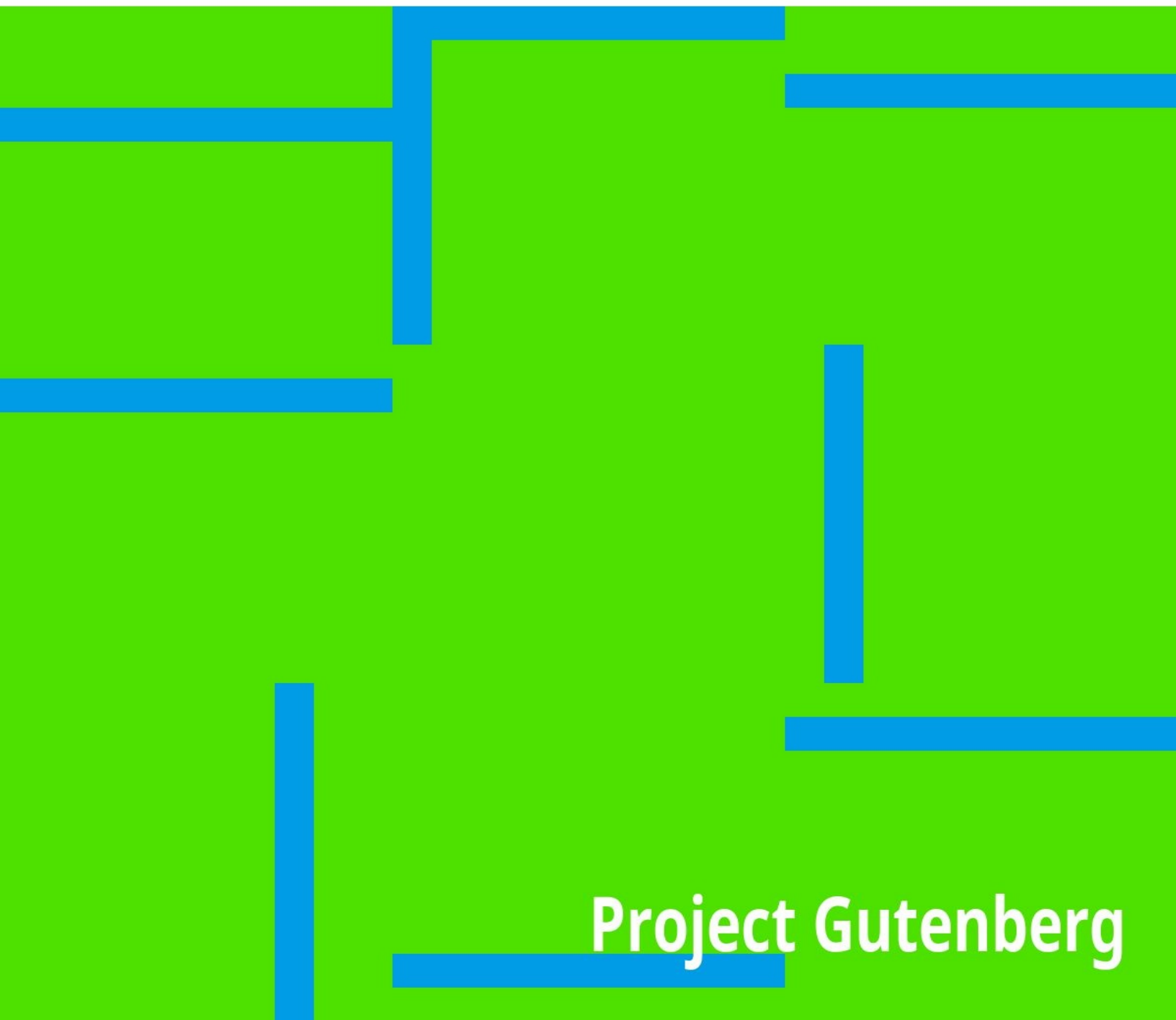


Code Three

Rick Raphael



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Illustration

Illustration

Code Three

The cars on high-speed highways
must follow each other like sheep.
And they need shepherds.
The highway police cruiser of tomorrow
however must be massively different—
as different as the highways themselves!

by Rick Raphael

Illustrated by Schoenherr

Illustration

Illustration

The late afternoon sun hid behind gray banks of snow clouds and a cold wind whipped loose leaves across the drill field in front of the Philadelphia Barracks of the North American Continental Thruway Patrol. There was the feel of snow in the air but the thermometer hovered just at the freezing mark and the clouds could turn either into icy rain or snow.

Patrol Sergeant Ben Martin stepped out of the door of the barracks and shivered as a blast of wind hit him. He pulled up the zipper on his loose blue uniform coveralls and paused to gauge the storm clouds building up to the west.

The broad planes of his sunburned face turned into the driving cold wind for a moment and then he looked back down at the weather report secured to the top of a stack of papers on his clipboard.

Behind him, the door of the barracks was shouldered open by his junior partner, Patrol Trooper Clay Ferguson. The young, tall Canadian officer's arms were loaded with paper sacks and his patrol work helmet dangled by its strap from the crook of his arm.

Clay turned and moved from the doorway into the wind. A sudden gust swept around the corner of the building and a small sack perched atop one of the larger bags in his arms blew to the ground and began tumbling towards the drill field.

"Ben," he yelled, "grab the bag."

The sergeant lunged as the sack bounced by and made the retrieve. He walked back to Ferguson and eyed the load of bags in the blond-haired officer's arms.

"Just what is all this?" he inquired.

"Groceries," the youngster grinned. "Or to be more exact, little gourmet items for our moments of gracious living."

Ferguson turned into the walk leading to the motor pool and Martin swung into step beside him. "Want me to carry some of that junk?"

"Junk," Clay cried indignantly. "You keep your grimy paws off these delicacies, peasant. You'll get yours in due time and perhaps it will help Kelly and me to make a more polished product of you instead of the clodlike cop you are today."

Martin chuckled. This patrol would mark the start of the second year that he, Clay Ferguson and Medical-Surgical Officer Kelly Lightfoot had been teamed together. After twenty-two patrols, cooped up in a semiarmored vehicle with a man for ten days at a time, you got to know him pretty well. And you either liked him or you hated his guts.

As senior officer, Martin had the right to reject or keep his partner after their first eleven-month duty tour. Martin had elected to retain the lanky Canadian. As soon as they had pulled into New York Barracks at the end of their last patrol, he had made his decisions. After eleven months and twenty-two patrols on the Continental Thruways, each team had a thirty-day furlough coming.

Martin and Ferguson had headed for the city the minute they put their signatures on the last of the stack of reports needed at the end of a tour. Then, for five days and nights, they tied one on. MSO Kelly Lightfoot had made a beeline for a Columbia Medical School seminar on tissue regeneration. On the sixth day, Clay staggered out of bed, swigged down a handful of antireaction pills, showered, shaved and dressed and then waved good-bye. Twenty minutes later he was aboard a jet, heading for his parents' home in Edmonton, Alberta. Martin soloed around the city for another week, then rented a car and raced up to his sister's home in Burlington, Vermont, to play Uncle Bountiful to Carol's three kids and to lap up as much as possible of his sister's real cooking.

While the troopers and their med officer relaxed, a service crew moved their car down to the Philadelphia motor pool for a full overhaul and refitting for the next torturous eleven-month-tour of duty.

The two patrol troopers had reported into the Philadelphia Barracks five days ago—Martin several pounds heavier courtesy of his sister's cooking; Ferguson

several pounds lighter courtesy of three assorted, starry-eyed, uniform-struck Alberta maidens.

They turned into the gate of the motor pool and nodded to the sentry at the gate. To their left, the vast shop buildings echoed to the sound of body-banging equipment and roaring jet engines. The darkening sky made the brilliant lights of the shop seem even brighter and the hulls of a dozen patrol cars cast deep shadows around the work crews.

The troopers turned into the dispatcher's office and Clay carefully placed the bags on a table beside the counter. Martin peered into one of the bags. "Seriously, kid, what do you have in that grab bag?"

"Oh, just a few essentials," Clay replied "*Pate de foie gras*, sharp cheese, a smidgen of cooking wine, a handful of spices. You know, stuff like that. Like I said—essentials."

"Essentials," Martin snorted, "you give your brains to one of those Alberta chicks of yours for a souvenir?"

"Look, Ben," Ferguson said earnestly, "I suffered for eleven months in that tin mausoleum on tracks because of what you fondly like to think is edible food. You've got as much culinary imagination as Beulah. I take that back. Even Beulah turns out some better smells when she's riding on high jet than you'll ever get out of her galley in the next one hundred years. This tour, I intend to eat like a human being once again. And I'll teach you how to boil water without burning it."

"Why you ungrateful young—" Martin yelled.



The patrol dispatcher, who had been listening with amused tolerance, leaned across the counter.

"If Oscar Waldorf is through with his culinary lecture, gentlemen," he said, "perhaps you two could be persuaded to take a little pleasure ride. It's a lovely night for a drive and it's just twenty-six hundred miles to the next service station. If you two aren't cooking anything at the moment, I know that NorCon would simply adore having the services of two such distinguished Continental

Commandos."

Ferguson flushed and Martin scowled at the dispatcher. "Very funny, clown. I'll recommend you for trooper status one of these days."

"Not me," the dispatcher protested. "I'm a married man. You'll never get me out on the road in one of those blood-and-gut factories."

"So quit sounding off to us heroes," Martin said, "and give us the clearances."

The dispatcher opened a loose-leaf reference book on the counter and then punched the first of a series of buttons on a panel. Behind him, the wall lighted with a map of the eastern United States to the Mississippi River. Ferguson and Martin had pencils out and poised over their clipboards.

The dispatcher glanced at the order board across the room where patrol car numbers and team names were displayed on an illuminated board. "Car 56—Martin-Ferguson-Lightfoot," glowed with an amber light. In the column to the right was the number "26-W." The dispatcher punched another button. A broad belt of multi-colored lines representing the eastern segment of North American Thruway 26 flashed onto the map in a band extending from Philadelphia to St. Louis. The thruway went on to Los Angeles in its western segment, not shown on the map. Ten bands of color—each five separated by a narrow clear strip, detailed the thruway. Martin and Ferguson were concerned with the northern five bands; NAT 26-westbound. Other unlighted lines radiated out in tangential spokes to the north and south along the length of the multi-colored belt of NAT 26.

This was just one small segment of the Continental Thruway system that spanned North America from coast to coast and crisscrossed north and south under the Three Nation Road Compact from the southern tip of Mexico into Canada and Alaska.

Each arterial cut a five-mile-wide path across the continent and from one end to the other, the only structures along the roadways were the turretlike NorCon Patrol check and relay stations—looming up at one-hundred-mile intervals like the fire control islands of earlier-day aircraft carriers.

Car 56 with Trooper Sergeant Ben Martin, Trooper Clay Ferguson and Medical-Surgical Officer Kelly Lightfoot, would take their first ten-day patrol on NAT 26-west. Barring major disaster, they would eat, sleep and work the entire time

from their car; out of sight of any but distant cities until they had reached Los Angeles at the end of the patrol. Then a five-day resupply and briefing period and back onto another thruway.

During the coming patrol they would cross ten state lines as if they didn't exist. And as far as thruway traffic control and authority was concerned, state and national boundaries actually didn't exist. With the growth of the old interstate highway system and the Alcan Highway it became increasingly evident that variation in motor vehicle laws from state to state and country to country were creating impossible situations for any uniform safety control.



With the establishment of the Continental Thruway System two decades later, came the birth of the supra-cop—The North American Thruway Patrol, known as NorCon. Within the five-mile bands of the thruways—all federally-owned land by each of the three nations—the blue-coveredalled "Continental Commandos" of NorCon were the sole law enforcement agency and authority. Violators of thruway law were cited into NorCon district traffic courts located in the nearest city to each access port along every thruway.

There was no challenge to the authority of NorCon. Public demand for faster and more powerful vehicles had forced the automotive industry to put more and more power under the touch of the ever-growing millions of drivers crowding the continent's roads. Piston drive gave way to turbojet; turbojet was boosted by a modification of ram jet and air-cushion drive was added. In the last two years, the first of the nuclear reaction mass engines had hit the roads. Even as the hot Ferraris and Jags of the mid-'60s would have been suicide vehicles on the T-model roads of the '20s so would today's vehicles be on the interstates of the '60s. But building roads capable of handling three hundred to four hundred miles an hour speeds was beyond the financial and engineering capabilities of individual states and nations. Thus grew the continental thruways with their four speed lanes in each direction, each a half-mile wide separated east and west and north and south by a half-mile-wide landscaped divider. Under the Three Nation Compact, the thruways now wove a net across the entire North American continent.

On the big wall map, NAT 26-west showed as four colored lines; blue and yellow as the two high and ultra-high speed lanes; green and white for the

intermediate and slow lanes. Between the blue and yellow and the white and green was a red band. This was the police emergency lane, never used by other than official vehicles and crossed by the traveling public shifting from one speed lane to another only at sweeping crossovers.

The dispatcher picked up an electric pointer and aimed the light beam at the map. Referring to his notes, he began to recite.

"Resurfacing crews working on 26-W blue at milestone Marker 185 to Marker 187, estimated clearance 0300 hours Tuesday—Let's see, that's tomorrow morning."

The two officers were writing the information down on their trip-analysis sheets.

