



THE LAST  
ITERATION  
OF DEXTER MAXWELL

MATTHEW HART

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## About the Author

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Matthew Hart is the author of six technology books and has been working in the middle of different corporations for fifteen years. He lives in Kansas City with his family.

This is his first novel.

Matthew will be supporting dedicated non-profit organizations through the sale of this book.

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MATTHEW HART

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**THE LAST  
ITERATION**<sub>OF</sub>  
DEXTER MAXWELL

**CAPSCOVIL**

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FOR ERIC, WHO BELIEVED EARLY AND OFTEN

## GREATER METROPOLITAN FRONT RANGE (GMFR), SEPTEMBER 27, 2113.

*One.*

---

*Tick, Tick, Crackle.*

It was Thelo, coding him on the com. Dex ignored the hail long enough to pass the roll of cash out the window of the truck, give a smile to the attendant taking the bribe, and wait for the tollgate to rise. Then he pulled the collar back on his heavy worker's coat and engaged the small chip on his throat with a *tap tap rub*, and breathed, "Thelo, whachya need?"

"Bored. Checking in. Hadn't heard from you in a while."

Dex tried to picture Thelo's location. Thelo had pulled the short straw for the cross-70 turnpike, straight through downtown Grenver, past the DMV helipads. Past Central Dispatch. Past Fed Park.

"One more toll station," Dex said, "then I'm down to outer burbring, no problem."

"Crackpipe, Dex, you're way behind."

"I know."

"Everyone is minutes away from zero go. And you are, what, twenty minutes from go?"

"I know. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried. I'm mostly pissed."

"Don't stress it. Everything's fives."

"I doubt that."

"Stop shrinkin' your peener. A few minutes ain't no deal."

Thelo spoke up, ever so slightly, but it was as good as a yell in Dex's earpiece. "Now you listen to me, you orphan-rot. We've been planning this exact moment for months, and I am not about to let your druggy hangover screw everything up. Do what it takes to get there on time. Understand?"

"Crackpipe, Thelo, who crapped up your coffee? I told you—"

But Thelo had coded out. Dex slammed his fist into the dash. What had gotten into him? First Mal was acting dripped, and now Thelo seemed straight uphill-bunged. What was happening to his friends?

Thelo had had him there for a second, Dex realized, but he got it now. Thelo was just firing up his crapper. Getting him into the moment. Well, if Thelo wanted a fire, he'd give him one. His mind took off, unleashed. The hangover vanished.

Dex downshifted as he approached the final toll booth, and his truck gave an angry groan against the autumn cold. Today he was driving a Halliburton 260, one of the oldest garbage carriers around; the kind with the large compacting space in the back behind the cab so it could hold as much garbage as possible. It was a good six feet higher than the cab where he sat. Dex figured his truck must be twice as old as he was. It still had an old-fashioned transmission, and the central brain controller had been an after-market add-on by Old Man Newbury himself.

He pulled up to the booth, rolled down his window, and slid his repurposed work permit through the small slit in the bulletproof glass. The overweight attendee looked up at Dex, then hit her mic button.

"Newbury Trash don't have a listing for Tuesdays," her voice crackled. "Can't let you pass." Then she smiled.

Dex smiled politely back, and reached for the rubber-banded roll with the name ROSEANNE inked on the outside. "Newbury Trash never dumps on Tuesdays. Of course, how could I be so dumb? Here, I just need you to swipe my work order, explain things to Newbury." Dex put his hand out toward the toll attendee. She took the wad of cash he offered, and started counting it. Then she wacked a large button with her thumb and the gate rose. "Have a good morning, Charlie. Try and remember your permit days next time."

"Thanks, Roseanne," Dex said, and put the truck into gear. He pulled his glove off to code up Mal to let her know where he was at.

"Wait, there, Charlie, you almost forgot your permit," the woman said, handing Dex his pass card. Without thinking, he reached for it with his left hand.

"Jeez, Charlie, what happened to you?" She asked, grimacing at his hand, which was missing the pinkie and top digit of his ring finger.

Dex smiled at her. "Lost a bet," he said with wink.

Roseanne chuckled. "Helluva bet, Charlie."

"You shoulda seen the other guy," Dex said.



