir. Whoever installed that box knew enough electronics to avoid putting explosives in it. We'd find it in a sweep, which we do regularly. So he set it up to fry its circuits if anybody tried to disconnect it. Smart. That's what it did. Heated the whole box up, in fact."

"Then you won't find anything inside?"

"Probably nothing useful, sir. The perpetrator was very determined that nobody else would learn just what that box did."

"And he outsmarted you," said the President.

"I'm dreadfully sorry to say he did, sir. We were just in too big a hurry."

That's how Walt would think, Rand reflected. Aloud he said, "Well, try and get everything put back so I can use my confounded office." He gestured for the general to follow and swept out, heading for the little think tank room. Then, behind closed doors: "McManus, I intend to find out just what that gizmo did. Any ideas?"

"Yes, sir, if you don't believe Ramsay. Let NSA check the cordless mike you use—and put Calvin's butt on a griddle."

"Walt keeps it himself. Always did; fanatic about it," Rand said thoughtfully.

"No doubt. And there's no telling how he's got *that* booby-trapped. Maybe his pal, Unruh, would know."

"Oh; CIA, I believe."

"Right; long and distinguished service, but he's a dying man. Metro Police say Terence Unruh may be running the men who tried to car-bomb Ramsay. And it's not exactly a long shot for Unruh to be hooked up with Calvin. We're letting them run loose for the moment, looking for wider infection."

Now the storm began to break, as the righteous Presidential anger of Harrison Rand began to surface. The Calvin-Unruh connection, he knew, was a fact. "I still have a few groups to speak to on that media council thing, which is due for a vote soon. McManus, I want no action from you whatever, do you understand? None! Nor a whisper of any of this. I'll get that cordless mike myself, Walt will want me to use it anyhow."

"But Mr. President—"

"That's the end of it! It's a terrible thing to suspect you've gained the highest office in this country as someone's trained seal, honking on cue. I will be blast—no, I will be *damned* if I don't put an end to it myself."

McManus started to speak, hesitated, then pressed on: "Are you sure you want to know the answers?"

Sighing: "Absolutely. General, in many ways I'm the apotheosis of the common man. I'm not so stupid that I don't know I have limitations, and it has been my pride—which goeth before a fall—that my political career was not built on compromises with corruption. Not that I knew about." He remained silent for a moment. Then, "It was Warren Harding who said he could handle his enemies but his *friends* were ruining him. I won't be another Harding." He leaned over and activated the intercom. "Jeanette, buzz Walt Kalvin for me; remind him I—*we*—have a pep talk scheduled for those hardcore media liberals at two-fifteen. Oh, and Jeanette: that telephone maintenance never happened. It was a non-event." He toggled the intercom off. "I'm still not certain Walt has betrayed me, McManus. But I'll admit I'm seeing rat tracks everywhere."

Now even Harman was getting jumpy, and Bobby Lathrop had to admit the situation was out of control. No one was using Ramsay's apartment; the man had still not surfaced. Nor had the kid, or the Garza chick. Because they didn't want to risk butting heads with NBN security on its own turf, both men staked themselves out at the mall. Ramsay was a Name, and sooner or later he'd show up at the studios, probably by the back entrance where Bobby would see him.

It was beyond hope that Ramsay would come bouncing across the parking lot with a hot-looking number beside him; beyond dreaming that the chick would be Garza. But they must have been using Garza's red Honda. Bobby barely had time to use his comm set to bring Harman on the run, before he put himself on an intercept course on foot. As it happened, his path took him within a few feet of that damned Genie, which he hadn't looked under because he had too much sense to risk jouncing it even a little. Hot damn, nothing but dry holes for an eternity, and now two birds at once!

Bobby's coat was wide so it would hide the stubby little Ingram stuttergun. It was no trouble at all for him to move ahead of them near the back entrance, then turn as they approached, letting the muzzle protrude so that it showed but would be inconspicuous to distant shoppers. "No yelling or running, folks," he said as the two of them were even with the yellow Genie, and he saw Ramsay's gaze fixate on the Ingram. "Or I'll drop you right here."

The Garza hotsy stumbled when she recognized Bobby, saw him in all his commanding potency. "To think I used to follow your orders," she said.

Ramsay had one hand in a jacket pocket and Bobby nearly wasted him as the guy jerked his hands up to steady the woman. But the hands were empty. "You must be suicidal. We're being watched," was all he said.