"Ohio State is playing Cal under the lights at Columbus tonight so you can expect a traffic surge sometime shortly after 2300 hours but most of it will stay in the green and white. Watch out for the drunks though. They might filter out onto the blue or yellow.

"The crossover for NAT 163 has painting crews working. Might watch out for any crud on the roadway. And they've got the entrance blocked there so that all 163 exchange traffic is being rerouted to 164 west of Chillicothe."

The dispatcher thumbed through his reference sheets. "That seems to be about all. No, wait a minute. This is on your trick. The Army's got a priority missile convoy moving out of the Aberdeen Proving Grounds bound for the west coast tonight at 1800 hours. It will be moving at green lane speeds so you might watch out for it. They'll have thirty-four units in the convoy. And that is all. Oh, yes. Kelly's already aboard. I guess you know about the weather."

Martin nodded. "Yup. We should be hitting light snows by 2300 hours tonight in this area and it could be anything from snow to ice-rain after that." He grinned at his younger partner. "The vacation is over, sonny. Tonight we make a man out of you."

Ferguson grinned back. "Nuts to you, pop. I've got character witnesses back in Edmonton who'll give you glowing testimonials about my manhood."

"Testimonials aren't legal unless they're given by adults," Martin retorted. "Come on, lover boy. Duty calls."

Clay carefully embraced his armload of bundles and the two officers turned to

leave. The dispatcher leaned across the counter.

"Oh, Ferguson, one thing I forgot. There's some light corrugations in red lane just east of St. Louis. You might be careful with your souffles in that area. Wouldn't want them to fall, you know."

Clay paused and started to turn back. The grinning dispatcher ducked into the back office and slammed the door.



The wind had died down by the time the troopers entered the brilliantly lighted parking area. The temperature seemed warmer with the lessening winds but in actuality, the mercury was dropping. The snow clouds to the west were much nearer and the overcast was getting darker.

But under the great overhead light tubes, the parking area was brighter than day. A dozen huge patrol vehicles were parked on the front "hot" line. Scores more were lined out in ranks to the back of the parking zone. Martin and Ferguson walked down the line of military blue cars. Number 56 was fifth on the line. Service mechs were just re-housing fueling lines into a ground panel as the troopers walked up. The technician corporal was the first to speak. "All set, Sarge," he said. "We had to change an induction jet at the last minute and I had the port engine running up to reline the flow. Thought I'd better top 'er off for you, though, before you pull out. She sounds like a purring kitten."

He tossed the pair a waving salute and then moved out to his service dolly where three other mechs were waiting.

The officers paused and looked up at the bulk of the huge patrol car.

"Beulah looks like she's been to the beauty shop and had the works," Martin said. He reached out and slapped the maglurium plates. "Welcome home, sweetheart. I see you've kept a candle in the window for your wandering son." Ferguson looked up at the lighted cab, sixteen feet above the pavement.

Car 56—Beulah to her team—was a standard NorCon Patrol vehicle. She was sixty feet long, twelve feet wide and twelve feet high; topped by a four-foot-high bubble canopy over her cab. All the way across her nose was a three-foot-wide luminescent strip. This was the variable beam headlight that could cut a day-

bright swath of light through night, fog, rain or snow and could be varied in intensity, width and elevation. Immediately above the headlight strip were two red-black plastic panels which when lighted, sent out a flashing red emergency signal that could be seen for miles. Similar emergency lights and back-up white light strips adorned Beulah's stern. Her bow rounded down like an old-time tank and blended into the track assembly of her dual propulsion system. With the exception of the cabin bubble and a two-foot stepdown on the last fifteen feet of her hull, Beulah was free of external protrusions. Racked into a flush-decked recess on one side of the hull was a crane arm with a two-hundred-ton lift capacity. Several round hatches covered other extensible gear and periscopes used in the scores of multiple operations the NorCon cars were called upon to accomplish on routine road patrols.

Beulah resembled a gigantic offspring of a military tank, sans heavy armament. But even a small stinger was part of the patrol car equipment. As for armament, Beulah had weapons to meet every conceivable skirmish in the deadly battle to keep Continental Thruways fast-moving and safe. Her own two-hundred-fifty-ton bulk could reach speeds of close to six hundred miles an hour utilizing one or both of her two independent propulsion systems.

At ultra-high speeds, Beulah never touched the ground—floating on an impeller air cushion and driven forward by a pair of one hundred fifty thousand pound thrust jets and ram jets. At intermediate high speeds, both her air cushion and the four-foot-wide tracks on each side of the car pushed her along at two hundred-mile-an-hour-plus speeds. Synchro mechanisms reduced the air cushion as the speeds dropped to afford more surface traction for the tracks. For slow speeds and heavy duty, the tracks carried the burden.

Martin thumbed open the portside ground-level cabin door.

"I'll start the outside check," he told Clay. "You stow that garbage of yours in the galley and start on the dispensary. I'll help you after I finish out here."

As the younger officer entered the car and headed up the short flight of steps to the working deck, the sergeant unclipped a check list from the inside of the door and turned towards the stern of the big vehicle.



Clay mounted to the work deck and turned back to the little galley just aft of the

cab. As compact as a spaceship kitchen—as a matter of fact, designed almost identically from models on the Moon run—the galley had but three feet of open counter space. Everything else, sink, range, oven and freezer, were built-ins with pull-downs for use as needed. He set his bags on the small counter to put away after the pre-start check. Aft of the galley and on the same side of the passageway were the double-decked bunks for the patrol troopers. Across the passageway was a tiny latrine and shower. Clay tossed his helmet on the lower bunk as he went down the passageway. At the bulkhead to the rear, he pressed a wall panel and a thick, insulated door slid back to admit him to the engine compartment. The service crews had shut down the big power plants and turned off the air exchangers and already the heat from the massive engines made the compartment uncomfortably warm.

He hurried through into a small machine shop. In an emergency, the troopers could turn out small parts for disabled vehicles or for other uses. It also stocked a good supply of the most common failure parts. Racked against the ceiling were banks of cutting torches, a grim reminder that death or injury still rode the thruways with increasing frequency.

In the tank storage space between the ceiling and top of the hull were the chemical fire-fighting liquids and foam that could be applied by nozzles, hoses and towers now telescoped into recesses in the hull. Along both sides and beneath the galley, bunks, engine and machine-shop compartments between the walls, deck and hull, were Beulah's fuel storage tanks.

The last after compartment was a complete dispensary, one that would have made the emergency room or even the light surgery rooms of earlier-day hospitals proud.

Clay tapped on the door and went through. Medical-Surgical Officer Kelly Lightfoot was sitting on the deck, stowing sterile bandage packs into a lower locker. She looked up at Clay and smiled. "Well, well, you DID manage to tear yourself away from your adoring bebies," she said. She flicked back a wisp of golden-red hair from her forehead and stood up. The patrol-blue uniform coverall with its belted waist didn't do much to hide a lovely, properly curved figure. She walked over to the tall Canadian trooper and reached up and grabbed his ear. She pulled his head down, examined one side critically and then quickly snatched at his other ear and repeated the scrutiny. She let go of his ear and stepped back. "Damned if you didn't get all the lipstick marks off, too."

Clay flushed. "Cut it out, Kelly," he said. "Sometimes you act just like my mother."

The olive-complexioned redhead grinned at him and turned back to her stack of boxes on the deck. She bent over and lifted one of the boxes to the operating table. Clay eyed her trim figure. "You might act like ma sometimes," he said, "but you sure don't look like her."

It was the Irish-Cherokee Indian girl's turn to flush. She became very busy with the contents of the box. "Where's Ben?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Making outside check. You about finished in here?"

Kelly turned and slowly scanned the confines of the dispensary. With the exception of the boxes on the table and floor, everything was behind secured locker doors. In one corner, the compact diagnostician—capable of analyzing many known human bodily ailments and every possible violent injury to the body—was locked in its riding clamps. Surgical trays and instrument racks were all hidden behind locker doors along with medical and surgical supplies. On either side of the emergency ramp door at the stern of the vehicle, three collapsible autolitters hung from clamps. Six hospital bunks in two tiers of three each, lined another wall. On patrol, Kelly utilized one of the hospital bunks for her own use except when they might all be occupied with accident or other kind of patients. And this would never be for more than a short period, just long enough to transfer them to a regular ambulance or hospital vehicle. Her meager supply of personal items needed for the ten-day patrol were stowed in a small locker and she shared the latrine with the male members of the team.

Kelly completed her scan, glanced down at the checklist in her hand. "I'll have these boxes stowed in five minutes. Everything else is secure." She raised her hand to her forehead in mock salute. "Medical-Surgical Officer Lightfoot reports dispensary ready for patrol, sir."

Clay smiled and made a checkmark on his clipboard. "How was the seminar, Kelly?" he asked.

Kelly hiked herself onto the edge of the operating table. "Wonderful, Clay, just wonderful. I never saw so many good-looking, young, rich and eligible doctors together in one place in all my life."

She sighed and smiled vacantly into space.

Clay snorted. "I thought you were supposed to be learning something new about tissue regeneration," he said.

"Generation, regeneration, who cares," Kelly grinned.

Clay started to say something, got flustered and wheeled around to leave—and bounded right off Ben Martin's chest. Ferguson mumbled something and pushed past the older officer.

Ben looked after him and then turned back to Car 56's combination doctor, surgeon and nurse. "Glad to see the hostess aboard for this cruise. I hope you make the passengers more comfortable than you've just made the first mate. What did you do to Clay, Kelly?"

"Hi, Ben," Kelly said. "Oh, don't worry about junior. He just gets all fluttery when a girl takes away his masculine prerogative to make cleverly lewd witticisms. He'll be all right. Have a happy holiday, Ben? You look positively fat."

Ben patted his stomach. "Carol's good cooking. Had a nice restful time. And how about you. That couldn't have been all work. You've got a marvelous tan."

"Don't worry," Kelly laughed, "I had no intention of letting it be all study. I spent just about as much time under the sun dome at the pool as I did in class. I learned a lot though."

Illustration

Ben grinned and headed back to the front of the car. "Tell me more after we're on the road," he said from the doorway. "We'll be rolling in ten minutes."

When he reached the cab, Clay was already in the right-hand control seat and was running down the instrument panel check. The sergeant lifted the hatch door between the two control seats and punched on a light to illuminate the stark compartment at the lower front end of the car. A steel grill with a dogged handle on the upper side covered the opening under the hatch cover. Two swing-down bunks were racked up against the walls on either side and the front hull door was without an inside handle. This was the patrol car brig, used for bringing in unwilling violators or other violent or criminal subjects who might crop up in the course of a patrol tour. Satisfied with the appearance of the brig, Ben closed the hatch cover and slid into his own control seat on the left of the cab. Both control seats were molded and plastiformed padded to the contours of the troopers and

the armrests on both were studded with buttons and a series of small, finger-operated, knobs. All drive, communication and fire fighting controls for the massive vehicle were centered in the knobs and buttons on the seat arms, while acceleration and braking controls were duplicated in two footrest pedals beneath their feet.

Ben settled into his seat and glanced down to make sure his work-helmet was racked beside him. He reached over and flipped a bank of switches on the instrument panel. "All communications to 'on,'" he said. Clay made a checkmark on his list. "All pre-engine start check complete," Clay replied.

"In that case," the senior trooper said, "let's give Beulah some exercise. Start engines."

Clay's fingers danced across the array of buttons on his seat arms and flicked lightly at the throttle knobs. From deep within the engine compartment came the muted, shrill whine of the starter engines, followed a split-second later by the full-throated roar of the jets as they caught fire. Clay eased the throttles back and the engine noise softened to a muffled roar.

Martin fingered a press-panel on the right arm of his seat.

"Car 56 to Philly Control," Ben called.

The speakers mounted around the cab came to life. "Go ahead Five Six."

"Five Six fired up and ready to roll," Martin said.

"Affirmative Five Six," came the reply, "You're clear to roll. Philly Check estimates white density 300; green, 840; blue 400; yellow, 75."

Both troopers made mental note of the traffic densities in their first one-hundred-mile patrol segment; an estimated three hundred vehicles for each ten miles of thruway in the white or fifty to one hundred miles an hour low lane; eight hundred forty vehicles in the one hundred to one hundred fifty miles an hour green, and so on. More than sixteen thousand westbound vehicles on the thruway in the first one hundred miles; nearly five thousand of them traveling at speeds between one hundred fifty and three hundred miles an hour.

Over the always-hot intercom throughout the big car Ben called out. "All set, Kelly?"

"I'm making coffee," Kelly answered from the galley. "Let 'er roll."

Martin started to kick off the brakes, then stopped. "Ooops," he exclaimed, "almost forgot." His finger touched another button and a blaring horn reverberated through the vehicle.

In the galley, Kelly hurled herself into a corner. Her body activated a pressure plant and a pair of mummy-like plastifoam plates slid curvingly out the wall and locked her in a soft cocoon. A dozen similar safety clamps were located throughout the car at every working and relaxation station.

In the same instance, both Ben and Clay touched another plate on their control seats. From kiosk-type columns behind each seat, pairs of body-molded crash pads snapped into place to encase both troopers in their seats, their bodies cushioned and locked into place. Only their fingers were loose beneath the spongy substance to work arm controls. The half-molds included headforms with a padded band that locked across their foreheads to hold their heads rigidly against the backs of their reinforced seats. The instant all three crew members were locked into their safety gear, the bull horn ceased.

"All tight," Ben called out as he wiggled and tried to free himself from the cocoon. Kelly and Clay tested their harnesses.