As he pulled the truck away from the booth, he scratched at his throat com again, and put his glove back on. But Mal didn't answer, so Dex re-focused in on the task at hand.

The truck groaned as it picked up speed, the transmission of the hybrid issuing a loud hydraulic hiss as Dex threw it into overdrive. His foot had already started to ache from holding the gas pedal down all the way, but he didn't release it. He was starting to pass the few small 'muter cars that dotted the freeway in front of him. They laid on their horns, the angry little bleats of the sheep, barely heard against the chugging of the huge truck's engine.

A disjunctive, pre-recorded male voice came through the overhead mic: "Warning, driver, Newbury Trash, permit... six, three, five, six, nine... your... two or more axle vehicle is close to maximum allowable speed. Please be careful."

Dex reached across to the passenger-side floor and picked up his ratty old backpack. He threw it onto the seat next to him. As he sat up he saw a small, red car right in front of him, going a good twenty miles per hour slower than he was. Dex pulled the horn lever next to him, and the car swerved back into the right lane, narrowly avoiding being bumped from behind.

His heart raced. A reported accident this early would bring the DMV sooner than he wanted. Before he was anywhere near his checkpoint. He pictured the place in his mind: the first exit into outer burbring, the cars already lining up for the race into the central commerce districts. It was sixteen miles out, and he only had three or four minutes. The freeway veered south and east soon, away from the Peak, and downhill to his destination. Downhill was good; it would help a little.

He unsnapped his backpack with one hand, weaving the huge truck through the traffic with the other. He pulled out his only valuable material possession—a worn old portable—from inside and placed it on the expansive dash. He'd glued some Velcro down on the surface to mesh with the strip on the back of his portable. Two red wires hung down from the portable's face. Dex reached for them.

Another zoned out 'muter strayed into the left lane. Before Dex could swerve, he grazed the side of the car, sending it spinning off into the shoulder.

“Shit!” Dex said out loud.

The voice came back from the overhead com immediately. “Warning, driver, Newbury Disposal Service, permit... six, three, five, six, nine. You have been involved in an automobile accident. This incident is currently being reported to Section 7 of the Department of Motor Vehicles. Please pull over to the shoulder slowly and wait for further instruction.”

But Dex didn’t pull over. His leg shaking visibly under the pressure, he stood on the pedal, using his weight instead of his muscles to hold it down. Finally he managed to get his hands around the data jack cables and reached them back under the steering column.

## *Two.*

---

Dex inserted an I/O jack into the truck’s central controller; it was so easy on those aftermarket jobbers. Then he dropped a cable into the jack and taped it under the steering column somewhere... there! He found the cable ends, pushed them into place on his portable, and the power indicator of his portable went live. He threw open the clamshell display.

The portable blinked, and a terminal appeared. Without looking, Dex reached over and typed in the commands to run Money’s hack. The terminal showed his keystrokes in an oversized font. He touched the big green GO button, barely readable and worn down from use, and lines of executing code scrolled quickly past. Then the screen cleared and a simple, one-word question remained, blinking lazily:

ENGAGE?

Dex had to time it just right. Engage too soon, and the program was useless. Too late, and the program suffered the same fate. He would only have a fraction of a second to engage.

The voice came back over the speaker. “Warning, driver, Newbury Disposal Service, permit... six, three, five, six, nine. You are exceeding the posted allowable speed for freeway... 625... southbound...

at mile marker ...thirty...four. Your driving permit is being penalized now. You have thirty seconds to disengage your throttle.”

Before the warning had even finished, he heard the com go live, and a real voice came over the speaker. “Permit, uh, permit six three five six nine, you’ve been reported as the primary in a traffic incident at mark 30. Immediately desist your speeding and pull to the shoulder.” Dex could hear the heli blades beating in the background. They’d already sent a chopper his way.

It was six more miles to his destination. His current speed was ninety-three miles per hour.

*Now this is fun.* There was no trace of his hangover left. He felt the moment; it was upon him, starting to take. He let it take him.

### *Three.*

---

Mallory Aquinas coded Thelo fast, *tap rub tap rub*. He came on, sounding distracted.

“Yes? What do you need?” Thelo asked.

“Did Salvador code you with the patched broadcast?” Mal asked quickly.

“Yes. I heard.”