"Nice try," Bobby said, seeing no one and feeling pretty good. "Now I want you to turn around and walk nice and steady out to my van."

The woman looked around, panicky, and Ramsay was pale too, but kept his head. "If I do, I'm dead," he said. And before Bobby could stop him, *he leaned on the Genie!*

Bobby almost fainted. "Get away from there!" he screamed, flinching, dropping the Ingram's muzzle, and

that's when the Garza bimbo started slashing him with her nails.

Bobby hunched, the big shoulders flexing, and elbowed her in the boobs and nobody would have been fooled by that roundhouse right that Ramsay threw except that Bobby's attention was split, and he took only part of the blow on his pectorals, the rest of it rattling his china, and then the silly bastard was trying to wrestle the Ingram away from a man who could bench press the Washington Monument.

The woman started yodeling for help but she had both hands on Bobby's head, too, razoring across his eyes, and to shake her off he spun to the left and suddenly Ramsay's footwork got lucky, tangling Bobby's feet, and when they fell onto the hood of the car all Bobby could see was yellow, and in his mind, a gigantic black mushroom lifting them all into the sky. Bobby started yelling some himself at that point, trying to tell the crazy sonofabitch that little car was about to blow, but while his mouth was open Ramsay butted him even though Bobby still had a good grip on the Ingram and could have taken the older guy with one hand behind him only the Ingram burped, just three rounds but they all went past Bobby's cheek, and between trying to protect the trigger and flailing to get up off of the rocking, shuddering Genie, there wasn't much concentration left for martial arts.

Bobby took another head butt in the mouth, his personal chimes ringing like a carillon, and that's when he began to lose it, wondering when the fucking bomb would blow, sliding into blackness, letting go of the gun. At the edge of his awareness, he could hear big feet pounding near and voices that sounded anything but pleased. Then Bobby let go of everything.

When he came to, the first thing he saw was Harman, acting all surprised and innocent with his forty-five in the hands of a guy in plain clothes and with Harman himself in the hands of two other guys, and then somebody was reading them their Mirandas. "Don't shove the fucking car," Bobby managed to say as they hauled him to his feet. "Blow um all to shit," he explained through broken incisors.

"I doubt it," said the balding plainclothesman. "Your little surprise was disarmed ten minutes after you put it there."

"Lithen, thith ith a mithtake, we're in intelligenthe too," Bobby said.

"You know what you're in," said the old guy. "You're in the dumper. And we're about to flush it."

Walter Calvin strolled across the opening from the Executive Office Building to the West Wing shortly before two p.m. with the Donnersprache mike in an inside pocket and a set of unanswered questions beating in his skull. If Unruh didn't produce Ramsay or the kid by sundown, it would be time for some give and take with Harry Rand. Harry, devout do-gooder that he was, was still only a man, with a human failing where power was concerned. And whatever else Walt might have done, he could claim that he'd done it for Harry, and for the American people.

And if that didn't work, there was always that little fling Harry had taken with Pam Garza a decade before. Harry would give a lot to keep that out of the news, and even more to keep it from Bea Rand.

Before going to the Oval Office Calvin detoured quickly down to the theatre, nodding to the security staff, taking a quick look through a viewport into the theatre. He had the list of attendees, but you never knew when Showers might lobby to have a couple of extras, and—

Kalvin blinked, denying the testimony of his eyes, while a flood of liquid helium poured through his veins.

All the major networks were represented, which was merely irksome. The horrifying image was the sight of Alan Ramsay, looking as though he could hardly wait for Harry's little speech.

And why would Ramsay let himself be dragged within a mile of the White House, knowing what he knew? *Only if he had protection I don't know about,* Calvin's pessimism replied.

Walter Calvin turned on his heel and hurried up the stairs, not quite running. No one seemed to notice when he trotted from the West Wing back toward his own office, but he was breathless as he turned the corner in the hallway. In thirty seconds he could have the spare Donnersprache, the fake ID, and the money he kept in his wall safe.

His secretary was not on duty, and that alerted him. What electrified him were the men he saw as he eased a two-inch crack in the door to his inner office. Burly, clean-cut, in dark three piece suits, they were doing a careful toss of his office. Or rather, one was doing the toss, very quietly. The other stood before the wall safe, attending to a digital meter with leads to suction cups on the face of the safe. Probably FBI.

Kalvin took several steps backward in silence. As he reached the hallway he began to run.