Satisfied that the safety cocoons were operating properly, Ben released them and the molds slid back into their recesses. The cocoons were triggered automatically in any emergency run or chase at speeds in excess of two hundred miles an hour.

Again he kicked off the brakes, pressed down on the foot feed and Car 56—Beulah—rolled out of the Philadelphia motor pool on the start of its ten-day patrol.



The motor pool exit opened into a quarter-mile wide tunnel sloping gently down into the bowels of the great city. Car 56 glided down the slight incline at a steady fifty miles an hour. A mile from the mouth of the tunnel the roadway leveled off and Ben kicked Beulah up another twenty-five miles an hour. Ahead, the main tunnel ended in a series of smaller portal ways, each emblazoned with a huge illuminated number designating a continental thruway.

Ben throttled back and began edging to the left lanes. Other patrol cars were heading down the main passageway, bound for their assigned thruways. As Ben eased down to a slow thirty, another patrol vehicle slid alongside. The two troopers in the cab waved. Clay flicked on the "car-to-car" transmit.

The senior trooper in Car 104 looked over at Martin and Ferguson. "If it isn't the gruesome twosome," he called. "Where have you two been? We thought the front office had finally caught up with you and found out that neither one of you could read or write and that they had canned you."

"We can't read," Ben quipped back. "That's why we're still on the job. The front office would never hire anyone who would embarrass you two by being smarter than either of you. Where're you headed, Eddie?"

"Got 154-north," the other officer said.

"Hey," Clay called out, "I've got a real hot doll in Toronto and I'll gladly sell her phone number for a proper price."

"Wouldn't want to hurt you, Clay," the other officer replied. "If I called her up and took her out, she'd throw rocks at you the next time you drew the run. It's all for your own good."

"Oh, go get lost in a cloverleaf," Clay retorted.

The other car broke the connection and with a wave, veered off to the right. The thruway entrances were just ahead. Martin aimed Beulah at the lighted orifice topped by the number 26-W. The patrol car slid into the narrower tunnel, glided along for another mile and then turned its bow upwards. Three minutes later, they emerged from the tunnel into the red patrol lane of Continental Thruway 26-West. The late afternoon sky was a covering of gray wool and a drop or two of moisture struck the front face of the cab canopy. For a mile on either side of the police lane, streams of cars sped westward. Ben eyed the sky, the traffic and then peered at the outer hull thermometer. It read thirty-two degrees. He made a mental bet with himself that the weather bureau was off on its snow estimates by six hours. His Vermont upbringing told him it would be flurrying within the hour.

He increased speed to a steady one hundred and the car sped silently and easily along the police lane. Across the cab, Clay peered pensively at the steady stream of cars and cargo carriers racing by in the green and blue lanes—all of them

moving faster than the patrol car.

The young officer turned in his seat and looked at his partner.

"You know, Ben," he said gravely, "I sometimes wonder if those old-time cowboys got as tired looking at the south end of northbound cows as I get looking at the vanishing tail pipes of cars."

The radio came to life.

"Philly Control to Car 56."

Clay touched his transmit plate. "This is Five Six. Go ahead."

"You've got a bad one at Marker 82," Control said. "A sideswipe in the white."

"Couldn't be too bad in the white," Ben broke in, thinking of the one-hundred mile-an-hour limit in the slow lane.

"That's not the problem," Control came back. "One of the sideswiped vehicles was flipped around and bounded into the green, and that's where the real mess is. Make it code three."

"Five Six acknowledge," Ben said. "On the way."

He slammed forward on the throttles. The bull horn blared and a second later, with MSO Kelly Lightfoot snuggled in her dispensary cocoon and both troopers in body cushions, Car 56 lifted a foot from the roadway, and leaped forward on a turbulent pad of air. It accelerated from one hundred to two hundred fifty miles an hour.

The great red emergency lights on the bow and stern began to blink and from the special transmitter in the hull a radio siren wail raced ahead of the car to be picked up by the emergency receptor antennas required on all vehicles.

The working part of the patrol had begun.



Conversation died in the speeding car, partly because of the concentration required by the troopers, secondly because all transmissions whether intercom or radio, on a code two or three run, were taped and monitored by Control. In the

center of the instrument panel, an oversized radiodometer was clicking off the mileage marks as the car passed each milestone. The milestone posts beamed a coded signal across all five lanes and as each vehicle passed the marker, the radiodometer clicked up another number.

Car 56 had been at MM 23 when the call came. Now, at better than four miles a minute, Beulah whipped past MM 45 with ten minutes yet to go to reach the scene of the accident. Light flurries of wet snow bounced off the canopy, leaving thin, fast-drying trails of moisture. Although it was still a few minutes short of 1700 hours, the last of the winter afternoon light was being lost behind the heavy snow clouds overhead. Ben turned on the patrol car's dazzling headlight and to the left and right, Clay could see streaks of white lights from the traffic on the green and blue lanes on either side of the quarter-mile wide emergency lane.

The radio filled them in on the movement of other patrol emergency vehicles being routed to the accident site. Car 82, also assigned to NAT 26-West, was more than one hundred fifty miles ahead of Beulah. Pittsburgh Control ordered Eight Two to hold fast to cover anything else that might come up while Five Six was handling the current crisis. Eastbound Car 119 was ordered to cut across to the scene to assist Beulah's crew, and another eastbound patrol vehicle was held in place to cover for One One Nine.

At mile marker 80, yellow caution lights were flashing on all westbound lanes, triggered by Philadelphia Control the instant the word of the crash had been received. Traffic was slowing down and piling up despite the half-mile wide lanes.

"Philly Control this is Car 56."

"Go ahead Five Six."

"It's piling up in the green and white," Ben said. "Let's divert to blue on slowdown and seal the yellow."

"Philly Control acknowledged," came the reply.



The flashing amber caution lights on all lanes switched to red. As Ben began deceleration, diagonal red flashing barriers rose out of the roadway on the green

and white lanes at the 85 mile marker and lane crossing. This channelled all traffic from both lanes to the left and into the blue lane where the flashing reds now prohibited speeds in excess of fifty miles an hour around the emergency situation. At the same time, all crossovers on the ultra high yellow lane were sealed by barriers to prevent changing of lanes into the over-congested area.

As Car 56's speed dropped back below the two hundred mile an hour mark the cocoon automatically slid open. Freed from her safety restraints, Kelly jumped for the rear entrance of the dispensary and cleared the racking clamps from the six autolitters. That done, she opened another locker and reached for the mobile first-aid kit. She slid it to the door entrance on its retractable casters. She slipped on her work helmet with the built-in transmitter and then sat down on the seat by the rear door to wait until the car stopped.

Car 56 was now less than two miles from the scene of the crash and traffic in the green lane to the left was at a standstill. A half mile farther westward, lights were still moving slowly along the white lane. Ahead, the troopers could see a faint wisp of smoke rising from the heaviest congregation of headlights. Both officers had their work helmets on and Clay had left his seat and descended to the side door, ready to jump out the minute the car stopped.

Martin saw a clear area in the green lane and swung the car over the dividing curbing. The big tracks floated the patrol car over the two-foot high, rounded abutment that divided each speed lane. Snow was falling faster as the headlight picked out a tangled mass of wreckage smoldering a hundred feet inside the median separating the green and white lanes. A crumpled body lay on the pavement twenty feet from the biggest clump of smashed metal, and other fragments of vehicles were strung out down the roadway for fifty feet. There was no movement.

NorCon thruway laws were strict and none were more rigidly enforced than the regulation that no one other than a member of the patrol set foot outside of their vehicle while on any thruway traffic lane. This meant not giving any assistance whatsoever to accident victims. The ruling had been called inhuman, monstrous, unthinkable, and lawmakers in the three nations of the compact had forced NorCon to revoke the rule in the early days of the thruways. After speeding cars and cargo carriers had cut down twice as many do-gooders on foot at accident scenes than the accidents themselves caused, the law was reinstated. The lives of the many were more vital than the lives of a few.

Martin halted the patrol vehicle a few feet from the wreckage and Beulah was still rocking gently on her tracks by the time both Patrol Trooper Clay Ferguson and MSO Kelly Lightfoot hit the pavement on the run.

In the cab, Martin called in on the radio. "Car 56 is on scene. Release blue at Marker 95 and resume speeds all lanes at Marker 95 in—" he paused and looked back at the halted traffic piled up before the lane had been closed "—seven minutes." He jumped for the steps and sprinted out of the patrol car in the wake of Ferguson and Kelly.

The team's surgeon was kneeling beside the inert body on the road. After an ear to the chest, Kelly opened her field kit bag and slapped an electrode to the victim's temple. The needle on the encephalic meter in the lid of the kit never flickered. Kelly shut the bag and hurried with it over to the mass of wreckage. A thin column of black, oily smoke rose from somewhere near the bottom of the heap. It was almost impossible to identify at a glance whether the mangled metal was the remains of one or more cars. Only the absence of track equipment made it certain that they even had been passenger vehicles.

Clay was carefully climbing up the side of the piled up wrecks to a window that gaped near the top.

"Work fast, kid," Martin called up. "Something's burning down there and this whole thing may go up. I'll get this traffic moving."

He turned to face the halted mass of cars and cargo carriers east of the wreck. He flipped a switch that cut his helmet transmitter into the remote standard vehicular radio circuit aboard the patrol car.

"Attention, please, all cars in green lane. All cars in the left line move out now, the next line fall in behind. You are directed to clear the area immediately. Maintain fifty miles an hour for the next mile. You may resume desired speeds and change lanes at mile Marker 95. I repeat, all cars in green lane...." he went over the instructions once more, relayed through Beulah's transmitter to the standard receivers on all cars. He was still talking as the traffic began to move.

By the time he turned back to help his teammates, cars were moving in a steady stream past the huge, red-flashing bulk of the patrol car.

Both Clay and Kelly were lying flat across the smashed, upturned side of the uppermost car in the pile. Kelly had her field bag open on the ground and she

was reaching down through the smashed window.

"What is it Clay?" Martin called.

The younger officer looked down over his shoulder. "We've got a woman alive down here but she's wedged in tight. She's hurt pretty badly and Kelly's trying to slip a hypo into her now. Get the arm out, Ben."

Martin ran back to the patrol car and flipped up a panel on the hull. He pulled back on one of the several levers recessed into the hull and the big wrecking crane swung smoothly out of its cradle and over the wreckage. The end of the crane arm was directly over Ferguson. "Lemme have the spreaders," Clay called. The arm dipped and from either side of the tip, a pair of flanges shot out like tusks on an elephant. "Put 'er in neutral," Clay directed. Martin pressed another lever and the crane now could be moved in any direction by fingertip pulls at its extremity. Ferguson carefully guided the crane with its projecting tusks into the smashed orifice of the car window. "O.K., Ben, spread it."

The crane locked into position and the entire arm split open in a "V" from its base. Martin pressed steadily on the two levers controlling each side of the divided arm and the tusks dug into the sides of the smashed window. There was a steady screeching of tearing and ripping metal as the crane tore window and frame apart. "Hold it," Ferguson yelled and then eased himself into the widened hole.

"Ben," Kelly called from her perch atop the wreckage, "litter."



Martin raced to the rear of the patrol car where the sloping ramp stood open to the lighted dispensary. He snatched at one of the autolitters and triggered its tiny drive motor. A homing beacon in his helmet guided the litter as it rolled down the ramp, turned by itself and rolled across the pavement a foot behind him. It stopped when he stopped and Ben touched another switch, cutting the homing beacon.

Clay's head appeared out of the hole. "Get it up here, Ben. I can get her out. And I think there's another one alive still further down."

Martin raised the crane and its ripper bars retracted. The split arms spewed a pair

of cables terminating in magnalocks. The cables dangled over the ends of the autolitter, caught the lift plates on the litter and a second later, the cart was swinging beside the smashed window as Clay and Kelly eased the torn body of a woman out of the wreckage and onto the litter. As Ben brought the litter back to the pavement, the column of smoke had thickened. He disconnected the cables and homed the stretcher back to the patrol car. The hospital cart with its unconscious victim, rolled smoothly back to the car, up the ramp and into the dispensary to the surgical table.

Martin climbed up the wreckage beside Kelly. Inside the twisted interior of the car, the thick smoke all but obscured the bent back of the younger trooper and his powerful handlight barely penetrated the gloom. Blood was smeared over almost every surface and the stink of leaking jet fuel was virtually overpowering. From the depths of the nightmarish scene came a tortured scream. Kelly reached into a coverall pocket and produced another sedation hypo. She squirmed around and started to slip down into the wreckage with Ferguson. Martin grabbed her arm. "No, Kelly, this thing's ready to blow. Come on, Clay, get out of there. Now!"

Ferguson continued to pry at the twisted plates below him.

"I said 'get out of there' Ferguson," the senior officer roared. "And that's an order."

Clay straightened up and put his hands on the edge of the window to boost himself out. "Ben, there's a guy alive down there. We just can't leave him."

"Get down from there, Kelly," Martin ordered. "I know that man's down there just as well as you do, Clay. But we won't be helping him one damn bit if we get blown to hell and gone right along with him. Now get outta there and maybe we can pull this thing apart and get to him before it does blow."

The lanky Canadian eased out of the window and the two troopers moved back to the patrol car. Kelly was already in her dispensary, working on the injured woman.

Martin slid into his control seat. "Shut your ramp, Kelly," he called over the intercom, "I'm going to move around to the other side."