“They’ve got two helis dispatched. He started *speeding*, for Chris-sake.”

Thelo paused, then said, “He also hit a ‘muter.’”

“No. No, he did NOT.”

“Yeah. I can’t get through to him. He’s coded me out.”

“Crackpipe. Okay. I’ll give him a try. Are we going to abort?”

“No!” Thelo was breathing heavy, irregularly. “The dominos fall without him.”

“I don’t know, Thelo. We could reschedule. It’s not too late.”

“Are you losing it, Mal? Getting cold feet?”

“Whoa, there, Thelo, where did that come from?”

“Call your damn boyfriend. Now.” Then he coded out.

What is his problem, Mal wondered. She looked at her watch. Two minutes. She could see her target ahead, on the horizon, just a few moments away. She took a bite of the stale bread that was lying in

the seat next to her. Keeping food in her belly seemed to be the only thing that stood between constant nausea and outright puking. She coded Dex quickly.

His voice came back fast, distracted. "I'm a little busy here, Mal."

Mal barely waited for him to finish. "What the hell are you doing? Get that rig pulled over and hoof it outta there! They've got two helis on your tail; they're gonna take control of your truck any second now!"

"Got it under control, Mal. Just make sure you're on time."

"We're thinking of aborting, Dex. You're jeopardizing the entire mission right now."

"No. Don't abort. I'm fine."

Mal could almost hear his smile through the radio. *He's enjoying this. The lunatic is enjoying this. He's probably doing that thing, the thing he does under pressure.*

"Are you doing that thing, Dex?" she asked.

A pause. "Yes."

She let her breath out, like a sigh. "Well, how's it going for you?"

"Better than average."

Mal almost laughed. "Look, Dex, you have to be careful. This is not just another little—"

She was cut off by an electric screech, and then radio fuzz.

"Dex. Dexter Maxwell. Dex." She coded him again, but only heard the fuzz. He hadn't coded her out. He'd been cut off. She tried coding him again.

*Tap rub rub tap.*

*Tap rub rub tap.*

And then she only had a split second between giving up on trying to reach him and realizing her target was upon her. In that split second, she thought of just driving, of just going on, parking the truck, and walking away from everything, from everyone, from Dex. She saw herself checking into a center and getting put on the Charts. Hiring a lawyer. Calling her parents. *Sorry Mom, I'm not actually dead. Sorry about the anguish and despair.*

She didn't keep driving. Without decelerating, she cranked her steering wheel counterclockwise, as hard as she could. The truck screeched, teetered, and jack-knifed across all three lanes of traffic.

## *Four.*

---

Dex had been able to do it since he was a little kid. If he got his adrenaline rushing, a good concentration on, and the chaos level was going up, up, up, things around him just seemed to sort of slow down.

He could compartmentalize all the different variables around him, separate them into their distinct parts, and extrapolate the possibilities they presented. Then he'd make the best decision based on all the factors, and execute. All inside the space of a fleeting moment. When Thelo first saw him do it, back when they had sprung out the orph, he'd said, "you can take a moment and really own it. I mean, you had that moment in high jack." The phrase had stuck. *The moment in high jack.* It felt like the right way to describe the feeling.

He'd seen the pop-up message on his portable display, heard the screechy beep. It was an old autoboot prog he'd found years ago, one he always left running. He hated to leave Mal hanging like that, but the beep coming from his portable indicated a low level snoop had been initiated on his truck cab. As soon as the little electronic beep had started, he had immediately torn his throat piece off its adhesive base on his neck, and rolled the delicate little microphone between his finger and thumb until it was nothing but metal dust. Whoever had initiated that snoop would have captured the conversation, maybe even traced the source.

Someone suspected something. He put that data aside in his mind and began analyzing the meaning, even as he pulled the ear bud from his ear and put it between his teeth and bit down.

He looked at the mile marker as it flew past him. Thirty-nine. Five more miles. Everyone else should have done their work already. The news would start to get out to the regional traffic controllers, and then to the heli pilots. *Time to play.*

He glanced at his portable's display. The single word ENGAGE was still flashing on the screen, but the rate was steadily increasing. The technician in the heli had engaged the root triangulation prog for his truck's central brain controller. They were tuning the satellite receiver to the truck's frequency in order to take control and apply the brakes. They were getting close.