Though Falls Church adjoins Arlington, it retains its own frumpy character. Calvin left the Greyhound local and then watched the sun disappear beyond the old rooftops along Broad Street, expecting the car from the east, toward Arlington, because that was where Unruh lived. Calvin had lost his touch with this kind of skulking in thirty years, and did not recognize the blue Caddie until it nearly ran him down.

Terry Unruh had been a good-looking specimen only a few months before. Late shadows accentuated the ravages to the flesh of his face. Unruh's was a death's head, almost bald, with a gray pallor. "My wife tried to stop me," said Unruh as the Caddie bore them toward a pink sunset. "She outweighs me, now."

Kalvin was in no mood to make small talk, and changed the subject. "They'll be watching every major airport, but of course you'd know that," he said.

The death's head nodded. "Leesburg Municipal is not a major airport," it said. "You have the full exfiltration kit? Enough cash?"

"Enough." *But I couldn't take the risk of hitting my safe deposit boxes. I did transfer a small fortune from one offshore bank to another; both Brit. I wonder what you'd do if you knew that Bermuda account of yours was gutted now. You might suspect that if you knew I was low on cash.*

Unruh drove expertly for a dead man. He overtook a limo, probably headed for Dulles, and settled back into the traffic stream. "We'll have to wait 'til dark. After that it's only a two hour hop to Canada," he said.

Kalvin made no reply, keeping his frustrations in check because Unruh was his lifeline. A few miles farther, Unruh snapped on his lights. "You know, I never did have a clear picture what you were up to, Calvin."

"You'll hear enough about it, I'm sure."

"Oh, I already have, right after I got your mayday this afternoon. Mid-level spook, friend of mine. He didn't dream I might be connected with you; must be kicking himself by now." A long silence ensued. Unruh broke it himself. "I had the idea that this was just some little political edge of yours, nothing that'd

change things much, no worse than the nits you find in any administration. Imagine my surprise," he added with rich sarcasm.

"I'd rather not discuss it," Calvin said, as Unruh swung the Caddie off of the Leesburg Pike.

"Why not? You must be the most convincing discusser since Moses heard from the burning bush. Why didn't you use that charisma machine yourself?"

"It helps to have the right voice to begin with," Calvin said grudgingly. "And the right background."

"Like being born with U.S. citizenship? That occurred to me this afternoon." Now Unruh turned off the paved county road onto a rutted farm access path. To their right, no more than a few miles distant, an airport beacon flashed its brief surge of welcome. The Caddie slowed, then stopped.

"Don't tell me," said Calvin, keeping his tone steady despite a thrill of alarm.

"No, *you* tell *me*," said Unruh, sounding very tired. "Use your powers of electronic persuasion. Or won't it work without a boxful of equipment?"

"Start the fucking car, Terry," said Calvin; and when Unruh did not move, he drew the Donnersprache mike from his coat. "Here it is. Is this your price for getting me exfiltrated? Take it," he said. *With the microfilmed diagrams in my billfold, I can build more when I get to Argentina.*

As Terence Unruh took the cordless mike, like a cold sceptre signaling the transfer of power, he laughed briefly. It became a cough, and required all of Unruh's strength to control. "You've already paid my price," he said, and drew a stubby little automatic with his left hand. "But there's a price for freedom; everybody's, I mean. They always told me that price was eternal vigilance. Sounds terribly mundane, doesn't it?"

Walter Calvin said nothing, waiting for Unruh to pick up the dialogue; to lead him to some further compromise. The last, and most horrifying, surprise of his life was the simultaneous sound and shock of a short nine-millimeter round entering his left side.

"No messy trials for us, Calvin," said Unruh.

Because the little weapon had only modest impact, Calvin was able to turn, grappling for the pistol, though he already felt something hideously wrong with his lungs. The second and third rounds seemed not quite so loud, their impacts less astounding. "No! Enough," he said, and oddly enough, Unruh did not fire again. Through a vast sense of disappointment, and shock that had somehow not entirely converted to pain, Calvin realized that he was going to die more in curiosity than in agony. "You expect to use it yourself?"

Only the instrument cluster lit the face of Terence Unruh, a corpse face in faint green reflection. "No. This is more important than money to my children. I'm turning it in."

Now Calvin felt himself sliding sideways and fumbled in his pocket with his right hand for the microphone's remote controller. "No you won't," he said, now with a sense of fullness as internal bleeding took its course. He could no longer see Unruh, but he could feel the device in his pocket.