The radio broke in. "Car 119 to Car 56, we're just turning into the divider. Be there in a minute."

"Snap it up," Ben replied. "We need you in a hurry."

As he maneuvered Beulah around the wreckage he snapped orders to Ferguson.

"Get the foam nozzles up, just in case, and then stand by on the crane."

A mile away, they saw the flashing emergency lights of Car 119 as it raced diagonally across the yellow and blue lanes, whipping with ponderous ease through the moving traffic.

"Take the south side, 119," Martin called out. "We'll try and pull this mess apart."

"Affirmative," came the reply. Even before the other patrol vehicle came to a halt, its crane was swinging out from the side, and the ganged magnalocks were dangling from their cables.

"O.K., kid," Ben ordered, "hook it."

At the interior crane controls, Clay swung Beulah's crane and cable mags towards the wreckage. The magnalocks slammed into the metallic mess with a bang almost at the same instant the locks hit the other side from Car 119.

Clay eased up the cable slack. "Good," Ben called to both Clay and the operating trooper in the other car, "now let's pull it ... LOOK OUT! FOAM ... FOAM ... FOAM," he yelled.

The ugly, deep red fireball from the exploding wreckage was still growing as Clay slammed down on the fire-control panel. A curtain of thick chemical foam burst from the poised nozzles atop Beulah's hull and a split-second later, another stream of foam erupted from the other patrol car. The dense, oxygen-absorbing retardant blanket snuffed the fire out in three seconds. The cranes were still secured to the foam-covered heap of metal. "Never mind the caution," Ben called out, "get it apart. Fast."

Both crane operators slammed their controls into reverse and with an ear-splitting screech, the twisted frames of the two vehicles ripped apart into tumbled heaps of broken metal and plastics. Martin and Ferguson jumped down the hatch steps and into ankle-deep foam and oil. They waded and slipped around the front of the car to join the troopers from the other car.

Ferguson was pawing at the scum-covered foam near the mangled section of one of the cars. "He should be right about," Clay paused and bent over, "here." He

straightened up as the others gathered around the scorched and ripped body of a man, half-submerged in the thick foam. "Kelly," he called over the helmet transmitter, "open your door. We'll need a couple of sacks."

He trudged to the rear of the patrol car and met the girl standing in the door with a pair of folded plastic morgue bags in her hands. Behind her, Clay could see the body of the woman on the surgical table, an array of tubes and probes leading to plasma drip bottles and other equipment racked out over the table.

"How is she?"

"Not good," Kelly replied. "Skull fracture, ruptured spleen, broken ribs and double leg fractures. I've already called for an ambulance."

Ferguson nodded, took the bags from her and waded back through the foam.

The four troopers worked in the silence of the deserted traffic lane. A hundred yards away, traffic was moving steadily in the slow white lane. Three-quarters of a mile to the south, fast and ultra high traffic sped at its normal pace in the blue and yellow lanes. Westbound green was still being rerouted into the slower white lane, around the scene of the accident. It was now twenty-six minutes since Car 56 had received the accident call. The light snow flurries had turned to a steady fall of thick wet flakes, melting as they hit on the warm pavement but beginning to coat the pitiful flotsam of the accident.

The troopers finished the gruesome task of getting the bodies into the morgue sacks and laid beside the dispensary ramp for the ambulance to pick up with the surviving victim. Car 119's MSO had joined Kelly in Beulah's dispensary to give what help she might. The four patrol troopers began the grim task of probing the scattered wreckage for other possible victims, personal possessions and identification. They were stacking a small pile of hand luggage when the long, low bulk of the ambulance swung out of the police lane and rolled to a stop. Longer than the patrol cars but without the non-medical emergency facilities, the ambulance was in reality a mobile hospital. A full, scrubbed-up surgical team was waiting in the main operating room even as the ramps opened and the techs headed for Car 56. The team had been briefed by radio on the condition of the patient; had read the full recordings of the diagnostician; and were watching transmitted pulse and respiration graphs on their own screens while the transfer was being made.

The two women MSOs had unlocked the surgical table in Beulah's dispensary

and a plastic tent covered not only the table and the patient, but also the plasma and Regen racks overhead. The entire table and rig slid down the ramp onto a motor-driven dolly from the ambulance. Without delay, it wheeled across the open few feet of pavement into the ambulance and to the surgery room. The techs locked the table into place in the other vehicle and left the surgery. From a storage compartment, they wheeled out a fresh patrol dispensary table and rack and placed it in Kelly's miniature surgery. The dead went into the morgue aboard the ambulance, the ramp closed and the ambulance swung around and headed across the traffic lanes to eastbound NAT-26 and Philadelphia.

Illustration

Outside, the four troopers had completed the task of collecting what little information they could from the smashed vehicles.

They returned to their cars and One One Nine's medical-surgical officer headed back to her own cubby-hole.

The other patrol car swung into position almost touching Beulah's left flank. With Ben at the control seat, on command, both cars extended broad bulldozer blades from their bows. "Let's go," Ben ordered. The two patrol vehicles moved slowly down the roadway, pushing all of the scattered scraps and parts onto a single great heap. They backed off, shifted direction towards the center police lane and began shoving the debris, foam and snow out of the green lane. At the edge of the police lane, both cars unshipped cranes and magnalifted the junk over the divider barrier onto the one-hundred-foot-wide service strip bordering the police lane. A slow cargo wrecker was already on the way from Pittsburgh barracks to pick up the wreckage and haul it away. When the last of the metallic debris had been deposited off the traffic lane, Martin called Control.

"Car 56 is clear. NAT 26-west green is clear."

Philly Control acknowledged. Seven miles to the east, the amber warning lights went dark and the detour barrier at Crossover 85 sank back into the roadway. Three minutes later, traffic was again flashing by on green lane past the two halted patrol cars.

"Pitt Control, this is Car 119 clear of accident," the other car reported.

"Car 119 resume eastbound patrol," came the reply.

Illustration

The other patrol car pulled away. The two troopers waved at Martin and Ferguson in Beulah. "See you later and thanks," Ben called out. He switched to intercom. "Kelly. Any ID on that woman?"

"Not a thing, Ben," she replied. "About forty years old, and she had a wedding band. She never was conscious, so I can't help you."

Ben nodded and looked over at his partner. "Go get into some dry clothes, kid,"

he said, "while I finish the report. Then you can take it for a while."

Clay nodded and headed back to the crew quarters.

Ben racked his helmet beside his seat and fished out a cigarette. He reached for an accident report form from the work rack behind his seat and began writing, glancing up from time to time to gaze thoughtfully at the scene of the accident. When he had finished, he thumbed the radio transmitter and called Philly Control. Somewhere in the bloody, oil and foam covered pile of wreckage were the registration plates for the two vehicles involved. When the wrecker collected the debris, it would be machine sifted in Pittsburgh and the plates fed to records and then relayed to Philadelphia where the identifications could be added to Ben's report. When he had finished reading his report he asked, "How's the woman?"

"Still alive, but just barely," Philly Control answered. "Ben, did you say there were just two vehicles involved?"

"That's all we found," Martin replied.

"And were they both in the green?"

"Yes, why?"

"That's funny," Philly controller replied, "we got the calls as a sideswipe in white that put one of the cars over into the green. There should have been a third vehicle."

"That's right," Ben exclaimed. "We were so busy trying to get that gal out and then making the try for the other man I never even thought to look for another car. You suppose that guy took off?"

"It's possible," the controller said. "I'm calling a gate filter until we know for sure. I've got the car number on the driver that reported the accident. I'll get hold of him and see if he can give us a lead on the third car. You go ahead with your patrol and I'll let you know what I find out."

"Affirmative," Ben replied. He eased the patrol car onto the police lane and turned west once again. Clay reappeared in the cab, dressed in fresh coveralls.

"I'll take it, Ben. You go and clean up now. Kelly's got a pot of fresh coffee in the galley." Ferguson slid into his control seat.

A light skiff of snow covered the service strip and the dividers as Car 56 swung back westward in the red lane. Snow was falling steadily but melting as it touched the warm ferrophalt pavement in all lanes. The wet roadways glistened with the lights of hundreds of vehicles. The chronometer read 1840 hours. Clay pushed the car up to a steady 75, just about apace with the slowest traffic in the white lane. To the south, densities were much lighter in the blue and yellow lanes and even the green had thinned out. It would stay moderately light now for another hour until the dinner stops were over and the night travelers again rolled onto the thruways.

Kelly was putting frozen steaks into the infra-oven as Ben walked through to crew quarters. Her coverall sleeves were rolled to the elbows as she worked and a vagrant strand of copper hair curled over her forehead. As Martin passed by, he caught a faint whisper of perfume and he smiled appreciatively.

In the tiny crew quarters, he shut the door to the galley and stripped out of his wet coveralls and boots. He eyed the shower stall across the passageway.

"Hey, mother," he yelled to Kelly, "have I got time for a shower before dinner?"

"Yes, but make it a quickie," she called back.

Five minutes later he stepped into the galley, his dark, crew-cut hair still damp. Kelly was setting plastic, disposable dishes on the little swing-down table that doubled as a food bar and work desk. Ben peered into a simmering pot and sniffed. "Smells good. What's for dinner, Hiawatha?"

"Nothing fancy. Steak, potatoes, green beans, apple pie and coffee."

Ben's mouth watered. "You know, sometimes I wonder whether one of your ancestors didn't come out of New England. Your menus always seem to coincide with my ideas of a perfect meal." He noted the two places set at the table. Ben glanced out the galley port into the headlight-stripped darkness. Traffic was still light. In the distance, the night sky glowed with the lights of Chambersburg, north of the thruway.

"We might as well pull up for dinner," he said. "It's pretty slow out there."

Kelly shoved dishes over and began laying out a third setting. About half the

time on patrol, the crew ate in shifts on the go, with one of the patrol troopers in the cab at all times. When traffic permitted, they pulled off to the service strip and ate together. With the communications system always in service, control stations could reach them anywhere in the big vehicle.

The sergeant stepped into the cab and tapped Ferguson on the shoulder. "Dinnertime, Clay. Pull her over and we'll try some of your gracious living."

"Light the candles and pour the wine," Clay quipped, "I'll be with you in a second."

Car 56 swung out to the edge of the police lane and slowed down. Clay eased the car onto the strip and stopped. He checked the radiometer and called in. "Pitt Control, this is Car 56 at Marker 158. Dinner is being served in the dining car to the rear. Please do not disturb."

"Affirmative, Car 56," Pittsburgh Control responded. "Eat heartily, it may be going out of style." Clay grinned and flipped the radio to remote and headed for the galley.



Seated around the little table, the trio cut into their steaks. Parked at the north edge of the police lane, the patrol car was just a few feet from the green lane divider strip and cars and cargo carriers flashed by as they ate.

Clay chewed on a sliver of steak and looked at Kelly. "I'd marry you, Pocahontas, if you'd ever learn to cook steaks like beef instead of curing them like your ancestral buffalo robes. When are you going to learn that good beef has to be bloody to be edible?"

The girl glared at him. "If that's what it takes to make it edible, you're going to be an epicurean delight in just about one second if I hear another word about my cooking. And that's also the second crack about my noble ancestors in the past five minutes. I've always wondered about the surgical techniques my great-great-great grandpop used when he lifted a paleface's hair. One more word, Clay Ferguson, and I'll have your scalp flying from Beulah's antenna like a coontail on a kid's scooter."

Ben bellowed and nearly choked. "Hey, kid," he spluttered at Clay, "ever notice

how the wrong one of her ancestors keeps coming to the surface? That was the Irish."

Clay polished off the last of his steak and reached for the individual frozen pies Kelly had put in the oven with the steaks. "Now that's another point," he said, waving his fork at Kelly. "The Irish lived so long on potatoes and prayers that when they get a piece of meat on their menu, they don't know how to do anything but boil it."

"That tears it," the girl exploded. She pushed back from the table and stood up. "I've cooked the last meal this big, dumb Canuck will ever get from me. I hope you get chronic indigestion and then come crawling to me for help. I've got something back there I've been wanting to dose you with for a long time."

She stormed out of the galley and slammed the door behind her. Ben grinned at the stunned look on Clay's face. "Now what got her on the warpath?" Clay asked. Before Ben could answer the radio speaker in the ceiling came to life.

"Car 56 this is Pitt Control."

Martin reached for the transmit switch beside the galley table. "This is Five Six, go ahead."

"Relay from Philly Control," the speaker blared. "Reference the accident at Marker 92 at 1648 hours this date; Philly Control reports a third vehicle definitely involved."

Ben pulled out a pencil and Clay shoved a message pad across the table.

"James J. Newhall, address 3409 Glen Cove Drive, New York City, license number BHT 4591 dash 747 dash 1609, was witness to the initial impact. He reports that a white over green, late model Travelaire, with two men in it, sideswiped one of the two vehicles involved in the fatal accident. The Travelaire did not stop but accelerated after the impact. Newhall was unable to get the full license number but the first six units were QABR dash 46 ... rest of numerals unknown."

Ben cut in. "Have we got identification on our fatalities yet?"

"Affirmative, Five Six," the radio replied. "The driver of the car struck by the hit-and-run vehicle was a Herman Lawrence Hanover, age forty-two, of 13460 One Hundred Eighty-First Street South, Camden, New Jersey, license number

LFM 4151 dash 603 dash 2738. With him was his wife, Clara, age forty-one, same address. Driver of the green lane car was George R. Hamilton, age thirty-five, address Box 493, Route 12, Tucumcari, New Mexico."