But they didn't have him yet.

He was flying along at nearly 100 miles per hour now, and the traffic controllers had engaged the emergency road safety broadcast system, asking all ‘muters to pull over to the shoulder. Anyone who didn’t comply got a fine, so the road was completely empty, except for his truck and the steady shadows of two helicopters pacing him, to the left. As he watched, the shadows were joined by a third, and then a fourth.

Four helicopters. Dex sorted the information with the electronic snoop he’d discovered. How could they respond so fast?

A live voice came back on the overhead com. “Driver, please identify yourself.”

Dex smiled. They’d tried to engage his chip, get his registration number, maybe give him a drip of serotonin, but found out he didn’t have any mech in his brain. Now the technician had to do it the old fashioned way, and just ask him who the hell he was. The voice had changed, too; this was the senior tech, probably in a different heli. *My threat level has been upgraded in just two minutes. File that away next to four helis.*

“I repeat: identify yourself immediately. You are illegally operating a class C four-axle hybrid that has been involved in a traffic accident.”

Four minutes.

ENGAGE was blinking faster. They were getting closer. He had to wait. Wait until the exact moment they initiated the override to the manual truck controls; until the signal had already arrived and was being processed for completion. If the signal had not been sent, his little hack would be worthless. But if he waited until the control signal had been fully processed, his override loop would be lost. The window of opportunity, he figured, would be about point-three seconds.

So he kept part of his mind glued to the display.

The speedometer of the old truck maxed out at 120, burying the needle. The steering wheel shook violently in Dex’s hands, which he had firmly gripped at 10 and 2 o’clock. His leg was shaking like a sewing machine from the downward pressure he applied to the pedal.

He glanced in the side-mirror, and saw three, no four, no *five* trooper vehicles rounding a curve, and gaining on him. New models, and fast. They must have been going 140 to close in on him like that.

*How could they be grouped together already? And already so far south from the metro?*

Ninety seconds.

“Driver, you are under arrest for reckless driving and motor vehicle endangerment. By the power vested in me by the Department of Motor Vehicles I am taking control of your vehicle. A ground trooper has been sent out to accompany you to central dispatch for sentencing.”

Seventy-one seconds.

And then he saw it. ENGAGE was flashing at a rate of twelve times per second. Dex wrenched his right hand from the steering wheel and reached for the portable’s keyboard. ENGAGE stopped flashing and went solid. Right as it made the transition, Dex slammed the GO button with his open palm. The truck gave a kick to the left, and for a fraction of a second Dex thought he’d missed it, missed the moment. But it was just the steering column shaking free of his grip as he’d reached for the portable. Once he had both hands back on the wheel, he knew he had control. Still.

“What the—?”

Dex smiled at the voice on the com. In his surprise, the tech had forgotten he was broadcasting live. It was this illusion of control that made this entire mission work, Money had always said.

Dex was looking for the break in the median between his southbound lane and the oncoming northbound lane. Right before the first outer burbring entrance, there was a thirty foot break in the concrete median. He knew it was there. It should be just ahead—

There it was.

Twenty-six seconds.

Northbound traffic had not been halted with the emergency road safety broadcast, as the maniac was only on the southbound freeway. Which was part of the plan. But this was a new thing. A new part. The plan hadn’t called for a truck going 120 miles per hour. Should have been a safe sixty-five. And not so many ‘muters already on the freeway.

He finally let go of the accelerator. The troopers were now directly behind him, and they must have thought that control had been usurped; when the truck’s speed broke, they slowed as well, planning to escort the latest head-case to the shoulder.

Dex did the math. Thirty feet wide: he would have to be going no faster than seventy when he hit the hole if he was going to make it.

Thirteen seconds.

But he wasn't going to make it.

Time had slowed down for Dex, and now it pulled up to a crawl. He noted his speed was a quickly slowing eighty-eight miles per hour. He calculated the amount of torque he would need to put on the steering wheel to at least put the cab through the median break, based on his understanding of the amount of play in the steering column and adjusting for possible skid from the old tires. He then calculated the impact point at the back of the truck and the physical repercussion for what would be an eighty-two-mile-an-hour concrete-on-steel kinetic energy transference.