The cordless microphone contained only fifty grams of explosive, not enough to completely demolish the car. But the concussion wave and flying particles were enough to eliminate all pain and disappointment

from both men forever.

NINETEEN

"...And so it seems that we live by catchphrases," said Alan Ramsay, beginning his windup of 'The Ramsay File' before eighty million Americans. In less than forty-eight hours, the Donnersprache unit from Calvin's wall safe had been disarmed and analyzed. Ramsay leaned against a display table as he spoke, sometimes using the cordless mike to demonstrate it, while the pointers of delicate meters responded to enhanced elements of resonance and pitch. "But we can be destroyed by catch phrases, too, when they happen to be the wrong ones, made artificially attractive."

He raised the microphone again. "Violence never settled anything," he intoned, glancing at the meters, adding, "and if you believe that, you never saw a war, a catfight, or a football game." Now he smiled faintly. "You can't cheat an honest man. Democracy means that all opinions are equal. And finally, cheaters never win." He lowered the mike, looking at it as though it were something to scrape off his shoe. "Well, in this case the cheater finally lost; but we'd be well advised not to count on it."

"And what's to be done with this little device, now that our Chief Executive has denounced its use? That isn't my decision, of course. But it seems that we have several options: make it available from Radio Shack for twenty-nine ninety-five, perhaps. Outlaw it as we did anabolic steroids and subliminal advertising? Maybe. Our chief defense springs from the same technology that created it; now that we can spot it, we'll know when it's being used against us."

"Because it *is* a weapon against us, against the kind of critical thinking that separates truth from lies. Nazi Germany had a leader who used Donnersprache with deliberate savagery. The measure of Harrison Rand is that, even though the device—arguably—put him in the White House, he reacted with courage, and outrage, when he discovered it. In the game of politics, where power is the name of the game, how could we ask for more?"

"From Washington, this is Alan Ramsay for NBN."

As the monitor light winked out, Ramsay turned to retrieve the central exhibit, handing it to one of the team detailed to secure it. Grinning, the man said, "Radio Shack! Don't hold your breath."

"Avoid giving long odds," Ramsay said. "Your grandfather could've bought a kingdom for a radar detector."

Irv, his headset awry, gripped Ramsay's arm with both hands in jubilation. "Knockout, Alan, just bleeding dynamite! If this didn't outdraw the Super Bowl, I'll buy dinner."

"I'll take a rain check; got a date with two gorgeous creatures," Ramsay cracked, pulling off his tie, hurrying toward a floorman who offered the usual towel so that he could begin ridding himself of makeup.

Minutes later, face scrubbed, Ramsay found Laurie waiting with Pam Garza. Laurie seemed undecided whether to shake his hand or leap into his arms and compromised by hugging him around the midriff. "You were great, Dad," she beamed.

Pam gave him a chaste kiss and fell in step with the Ramsays. "You showed a lot of restraint," she said. "If I hadn't listened carefully I wouldn't have known you had any personal involvement."

"Modest heroism is my forte," he said, deadpan, then winked. "Anyway, I already knew I'm scheduled for the cover of *Newsweek*." Laurie squealed and applauded. "I passed over Tom Cusick's group, too; their idea, actually. Publicity wouldn't do them any good. Unruh's family, either. From that note he left, he must've known he wasn't coming back. There's poetic justice for you; some people I loved aren't coming back either because of him."

"Hey, you haven't mentioned our new outfits," Pam said, trying to divert his train of thought, preening in her finery. "You said 'just short of formal,' but you didn't say which McDonald's you had in mind."

"Smartass," Ramsay replied. "Let's just say someone else is picking up the tab for the limo."

"Limo? Wow, Dad," Laurie marveled. "You've gotta tell us where."

"Well, uh—believe it or not, the White House, pudd'n."

Pam hesitated. "Me, too? Alan, you know why I can't—much as I'd love to."

"Sure you can," he said. "All that stuff happened a long time ago, to two different people. Just look him in the eye, but curtsy while you do it."

"My God," she said, and then giggled. "He's probably after your vote."

Trotting down the stairs toward the front entrance, Ramsay laughed aloud. "That'll be the day; our retreadedpreacher is a lousy judge of character. But I have an idea he'd be a great companion on a hunting trip."

He leaned forward to open a door and stumbled, laughing at himself, as it was opened for him. Outside, the limo waited.