Ben broke in once more. "You indicate all three are fatalities. Is this correct, Pitt Control? The woman was alive when she was transferred to the ambulance."

"Stand by, Five Six, and I'll check."

A moment later Pitt Control was back. "That is affirmative, Five Six. The woman died at 1745 hours. Here is additional information. A vehicle answering to the general description of the hit-and-run vehicle is believed to have been involved in an armed robbery and multiple murder earlier this date at Wilmington, Delaware. Philly Control is now checking for additional details. Gate filters have been established on NAT 26-West from Marker-Exit 100 to Marker-Exit 700. Also, filters on all interchanges. Pitt Control out."

Kelly Lightfoot, her not-too-serious peeve forgotten, had come back into the galley to listen to the radio exchange. The men got up from the table and Clay gathered the disposable dishware and tossed them into the waste receiver.

"We'd better get rolling," Ben said, "those clowns could still be on the thruway, although they could have got off before the filters went up."

They moved to the cab and took their places. The big engines roared into action as Ben rolled Car 56 back onto the police-way. Kelly finished straightening up in the galley and then came forward to sit on the jump seat between the two troopers. The snow had stopped again but the roadways were still slick and glistening under the headlights. Beulah rolled steadily along on her broad tracks, now cruising at one hundred miles an hour. The steady whine of the cold night wind penetrated faintly into the sound-proofed and insulated cabin canopy. Clay cut out the cabin lights, leaving only the instrument panel glowing faintly along with the phosphorescent buttons and knobs on the arms of the control seats.

A heavy express cargo carrier flashed by a quarter of a mile away in the blue lane, its big bulk lit up like a Christmas tree with running and warning lights. To their right, Clay caught the first glimpse of a set of flashing amber warning lights coming up from behind in the green lane. A minute later, a huge cargo carrier came abreast of the patrol car and then pulled ahead. On its side was a glowing star of the United States Army. A minute later, another Army carrier rolled by.

"That's the missile convoy out of Aberdeen," Clay told Kelly. "I wish our hit-runner had tackled one of those babies. We'd have scraped him up instead of those other people."

The convoy rolled on past at a steady one hundred twenty-five miles an hour. Car 56 flashed under a crossover and into a long, gentle curve. The chronometer clicked up to 2100 hours and the radio sang out. "Cars 207, 56 and 82, this is Pitt Control. 2100 hours density report follows...."

Pittsburgh Control read off the figures for the three cars. Car 82 was one hundred fifty miles ahead of Beulah, Car 207 about the same distance to the rear. The density report ended and a new voice came on the air.

"Attention all cars and all stations, this is Washington Criminal Control." The new voice paused, and across the continent, troopers on every thruway, control station, checkpoint and relay block, reached for clipboard and pen.

"Washington Criminal Control continuing, all cars and all stations, special attention to all units east of the Mississippi. At 1510 hours this date, two men held up the First National Bank of Wilmington, Delaware, and escaped with an estimated one hundred seventy-five thousand dollars. A bank guard and two tellers, together with five bank customers were killed by these subjects using automatic weapon fire to make good their escape. They were observed leaving the scene in a late model, white-over-green Travelaire sedan, license unknown. A car of the same make, model and color was stolen from Annapolis, Maryland, a short time prior to the holdup. The stolen vehicle, now believed to be the getaway car, bears USN license number QABR dash 468 dash 1113...."

"That's our baby," Ben murmured as he and Clay scribbled, on their message forms.

"... Motor number ZB 1069432," Washington Criminal Control continued. "This car is also now believed to have been involved in a hit-and-run fatal accident on NAT 26-West at Marker 92 at approximately 1648 hours this date.

"Subject Number One is described as WMA, twenty to twenty-five years, five feet, eleven inches tall, medium complexion, dark hair and eyes, wearing a dark-gray sports jacket and dark pants, and wearing a gray sports cap. He was wearing a ring with a large red stone on his left hand.

"Subject Number Two is described as WMA, twenty to twenty-five years, six

feet, light, ruddy complexion and reddish brown hair, light colored eyes. Has scar on back left side of neck. Wearing light-brown suit, green shirt and dark tie, no hat.

"These subjects are believed to be armed and psychotically dangerous. If observed, approach with extreme caution and inform nearest control of contact. Both subjects now under multiple federal warrants charging bank robbery, murder, and hit-and-run murder. All cars and stations acknowledge. Washington Criminal Control out."

The air chattered as the cars checked into their nearest controls with "acknowledged."

"This looks like it could be a long night," Kelly said, rising to her feet. "I'm going to sack out. Call me if you need me."

"Good night, princess," Ben called.

"Hey, Hiawatha," Clay called out as Kelly paused in the galley door. "I didn't mean what I said about your steaks. Your great-great-great grandpop would have gone around with his bare scalp hanging out if he had had to use a buffalo hide cured like that steak was cooked."

He reached back at the same instant and slammed the cabin door just as Kelly came charging back. She slammed into the door, screamed and then went storming back to the dispensary while Clay doubled over in laughter.

Ben smiled at his junior partner. "Boy, you're gonna regret that. Don't say I didn't warn you."



Martin turned control over to the younger trooper and relaxed in his seat to go over the APB from Washington. Car 56 bored steadily through the night. The thruway climbed easily up the slight grade cut through the hills north of Wheeling, West Virginia, and once more snow began falling.

Clay reached over and flipped on the video scanners. Four small screens, one for each of the westbound lanes, glowed with a soft red light. The monitors were synchronized with the radiometer and changed view at every ten-mile marker. Viewing cameras mounted on towers between each lane, lined the thruway,

aimed eastward at the on-coming traffic back to the next bank of cameras ten miles away. Infra-red circuits took over from standard scan at dark. A selector system in the cars gave the troopers the option of viewing either the block they were currently patrolling; the one ahead of the next ten-mile block; or, the one they had just passed. As a rule, the selection was based on the speed of the car. Beamed signals from each block automatically switched the view as the patrol car went past the towers. Clay put the slower lane screens on the block they were in, turned the blue and yellow lanes to the block ahead.

They rolled past the interchange with NAT 114-South out of Cleveland and the traffic densities picked up in all lanes as many of the southbound vehicles turned west on to NAT 26. The screens flicked and Clay came alert. Some fifteen miles ahead in the one-hundred-fifty-to-two-hundred-mile an hour blue lane, a glowing dot remained motionless in the middle of the lane and the other racing lights of the blue lane traffic were sheering around it like a racing river current parting around a boulder.

"Trouble," he said to Martin, as he shoved forward on the throttle.

A stalled car in the middle of the high-speed lane was an invitation to disaster. The bull horn blared as Beulah leaped past the two hundred mile an hour mark and safety cocoons slid into place. Aft in the dispensary, Kelly was sealed into her bunk by a cocoon rolling out of the wall and encasing the hospital bed.

Car 5 slanted across the police lane with red lights flashing and edged into the traffic flow in the blue lane. The great, red winking lights and the emergency radio siren signal began clearing a path for the troopers. Vehicles began edging to both sides of the lane to shift to crossovers to the yellow or green lanes. Clay aimed Beulah at the motionless dot on the screen and eased back from the four-mile-a-minute speed. The patrol car slowed and the headlight picked up the stalled vehicle a mile ahead. The cocoons opened and Ben slipped on his work helmet and dropped down the steps to the side hatch. Clay brought Beulah to a halt a dozen yards directly to the rear of the stalled car, the great bulk of the patrol vehicle with its warning lights serving as a shield against any possible fuzzy-headed speeders that might not be observing the road.

As Martin reached for the door, the Wanted bulletin flashed through his head. "What make of car is that, Clay?"

"Old jalopy Tritan with some souped-up rigs. Probably kids," the junior officer replied. "It looks O.K."

Ben nodded and swung down out of the patrol car. He walked quickly to the other car, flashing his handlight on the side of the vehicle as he went up to the driver. The interior lights were on and inside, two obviously frightened young couples smiled with relief at the sight of the uniform coveralls. A freckled-faced teenager in a dinner jacket was in the driver's seat and had the blister window open. He grinned up at Martin. "Boy, am I glad to see you, officer," he said.

"What's the problem?" Ben asked.

"I guess she blew an impeller," the youth answered. "We were heading for a school dance at Cincinnati and she was boiling along like she was in orbit when blooey she just quit."

Ben surveyed the old jet sedan. "What year is this clunker?" he asked. The kid told him. "You kids have been told not to use this lane for any vehicle that old." He waved his hand in protest as the youngster started to tell him how many modifications he had made on the car. "It doesn't make one bit of difference whether you've put a first-stage Moon booster on this wreck. It's not supposed to be in the blue or yellow. And this thing probably shouldn't have been allowed out of the white—or even on the thruway."

The youngster flushed and bit his lip in embarrassment at the giggles from the two evening-frocked girls in the car.

"Well, let's get you out of here." Ben touched his throat mike. "Drop a light, Clay and then let's haul this junk pile away."

In the patrol car, Ferguson reached down beside his seat and tugged at a lever. From a recess in Beulah's stern, a big portable red warning light dropped to the pavement. As it touched the surface, it automatically flashed to life, sending out a bright, flashing red warning signal into the face of any approaching traffic. Clay eased the patrol car around the stalled vehicle and then backed slow into position, guided by Martin's radioed instructions. A tow-bar extruded from the back of the police vehicle and a magnaclamp locked onto the front end of the teenager's car. The older officer walked back to the portable warning light and rolled it on its four wheels to the rear plate of the jalopy where another magnalock secured it to the car. Beulah's two big rear warning lights still shone above the low silhouette of the passenger car, along with the mobile lamp on the jalopy. Martin walked back to the patrol car and climbed in.

He slid into his seat and nodded at Clay. The patrol car, with the disabled vehicle

in tow moved forward and slanted left towards the police lane. Martin noted the mileage marker on the radiometer and fingered the transmitter. "Chillicothe Control this is Car 56."

"This Chillicothe. Go ahead Five Six."

"We picked up some kids in a stalled heap on the blue at Marker 382 and we've got them in tow now," Ben said. "Have a wrecker meet us and take them off our hands."

"Affirmative, Five Six. Wrecker will pick you up at Marker 412."



Clay headed the patrol car and its trailed load into an emergency entrance to the middle police lane and slowly rolled westward. The senior trooper reached into his records rack and pulled out a citation book.

"You going to nail these kids?" Clay asked.

"You're damn right I am," Martin replied, beginning to fill in the violation report. "I'd rather have this kid hurting in the pocketbook than dead. If we turn him loose, he'll think he got away with it this time and try it again. The next time he might not be so lucky."

"I suppose you're right," Clay said, "but it does seem a little rough."

Ben swung around in his seat and surveyed his junior officer. "Sometimes I think you spent four years in the patrol academy with your head up your jet pipes," he said. He fished out another cigarette and took a deep drag.

"You've had four solid years of law; three years of electronics and jet and air-drive engine mechanics and engineering; pre-med, psychology, math, English, Spanish and a smattering of Portuguese, to say nothing of dozens of other subjects. You graduated in the upper tenth of your class with a B.S. in both Transportation and Criminology which is why you're riding patrol and not punching a computer or tinkering with an engine. You'd think with all that education that somewhere along the line you'd have learned to think with your head instead of your emotions."

Clay kept a studied watch on the roadway. The minute Ben had turned and

swung his legs over the side of the seat and pulled out a cigarette, Clay knew that it was school time in Car 56. Instructor Sergeant Ben Martin was in a lecturing mood. It was time for all good pupils to keep their big, fat mouths shut.

"Remember San Francisco de Borja?" Ben queried. Clay nodded. "And you still think I'm too rough on them?" Ben pressed.

Illustration

Ferguson's memory went back to last year's fifth patrol. He and Ben with Kelly riding hospital, had been assigned to NAT 200-North, running out of Villahermosa on the Guatemalan border of Mexico to Edmonton Barracks in Canada. It was the second night of the patrol. Some seven hundred fifty miles north of Mexico City, near the town of San Francisco de Borja, a gang of teenage Mexican youngsters had gone roaring up the yellow at speeds touching on four hundred miles an hour. Their car, a beat-up, fifteen-year-old veteran of less speedy and much rockier local mountain roads, had been gimmicked by the kids so that it bore no resemblance to its original manufacture.

From a junkyard they had obtained a battered air lift, smashed almost beyond use in the crackup of a ten-thousand dollar sports cruiser. The kids pried, pounded and bent the twisted impeller lift blades back into some semblance of alignment. From another wreck of a cargo carrier came a pair of 4000-pound thrust engines. They had jury-rigged the entire mess so that it stuck together on the old heap. Then they hit the thruway—nine of them packed into the jalopy—the oldest one just seventeen years old. They were doing three hundred fifty when they flashed past the patrol car and Ben had roared off in pursuit. The senior officer whipped the big patrol car across the crowded high speed blue lane, jockeyed into the ultra-high yellow and then turned on the power.

Illustration

By this time the kids realized they had been spotted and they cranked their makeshift power plant up to the last notch. The most they could get out of it was four hundred and it was doing just that as Car 56, clocking better than five hundred, pulled in behind them. The patrol car was still three hundred yards astern when one of the bent and re-bent impeller blades let go. The out-of-balance fan, turning at close to 35,000 rpm, flew to pieces and the air cushion vanished. At four hundred miles an hour, the body of the old jalopy fell the twelve inches to the pavement and both front wheels caved under. There was a momentary shower of sparks, then the entire vehicle snapped cartwheeling more

than eighty feet into the air and exploded. Pieces of car and bodies were scattered for a mile down the thruway and the only whole, identifiable human bodies were those of the three youngsters thrown out and sent hurtling to their deaths more than two hundred feet away.

Clay's mind snapped back to the present.

"Write 'em up," he said quietly to Martin. The senior officer gave a Satisfied nod and turned back to his citation pad.

At marker 412, which was also the Columbus turnoff, a big patrol wrecker was parked on the side strip, engines idling, service and warning lights blinking. Clay pulled the patrol car alongside and stopped. He disconnected the tow bar and the two officers climbed out into the cold night air. They walked back to the teenager's car. Clay went to the rear of the disabled car and unhooked the warning light while Martin went to the driver's window. He had his citation book in hand. The youngster in the driver's seat went white at the sight of the violation pad. "May I see your license, please," Ben asked. The boy fumbled in a back pocket and then produced a thin, metallic tab with his name, age, address and license number etched into the indestructible and unalterable metal.

"Also your car registration," Ben added. The youth unclipped similar metal strip from the dashboard.

The trooper took the two tabs and walked to the rear of the patrol car. He slid back a panel to reveal two thin slots in the hull. Martin slid the driver's license into one of the slots, the registration tab into the other. He pressed a button below each slot. Inside the car, a magnetic reader and auto-transmitter "scanned" the magnetic symbols implanted in the tags. The information was fed instantly to Continental Headquarters Records division at Colorado Springs. In fractions of a second, the great computers at Records were comparing the information on the tags with all previous traffic citations issued anywhere in the North American continent in the past forty-five years since the birth of the Patrol. The information from the driver's license and registration tab had been relayed from Beulah via the nearest patrol relay point. The answer came back the same way.

Above the license recording slot were two small lights. The first flashed green, "license is in order and valid." The second flashed green as well, "no previous

citations." Ben withdrew the tag from the slot. Had the first light come on red, he would have placed the driver under arrest immediately. Had the second light turned amber, it would have indicated a previous minor violation. This, Ben would have noted on the new citation. If the second light had been red, this would have meant either a major previous violation or more than one minor citation. Again, the driver would have been under immediate arrest. The law was mandatory. One big strike and you're out—two foul tips and the same story. And "out" meant just that. Fines, possibly jail or prison sentence and lifetime revocation of driving privileges.

Ben flipped the car registration slot to "stand-by" and went back to the teenager's car. Even though they were parked on the service strip of the police emergency lane, out of all traffic, the youngsters stayed in the car. This one point of the law they knew and knew well. Survival chances were dim anytime something went wrong on the high-speed thruways. That little margin of luck vanished once outside the not-too-much-better security of the vehicle body.

Martin finished writing and then slipped the driver's license into a pocket worked into the back of the metallic paper foil of the citation blank. He handed the pad into the window to the driver together with a carbon stylus.

The boy's lip trembled and he signed the citation with a shaky hand.

Ben ripped off the citation blank and license, fed them into the slot on the patrol car and pressed both the car registration and license "record" buttons. Ten seconds later the permanent record of the citation was on file in Colorado Springs and a duplicate recording of the action was in the Continental traffic court docket recorder nearest to the driver's hometown. Now, no power in three nations could "fix" that ticket. Ben withdrew the citation and registration tag and walked back to the car. He handed the boy the license and registration tab, together with a copy of the citation. Ben bent down to peer into the car.

"I made it as light on you as I could," he told the young driver. "You're charged with improper use of the thruway. That's a minor violation. By rights, I should have cited you for illegal usage." He looked around slowly at each of the young people. "You look like nice kids," he said. "I think you'll grow up to be nice people. I want you around long enough to be able to vote in a few years. Who knows, maybe I'll be running for president then and I'll need your votes. It's a cinch that falling apart in the middle of two-hundred-mile an hour traffic is no way to treat future voters.

"Good night, Kids." He smiled and walked away from the car. The three young passengers smiled back at Ben. The young driver just stared unhappily at the citation.

Clay stood talking with the wrecker crewmen. Ben nodded to him and mounted into the patrol car. The young Canadian crushed out his cigarette and swung up behind the sergeant. Clay went to the control seat when he saw Martin pause in the door to the galley.

"I'm going to get a cup of coffee," the older officer said, "and then take the first shift. You keep Beulah 'til I get back."

Clay nodded and pushed the throttles forward. Car 56 rolled back into the police lane while behind it, the wrecker hooked onto the disabled car and swung north into the crossover. Clay checked both the chronometer and radiometer and then reported in. "Cinncy Control this is Car 56 back in service." Cincinnati Control acknowledged.

Ten minutes later, Ben reappeared in the cab, slid into the left-hand seat. "Hit the sack, kid," he told Ferguson. The chronometer read 2204. "I'll wake you at midnight—or sooner, if anything breaks."

Ferguson stood up and stretched, then went into the galley. He poured himself a cup of coffee and carrying it with him, went back to the crew quarters. He closed the door to the galley and sat down on the lower bunk to sip his coffee. When he had finished, he tossed the cup into the basket, reached and dimmed the cubby lights and kicked off his boots. Still in his coveralls, Clay stretched out on the bunk and sighed luxuriously. He reached up and pressed a switch on the bulkhead above his pillow and the muted sounds of music from a standard broadcast commercial station drifted into the bunk area. Clay closed his eyes and let the sounds of the music and the muted rumble of the engines lull him to sleep. It took almost fifteen seconds for him to be in deep slumber.



Ben pushed Beulah up to her steady seventy-five-mile-an-hour cruising speed, moved to the center of the quarter-mile-wide police lane and locked her tracks into autodriven. He relaxed back in his seat and divided his gaze between the video monitors and the actual scene on either side of him in the night. Once again the sky was lighted, this time much brighter on the horizon as the road

ways swept to the south of Cincinnati.

Traffic was once again heavy and fast with the blue and green carrying almost equal loads while white was really crowded and even the yellow "zoom" lane was beginning to fill. The 2200 hour density reports from Cinncy had been given before the Ohio State-Cal football game traffic had hit the thruways and densities now were peaking near twenty thousand vehicles for the one-hundred-mile block of westbound NAT 26 out of Cincinnati.

Back to the east, near the eastern Ohio state line, Martin could hear Car 207 calling for a wrecker and meat wagon. Beulah rumbled on through the night. The video monitors flicked to the next ten-mile stretch as the patrol car rolled past another interchange. More vehicles streamed onto the westbound thruway, crossing over and dropping down into the same lanes they held coming out of the north-south road. Seven years on patrols had created automatic reflexes in the trooper sergeant. Out of the mass of cars and cargoes streaming along the rushing tide of traffic, his eye picked out the track of one vehicle slanting across the white lane just a shade faster than the flow of traffic. The vehicle was still four or five miles ahead. It wasn't enough out of the ordinary to cause more than a second, almost unconscious glance, on the part of the veteran officer. He kept his view shifting from screen to screen and out to the sides of the car.

But the reflexes took hold again as his eye caught the track of the same vehicle as it hit the crossover from white to green, squeezed into the faster lane and continued its sloping run towards the next faster crossover. Now Martin followed the movement of the car almost constantly. The moving blip had made the cut-over across the half-mile wide green lane in the span of one crossover and was now whipping into the merger lane that would take it over the top of the police lane and drop down into the one hundred fifty to two hundred mile an hour blue. If the object of his scrutiny straightened out in the blue, he'd let it go. The driver had been bordered on violation in his fast crossover in the face of heavy traffic. If he kept it up in the now-crowded high-speed lane, he was asking for sudden death. The monitors flicked to the next block and Ben waited just long enough to see the speeding car make a move to the left, cutting in front of a speeding cargo carrier. Ben slammed Beulah into high. Once again the bull horn blared as the cocoons slammed shut, this time locking both Clay and Kelly into their bunks, sealing Ben into the control seat.

Beulah lifted on her air cushion and the twin jets roared as she accelerated down the police lane at three hundred miles an hour. Ben closed the gap on the speeder

in less than a minute and then edged over to the south side of the police lane to make the jump into the blue lane. The red emergency lights and the radio siren had already cleared a hole for him in the traffic pattern and he eased back on the finger throttles as the patrol car sailed over the divider and into the blue traffic lane. Now he had eyeball contact with the speeding car, still edging over towards the ultra-high lane. On either side of the patrol car traffic gave way, falling back or moving to the left and right. Car 56 was now directly behind the speeding passenger vehicle. Ben fingered the cut-in switch that put his voice signal onto the standard vehicular emergency frequency—the band that carried the automatic siren-warning to all vehicles.



The patrol car was still hitting above the two-hundred-mile-an-hour mark and was five hundred feet behind the speeder. The headlamp bathed the other car in a white glare, punctuated with angry red flashes from the emergency lights.

"You are directed to halt or be fired upon," Ben's voice roared out over the emergency frequency. Almost without warning, the speeding car began braking down with such deceleration that the gargantuan patrol car with its greater mass came close to smashing over it and crushing the small passenger vehicle like an insect. Ben cut all forward power, punched up full retrojet and at the instant he felt Beulah's tracks touch the pavement as the air cushion blew, he slammed on the brakes. Only the safety cocoon kept Martin from being hurled against the instrument panel and in their bunks, Kelly Lightfoot and Clay Ferguson felt their insides dragging down into their legs.

The safety cocoons snapped open and Clay jumped into his boots and leaped for the cab. "Speeder," Ben snapped as he jumped down the steps to the side hatch. Ferguson snatched up his helmet from the rack beside his seat and leaped down to join his partner. Ben ran up to the stopped car through a thick haze of smoke from the retrojets of the patrol car and the friction-burning braking of both vehicles. Ferguson circled to the other side of the car. As they flashed their handlights into the car, they saw the driver of the car kneeling on the floor beside the reclined passenger seat. A woman lay stretched out on the seat, twisting in pain. The man raised an agonized face to the officers. "My wife's going to have her baby right here!"

"Kelly," Ben yelled into his helmet transmitter. "Maternity!"

The dispensary ramp was halfway down before Ben had finished calling. Kelly jumped to the ground and sprinted around the corner of the patrol car, medical bag in hand.

She shoved Clay out of the way and opened the door on the passenger side. On the seat, the woman moaned and then muffled a scream. The patrol doctor laid her palm on the distended belly. "How fast are your pains coming?" she asked. Clay and Ben had moved away from the car a few feet.

"Litter," Kelly snapped over her shoulder. Clay raced for the patrol car while Ben unshipped a portable warning light and rolled it down the lane behind the patrol car. He flipped it to amber "caution" and "pass." Blinking amber arrows pointed to the left and right of the halted passenger vehicle and traffic in the blue lane began picking up speed and parting around the obstructions.

By the time he returned to the patrol car, Kelly had the expectant mother in the dispensary. She slammed the door in the faces of the three men and then she went to work.

The woman's husband slumped against the side of the patrol vehicle.

Ben dug out his pack of cigarettes and handed one to the shaking driver.

He waited until the man had taken a few drags before speaking.

"Mister, I don't know if you realize it or not but you came close to killing your wife, your baby and yourself," Ben said softly, "to say nothing of the possibility of killing several other families. Just what did you think you were doing?"

The driver's shoulders sagged and his hand shook as he took the cigarette from his mouth. "Honestly, officer, I don't know. I just got frightened to death," he said. He peered up at Martin. "This is our first baby, you see, and Ellen wasn't due for another week. We thought it would be all right to visit my folks in Cleveland and Ellen was feeling just fine. Well, anyway, we started home tonight—we live in Jefferson City—and just about the time I got on the thruway, Ellen started having pains. I was never so scared in my life. She screamed once and then tried to muffle them but I knew what was happening and all I could think of was to get her to a hospital. I guess I went out of my head, what with her moaning and the traffic and everything. The only place I could think of that had a hospital was Evansville, and I was going to get her there come hell or high water." The young man tossed away the half-smoked cigarette and looked up at

the closed dispensary door. "Do you think she's all right?"

Ben sighed resignedly and put his hand on the man's shoulder. "Don't you worry a bit. She's got one of the best doctors in the continent in there with her. Come on." He took the husband by the arm and led him around to the patrol car cab hatch. "You climb up there and sit down. I'll be with you in a second."

The senior officer signaled to Ferguson. "Let's get his car out of the traffic, Clay," he directed. "You drive it."



Ben went back and retrieved the caution blinker and re-racked it in the side of the patrol car, then climbed up into the cab. He took his seat at the controls and indicated the jump seat next to him. "Sit down, son. We're going to get us and your car out of this mess before we all get clobbered."

He flicked the headlamp at Ferguson in the control seat of the passenger car and the two vehicles moved out. Ben kept the emergency lights on while they eased carefully cross-stream to the north and the safety of the police lane. Clay picked up speed at the outer edge of the blue lane and rolled along until he reached the first "patrol only" entrance through the divider to the service strip. Ben followed him in and then turned off the red blinkers and brought the patrol car to a halt behind the other vehicle.

The worried husband stood up and looked to the rear of the car. "What's making it so long?" he asked anxiously. "They've been in there a long time."

Ben smiled. "Sit down, son. These things take time. Don't you worry. If there were anything wrong, Kelly would let us know. She can talk to us on the intercom anytime she wants anything."

The man sat back down. "What's your name?" Ben inquired.

"Haverstraw," the husband replied distractedly, "George Haverstraw. I'm an accountant. That's my wife back there," he cried, pointing to the closed galley door. "That's Ellen."

"I know," Ben said gently. "You told us that."

Clay had come back to the patrol car and dropped into his seat across from the

young husband. "Got a name picked out for the baby?" he asked.

Haverstraw's face lighted. "Oh, yes," he exclaimed. "If it's a boy, we're going to call him Harmon Pierce Haverstraw. That was my grandfather's name. And if she's a girl, it's going to be Caroline May after Ellen's mother and grandmother."

The intercom came to life. "Anyone up there?" Kelly's voice asked. Before they could answer, the wail of a baby sounded over the system. Haverstraw yelled.

"Congratulations, Mr. Haverstraw," Kelly said, "you've got a fine-looking son."

"Hey," the happy young father yelped, "hey, how about that? I've got a son." He pounded the two grinning troopers on the back. Suddenly he froze. "What about Ellen? How's Ellen?" he called out.

"She's just fine," Kelly replied. "We'll let you in here in a couple of minutes but we've got to get us gals and your new son looking pretty for papa. Just relax."

Haverstraw sank down onto the jump seat with a happy dazed look on his face.

Ben smiled and reached for the radio. "I guess our newest citizen deserves a ride in style," he said. "We're going to have to transfer Mrs. Haverstraw and er, oh yes, Master Harmon Pierce to an ambulance and then to a hospital now, George. You have any preference on where they go?"

"Gosh, no," the man replied. "I guess the closest one to wherever we are." He paused thoughtfully. "Just where are we? I've lost all sense of distance or time or anything else."

Ben looked at the radiometer. "We're just about due south of Indianapolis. How would that be?"

"Oh, that's fine," Haverstraw replied.

"You can come back now, Mr. Haverstraw," Kelly called out. Haverstraw jumped up. Clay got up with him. "Come on, papa," he grinned, "I'll show you the way."

Ben smiled and then called into Indianapolis Control for an ambulance.

"Ambulance on the way," Control replied. "Don't you need a wrecker, too, Five Six?"

Ben grinned. "Not this time. We didn't lose one. We gained one."

He got up and went back to have a look at Harmon Pierce Haverstraw, age five minutes, temporary address, North American Continental Thruway 26-West, Mile Marker 632.

Fifteen minutes later, mother and baby were in the ambulance heading north to the hospital. Haverstraw, calmed down with a sedative administered by Kelly, had nearly wrung their hands off in gratitude as he said good-by.

"I'll mail you all cigars when I get home," he shouted as he waved and climbed into his car.

Beulah's trio watched the new father ease carefully into the traffic as the ambulance headed down the police-way. Haverstraw would have to cut over to the next exchange and then go north to Indianapolis. He'd arrive later than his family. This time, he was the very picture of careful driving and caution as he threaded his way across the green.

"I wonder if he knows what brand of cigars I smoke?" Kelly mused.



The chrono clicked up to 2335 as Car 56 resumed patrol. Kelly plumped down onto the jump seat beside Ben. Clay was fiddling in the galley. "Why don't you go back to the sack?" Ben called.

"What, for a lousy twenty-five minutes," Clay replied. "I had a good nap before you turned the burners up to high. Besides, I'm hungry. Anyone else want a snack?"

Ben shook his head. "No, thanks," Kelly said. Ferguson finished slapping together a sandwich. Munching on it, he headed into the engine room to make the midnight check. Car 56 had now been on patrol eight hours. Only two hundred thirty-two hours and two thousand miles to go.

Kelly looked around at the departing back of the younger trooper. "I'll bet this is the only car in NorCon that has to stock twenty days of groceries for a ten-day patrol," she said.

Ben chuckled. "He's still a growing boy."

"Well, if he is, it's all between the ears," the girl replied. "You'd think that after a

year I would have realized that nothing could penetrate that thick Canuck's skull. He gets me so mad sometimes that I want to forget I'm a lady." She paused thoughtfully. "Come to think of it. No one ever accused me of being a lady in the first place."

"Sounds like love," Ben smiled.

Hunched over on the jump seat with her elbows on her knees and her chin cupped in both hands, Kelly gave the senior officer a quizzical sideways look.

Ben was watching his monitors and missed the glance. Kelly sighed and stared out into the light streaked night of the thruway. The heavy surge of football traffic had distributed itself into the general flow on the road and while all lanes were busy, there were no indications of any overcrowding or jam-ups. Much of the pattern was shifting from passenger to cargo vehicle as it neared midnight. The football crowds were filtering off at each exchange and exit and the California fans had worked into the blue and yellow—mostly the yellow—for the long trip home. The fewer passenger cars on the thruway and the increase in cargo carriers gave the troopers a breathing spell. The men in the control buckets of the three hundred and four hundred-ton cargo vehicles were the real pro's of the thruways; careful, courteous and fast. The NorCon patrol cars could settle down to watch out for the occasional nuts and drunks that might bring disaster.

Once again, Martin had the patrol car on auto drive in the center of the police lane and he steeled back in his seat. Beside him, Kelly stared moodily into the night.

"How come you've never married, Ben?" she asked. The senior trooper gave her a startled look. "Why, I guess for the same reason you're still a maiden," he answered. "This just doesn't seem to be the right kind of a job for a married man."

Kelly shook her head. "No, it's not the same thing with me," she said. "At least, not entirely the same thing. If I got married, I'd have to quit the Patrol and you wouldn't. And secondly, if you must know the truth, I've never been asked."

Ben looked thoughtfully at the copper-haired Irish-Indian girl. All of a sudden she seemed to have changed in his eyes. He shook his head and turned back to the road monitors.

"I just don't think that a patrol trooper has any business getting married and

trying to keep a marriage happy and make a home for a family thirty days out of every three hundred sixty, with an occasional weekend home if you're lucky enough to draw your hometown for a terminal point. This might help the population rate but it sure doesn't do anything for the institution of matrimony."

Illustration

"I know some troopers that are married," Kelly said.

"But there aren't very many," Ben countered. "Comes the time they pull me off the cars and stick me behind a desk somewhere, then I'll think about it."

"You might be too old by then," Kelly murmured.

Ben grinned. "You sound as though you're worried about it," he said.

"No," Kelly replied softly, "no, I'm not worried about it. Just thinking." She averted her eyes and looked out into the night again. "I wonder what NorCon would do with a husband-wife team?" she murmured, almost to herself.

Ben looked sharply at her and frowned. "Why, they'd probably split them up," he said.



"Split what up?" Clay inquired, standing in the door of the cab.

"Split up all troopers named Clay Ferguson," Kelly said disgustedly, "and use them for firewood—especially the heads. They say that hardwood burns long and leaves a fine ash. And that's what you've been for years."

She sat erect in the jump seat and looked sourly at the young trooper.

Clay shuddered at the pun and squeezed by the girl to get to his seat. "I'll take it now, pop," he said. "Go get your geriatrics treatment."

Ben got out of his seat with a snort. "I'll 'pop' you, skinhead," he snapped. "You may be eight years younger than I am but you only have one third the virility and one tenth the brains. And eight years from now you'll still be in deficit spending on both counts."

"Careful, venerable lord of my destiny," Clay admonished with a grin, "remember how I spent my vacation and remember how you spent yours before you go making unsubstantiated statements about my virility."

Kelly stood up. "If you two will excuse me, I'll go back to the dispensary and take a good jolt of male hormones and then we can come back and finish this

man-to-man talk in good locker room company."

"Don't you dare," Ben cried, "I wouldn't let you tamper with one single, tiny one of your feminine traits, princess. I like you just the way you are."

Kelly looked at him with a wide-eyed, cherubic smile. "You really mean that, Ben?"

The older trooper flushed briefly and then turned quickly into the galley. "I'm going to try for some shut-eye. Wake me at two, Clay, if nothing else breaks." He turned to Kelly who still was smiling at him. "And watch out for that lascivious young goat."

"It's all just talk, talk, talk," she said scornful. "You go to bed Ben. I'm going to try something new in psychiatric annals. I'm going to try and psychoanalyze a dummy." She sat back down on the jump seat.

At 2400 hours it was Vincennes Check with the density reports, all down in the past hour. The patrol was settling into what looked like a quiet night routine. Kelly chatted with Ferguson for another half hour and then rose again. "I think I'll try to get some sleep," she said. "I'll put on a fresh pot of coffee for you two before I turn in."

She rattled around in the galley for some time. "Whatcha cooking?" Clay called out. "Making coffee," Kelly replied.

"It take all that time to make coffee?" Clay queried.

"No," she said. "I'm also getting a few things ready so we can have a fast breakfast in case we have to eat on the run. I'm just about through now."

A couple of minutes later she stuck her head into the cab. "Coffee's done. Want some?"

Clay nodded. "Please, princess."

She poured him a cup and set it in the rack beside his seat.

"Thanks," Clay said. "Good night, Hiawatha."

"Good night, Babe," she replied.

"You mean 'Paul Bunyon,' don't you?" Clay asked. "'Babe' was his blue ox."

"I know what I said," Kelly retorted and strolled back to the dispensary. As she passed through the crew cubby, she glanced at Ben sleeping on the bunk recently vacated by Ferguson. She paused and carefully and gently pulled a blanket up over his sleeping form. She smiled down at the trooper and then went softly to her compartment.

In the cab, Clay sipped at his coffee and kept watchful eyes on the video monitors. Beulah was back on auto drive and Clay had dropped her speed to a slow fifty as the traffic thinned.

At 0200 hours he left the cab long enough to go back and shake Ben awake and was himself re-awakened at 0400 to take back control. He let Ben sleep an extra hour before routing him out of the bunk again at 0700. The thin, gray light of the winter morning was just taking hold when Ben came back into the cab. Clay had pulled Beulah off to the service strip and was stopped while he finished transcribing his scribbled notes from the 0700 Washington Criminal Control broadcast.

Ben ran his hand sleepily over his close-cropped head. "Anything exciting?" he asked with a yawn. Clay shook his head. "Same old thing. 'All cars exercise special vigilance over illegal crossovers. Keep all lanes within legal speed limits.' Same old noise."

"Anything new on our hit-runner?"

"Nope."

"Good morning, knights of the open road," Kelly said from the galley door. "Obviously you both went to sleep after I left and allowed our helpless citizens to slaughter each other."

"How do you figure that one?" Ben laughed.

"Oh, it's very simple," she replied. "I managed to get in a full seven hours of sleep. When you sleep, I sleep. I slept. Ergo, you did likewise."

"Nope," Clay said, "for once we had a really quiet night. Let's hope the day is of like disposition."

Kelly began laying out the breakfast things. "You guys want eggs this morning?"

"You gonna cook again today?" Clay inquired.

"Only breakfast," Kelly said. "You have the honors for the rest of the day. The diner is now open and we're taking orders."

"I'll have mine over easy," Ben said. "Make mine sunny-up," Clay called.

Kelly began breaking eggs into the pan, muttering to herself. "Over easy, sunny-up, I like 'em scrambled. Next tour I take I'm going to get on a team where everyone likes scrambled eggs."

A few minutes later, Beulah's crew sat down to breakfast. Ben had just dipped into his egg yolk when the radio blared. "Attention all cars. Special attention Cars 207, 56 and 82."

"Just once," Ben said, "just once, I want to sit down to a meal and get it all down my gullet before that radio gives me indigestion." He laid down his fork and reached for the message pad.

The radio broadcast continued. "A late model, white over green Travelaire, containing two men and believed to be the subjects wanted in earlier broadcast on murder, robbery and hit-run murder, was involved in a service station robbery and murder at Vandalia, Illinois, at approximately 0710 this date. NorCon Criminal Division believes this subject car escaped filter check and left NAT 26-West sometime during the night.

"Owner of this stolen vehicle states it had only half tanks of fuel at the time it was taken. This would indicate wanted subjects stopped for fuel. It is further believed they were recognized by the station attendant from video bulletins sent out by this department last date and that he was shot and killed to prevent giving alarm.

"The shots alerted residents of the area and the subject car was last seen headed south. This vehicle may attempt to regain access to NAT-26-West or it may take another thruway. All units are warned once again to approach this vehicle with extreme caution and only with the assistance of another unit where possible. Acknowledge. Washington Criminal Control out."

Ben looked at the chrono. "They hit Vandalia at 0710, eh. Even in the yellow they couldn't get this far for another half hour. Let's finish breakfast. It may be a long time until lunch."

The crew returned to their meal. While Kelly was cleaning up after breakfast, Clay ran the quick morning engine room check. In the cab, Ben opened the arms

rack and brought out two machine pistols and belts. He checked them for loads and laid one on Clay's control seat. He strapped the other around his waist. Then he flipped up a cover in the front panel of the cab. It exposed the breech mechanisms of a pair of twin-mounted 25 mm auto-cannon. The ammunition loads were full. Satisfied, Ben shut the inspection port and climbed into his seat. Clay came forward, saw the machine pistol on his seat and strapped it on without a word. He settled himself in his seat. "Engine room check is all green. Let's go rabbit hunting."

Car 56 moved slowly out into the police lane. Both troopers had their individual sets of video monitors on in front of their seats and were watching them intently. In the growing light of day, a white-topped car was going to be easy to spot.



It had all the earmarks of being another wintery, overcast day. The outside temperature at 0800 was right on the twenty-nine-degree mark and the threat of more snow remained in the air. The 0800 density reports from St. Louis Control were below the 14,000 mark in all lanes in the one-hundred-mile block west of the city. That was to be expected. They listened to the eastbound densities peaking at twenty-six thousand vehicles in the same block, all heading into the metropolis and their jobs. The 0800, 1200 and 1600 hours density reports also carried the weather forecasts for a five-hundred-mile radius from the broadcasting control point. Decreasing temperatures with light to moderate snow was in the works for Car 56 for the first couple of hundred miles west of St. Louis, turning to almost blizzard conditions in central Kansas. Extra units had already been put into service on all thruways through the midwest and snow-burners were waging a losing battle from Wichita west to the Rockies around Alamosa, Colorado.

Outside the temperature was below freezing; inside the patrol car it was a comfortable sixty-eight degrees. Kelly had cleared the galley and taken her place on the jump seat between the two troopers. With all three of them in the cab, Ben cut from the intercom to commercial broadcast to catch the early morning newscasts and some pleasant music. The patrol vehicle glided along at a leisurely sixty miles an hour. An hour out of St. Louis, a big liquid cargo carrier was stopped on the inner edge of the green lane against the divider to the police lane. The trucker had dropped both warning barriers and lights a half mile back. Ben brought Beulah to a halt across the divider from the stopped carrier.

"Dropped a track pin," the driver called out to the officers.

Ben backed Beulah across the divider behind the stalled carrier to give them protection while they tried to assist the stalled vehicle.

Donning work helmets to maintain contact with the patrol car, and its remote radio system, the two troopers dismounted and went to see what needed fixing. Kelly drifted back to the dispensary and stretched out on one of the hospital bunks and picked up a new novel.

Beulah's well-equipped machine shop stock room produced a matching pin and it was merely a matter of lifting the stalled carrier and driving it into place in the track assembly. Ben brought the patrol car alongside the carrier and unshipped the crane. Twenty minutes later, Clay and the carrier driver had the new part installed and the tanker was on his way once again.

Clay climbed into the cab and surveyed his grease-stained uniform coveralls and filthy hands. "Your nose is smudged, too, dearie," Martin observed.

Clay grinned, "I'm going to shower and change clothes. Try and see if you can drive this thing until I get back without increasing the pedestrian fatality rate." He ducked back into the crew cubby and stripped his coveralls.

Bored with her book, Kelly wandered back to the cab and took Clay's vacant control seat. The snow had started falling again and in the mid-morning light it tended to soften the harsh, utilitarian landscape of the broad thruway stretching ahead to infinity and spreading out in a mile of speeding traffic on either hand.

"Attention all cars on NAT 26-West and east," Washington Criminal Control radio blared. "Special attention Cars 56 and 82. Suspect vehicle, white over green Travelaire reported re-entered NAT 26-West on St. Louis interchange 179. St. Louis Control reports communications difficulty in delayed report. Vehicle now believed...."

"Car 56, Car 56," St. Louis Control broke in. "Our pigeon is in your zone. Commercial carrier reports near miss sideswipe three minutes ago in blue lane approximately three miles west of mile Marker 957.

"Repeating. Car 56, suspect car...."

Ben glanced at the radiodometer. It read 969, then clicked to 970.

"This is Five Six, St. Louis," he broke in, "acknowledged. Our position is mile marker 970...."

Kelly had been glued to the video monitors since the first of the bulletin. Suddenly she screamed and banged Ben on the shoulder. "There they are. There they are," she cried, pointing at the blue lane monitor.

Martin took one look at the white-topped car cutting through traffic in the blue lane and slammed Beulah into high. The safety cocoons slammed shut almost on the first notes of the bull horn. Trapped in the shower, Clay was locked into the stall dripping wet as the water automatically shut off with the movement of the cocoon.



"I have them in sight," Ben reported, as the patrol car lifted on its air pad and leaped forward. "They're in the blue five miles ahead of me and cutting over to the yellow. I estimate their speed at two twenty-five. I am in pursuit."

Traffic gave way as Car 56 hurtled the divider into the blue.

The radio continued to snap orders.

"Cars 112, 206, 76 and 93 establish roadblocks at mile marker crossover 1032. Car 82 divert all blue and yellow to green and white."

Eight Two was one hundred fifty miles ahead but at three-hundred-mile-an-hour speeds, 82's team was very much a part of the operation. This would clear the two high-speed lanes if the suspect car hadn't been caught sooner.

"Cars 414, 227 and 290 in NAT-26-East, move into the yellow to cover in case our pigeon decides to fly the median." The controller continued to move cars into covering positions in the area on all crossovers and turnoffs. The sweating dispatcher looked at his lighted map board and mentally cursed the lack of enough units to cover every exit. State and local authorities already had been notified in the event the fugitives left the thruways and tried to escape on a state freeway.

In Car 56, Ben kept the patrol car roaring down the blue lane through the speeding westbound traffic. The standard emergency signal was doing a partial job of clearing the path, but at those speeds, driver reaction times weren't always

fast enough. Ahead, the fleeing suspect car brushed against a light sedan, sending it careening and rocking across the lane. The driver fought for control as it swerved and screeched on its tilting frame. He brought it to a halt amid a haze of blue smoke from burning brakes and bent metal. The white over green Travelaire never slowed, fighting its way out of the blue into the ultra-high yellow and lighter traffic. Ben kept Beulah in bulldog pursuit.

The sideswipe ahead had sent other cars veering in panic and a cluster inadvertently bunched up in the path of the roaring patrol car. Like a flock of hawk-frightened chickens, they tried to scatter as they saw and heard the massive police vehicle bearing down on them. But like chickens, they couldn't decide which way to run. It was a matter of five or six seconds before they parted enough to let the patrol car through. Ben had no choice but to cut the throttle and punch once on the retrojets to brake the hurtling patrol car. The momentary drops in speed unlocked the safety cocoons and in an instant, Clay had leaped from the shower stall and sped to the cab. Hearing, rather than seeing his partner, Martin snapped over his shoulder, "Unrack the rifles. That's the car." Clay reached for the gun rack at the rear of the cab.

Kelly took one look at the young trooper and jumped for the doorway to the galley. A second later she was back. Without a word, she handed the nude Ferguson a dangling pair of uniform coveralls. Clay gasped, dropped the rifles and grabbed the coveralls from her hand and clutched them to his figure. His face was beet-red. Still without speaking, Kelly turned and ran back to her dispensary to be ready for the next acceleration.

Clay was into the coveralls and in his seat almost at the instant Martin whipped the patrol car through the hole in the blue traffic and shoved her into high once more.

There was no question about the fact that the occupants of the fugitive car knew they were being pursued. They shot through the crossover into the yellow lane and now were hurtling down the thruway close to the four-hundred-mile-an-hour mark.

Martin had Beulah riding just under three hundred to make the crossover, still ten miles behind the suspect car and following on video monitor. The air still crackled with commands as St. Louis and Washington Control maneuvered other cars into position as the pursuit went westward past other units blocking exit routes.

Clay read aloud the radiodometer numerals as they clicked off a mile every nine seconds. Car 56 roared into the yellow and the instant Ben had it straightened out, he slammed all finger throttles to full power. Beulah snapped forward and even at three hundred miles an hour, the sudden acceleration pasted the car's crew against the back of their cushioned seats. The patrol car shot forward at more than five hundred miles an hour.

The image of the Travelaire grew on the video monitor and then the two troopers had it in actual sight, a white, racing dot on the broad avenue of the thruway six miles ahead.

Clay triggered the controls for the forward bow cannon and a panel box flashed to "ready fire" signal.

"Negative," Martin ordered. "We're coming up on the roadblock. You might miss and hit one of our cars."

"Car 56 to Control," the senior trooper called. "Watch out at the roadblock. He's doing at least five hundred in the yellow and he'll never be able to stop."

Two hundred miles east, the St. Louis controller made a snap decision. "Abandon roadblock. Roadblock cars start west. Maintain two hundred until subject comes into monitor view. Car 56, continue speed estimates of subject car. Maybe we can box him in."

At the roadblock forty-five miles ahead of the speeding fugitives and their relentless pursuer, the four patrol cars pivoted and spread out across the roadway some five hundred feet apart. They lunged forward and lifted up to air-cushion jet drive at just over two hundred miles an hour. Eight pairs of eyes were fixed on video monitors set for the ten-mile block to the rear of the four vehicles.

Beulah's indicated ground speed now edged towards the five hundred fifty mark, close to the maximum speeds the vehicles could attain.

The gap continued to close, but more slowly. "He's firing hotter," Ben called out. "Estimating five thirty on subject vehicle."

Now Car 56 was about three miles astern and still the gap closed. The fugitive car flashed past the site of the abandoned roadblock and fifteen seconds later all four patrol cars racing ahead of the Travelaire broke into almost simultaneous reports of "Here he comes."

A second later, Clay Ferguson yelled out, "There he goes. He's boondocking, he's boondocking."

"He has you spotted," Martin broke in. "He's heading for the median. Cut, cut, cut. Get out in there ahead of him."

The driver of the fugitive car had seen the bulk of the four big patrol cruisers outlined against the slight rise in the thruway almost at the instant he flashed onto their screens ten miles behind them. He broke speed, rocked wildly from side to side, fighting for control and then cut diagonally to the left, heading for the outer edge of the thruway and the unpaved, half-mile-wide strip of landscaped earth that separated the east and westbound segments of NAT-26.

The white and green car was still riding on its airpad when it hit the low, rounded curbing at the edge of the thruway. It hurtled into the air and sailed for a hundred feet across the gently-sloping snow-covered grass, came smashing down in a thick hedgerow of bushes—and kept going.

Car 56 slowed and headed for the curbing. "Watch it, kids," Ben snapped over the intercom, "we may be buying a plot in a second."

Still traveling more than five hundred miles an hour, the huge patrol car hit the curbing and bounced into the air like a rocket boosted elephant. It tilted and smashed its nose in a slanting blow into the snow-covered ground. The sound of smashing and breaking equipment mingled with the roar of the thundering jets, tracks and air drives as the car fought its way back to level travel. It surged forward and smashed through the hedgerow and plunged down the sloping snowbank after the fleeing car.

"Clay," Ben called in a strained voice, "take 'er."

Ferguson's fingers were already in position. "You all right, Ben?" he asked anxiously.

"Think I dislocated a neck vertebra," Ben replied. "I can't move my head. Go get 'em, kid."

"Try not to move your head at all, Ben," Kelly called from her cocoon in the dispensary. "I'll be there the minute we slow down."

A half mile ahead, the fugitive car plowed along the bottom of the gentle draw in a cloud of snow, trying to fight its way up the opposite slope and onto the

eastbound thruway.

But the Travelaire was never designed for driving on anything but a modern superhighway. Car 56 slammed through the snow and down to the bottom of the draw. A quarter of a mile ahead of the fugitives, the first of the four roadblock units came plowing over the rise.

The car speed dropped quickly to under a hundred and the cocoons were again retracted. Ben slumped forward in his seat and caught himself. He eased back with a gasp of pain, his head held rigidly straight. Almost the instant he started to straighten up, Kelly flung herself through the cab door. She clasped his forehead and held his head against the back of the control seat.

Suddenly, the fugitive car spun sideways, bogged in the wet snow and muddy ground beneath and stopped. Clay bore down on it and was about two hundred yards away when the canopy of the other vehicle popped open and a sheet of automatic weapons fire raked the patrol car. Only the low angle of the sedan and the nearness of the bulky patrol car saved the troopers. Explosive bullets smashed into the patrol car canopy and sent shards of plastiglass showering down on the trio.

An instant later, the bow cannon on the first of the cut-off patrol units opened fire. An ugly, yellow-red blossom of smoke and fire erupted from the front of the Travelaire and it burst into flames. A second later, the figure of a man staggered out of the burning car, clothes and hair aflame. He took four plunging steps and then fell face down in the snow. The car burning and crackled and a thick funereal pyre of oily, black smoke billowed into the gray sky. It was snowing heavily now, and before the troopers could dismount and plow to the fallen man, a thin layer of snow covered his burned body.



An hour later, Car 56 was again on NAT 26-West, this time heading for Wichita barracks and needed repairs. In the dispensary, Ben Martin was stretched out on a hospital bunk with a traction brace around his neck and a copper-haired medical-surgical patrolwoman fussing over him.

In the cab, Clay peered through the now almost-blinding blizzard that whirled and skirled thick snow across the thruway. Traffic densities were virtually zero despite the efforts of the dragonlike snow-burners trying to keep the roadways

clear. The young trooper shivered despite the heavy jacket over his coveralls. Wind whistled through the shell holes in Beulah's canopy and snow sifted and drifted against the back bulkhead.

The cab communications system had been smashed by the gunfire and Clay wore his work helmet both for communications and warmth.

The door to the galley cracked open and Kelly stuck her head in. "How much farther, Clay?" she asked.

"We should be in the barracks in about twenty minutes," the shivering trooper replied.

"I'll fix you a cup of hot coffee," Kelly said. "You look like you need it."

Over the helmet intercom Clay heard her shoving things around in the galley. "My heavens, but this place is a mess," she exclaimed. "I can't even find the coffee bin. That steeplechase driving has got to stop." She paused.

"Clay," she called out, "Have you been drinking in here? It smells like a brewery."

Clay raised mournful eyes to the shattered canopy above him. "My cooking wine" he sighed.

Illustration

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