Then he yanked the wheel counterclockwise as hard as he could.

This put the six-ton garbage truck up on two wheels as its inertia and top-heavy hybrid design pulled it forward instead of the direction the front wheels now pointed. Dex leaned into the turn (like it mattered) as the truck righted itself, but it lurched too far forward. Dex recalculated the impact point. He still had the truck aimed at the median break, but at a little too obtuse of an angle. Too late to adjust. Behind him, the troopers were slamming on their brakes and attempting to follow, their abject surprise reflected in the jerking and screeching of the cars. Overhead, the copters were pulling up, heading directly into the faint blue morning sky, in an effort to slow themselves.

Dex yanked the feeds of his portable out of the truck jack. The truck immediately locked up with the automatic freeze command the idiot in the copter had provided, and which Money's hack had looped in a permanent wait. The steering wheel snapped into position, and the hydraulic brakes began their tired exhale. Dex tore his portable loose from its perch and braced himself for impact.

The cab made it through the concrete median hole, but the front of the median caught the back of the truck, just behind the rear axle.

The metal-on-concrete tearing sound cemented itself in Dex's ears. The impact sent the back end of the truck swinging pendulum-like out into the northbound lanes, into the oncoming traffic. The fishtail motion forced a lateral momentum of the truck's speed on the driver-side tires. The truck tipped with enough forward force to keep



it rolling onto its top, and then slid to a stop, tottering, balanced awkwardly upside-down on the rounded hump of the trash compartment.

Northbound traffic began to rave into the shoulders, into each other. The first 'muter to hit the upended truck smashed into its back end, sending the entire truck spinning and rocking on its central hump again. The small car did a full 360, leaving the driver side facing forward again. When the next car caught the truck dead-center, it pushed it a few feet, and was then hit from behind by another car. And then another; each one in turn softening the impact on the truck, but jamming all the cars into a single, tangled mass of aluminum and fiberglass. Soft, life-saving foam dripped out the broken windows of the 'muters' cars.

### *Five.*

---

*And it had been such a gorgeous morning.* Time was speeding up again, gaining its normal tempo. Dex was hanging from the five-point harness around his chest. He could hear distant screeches, and the sound of metal hitting metal. It seemed to have worked.

*I need to get out of here. Now. The escape route is too far away. Plan B. There was a plan B.*

He thought of Mal, and his heart skipped a beat. Hopefully it had gone smoothly on her route. He felt sick thinking of her stuck upside down in a garbage truck, the sound of helis overhead. Mal being Mal, she'd probably laugh at this display of typical male nonsense, but that didn't stop him from feeling it, it just made him feel a weird kind of guilt like—

*Get out. Now.* He shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs, and a big glob of blood dripped down onto his portable, lying on the roof below him. He clicked the release device, but it was jammed. *The traffic tech's override included the safety harness. It won't release.* He reached up, and could just get his hand on his backpack to pull out the fold-away knife and start sawing at the straps. He could hear voices shouting, and, not too far away, sirens. Everything was moving way too slow.

And then he was scared. He felt caught. *Time for your chip,* he

heard the orphanage doctor say with that sick smile of his. With that corn-chip breath against the nape of his neck. *Time for your drip, you little psycho bastard. You won't mind, then. You won't mind anything at all.*

Thinking of Dr. Johansson kicked his adrenaline back up, and Dex cut through the straps. He fell to the roof, rolled over, grabbed his portable and shoved it in his pack. He carefully crawled out the broken driver-side window.

The cutting wind and dull roar of helis flying too low to the ground was all around him. Without standing up, he instead rolled underneath the first 'muter that had collided with the truck, and began to crawl military-style toward the bottom of the next car. He had made it about three vehicles back before he ran into one on its side, preventing him from crawling any further.

But he wasn't going to get away from this mess by inching from car to car. He started going through the highway maps in his head. Where was he? This was all new concrete, completely overhauled in '09 or so. They had had to rebuild it after the, after the... *floods. Plan B.*

He jumped straight up and felt the wind of the heli blades cut into his face, squinting through the wind. He looked desperately around, until he saw what he needed. Forty feet south, on the right. A brand-new, up-to-code, built-for-the-new-millennium, gov-installed storm drain. He looked up at the heli just overhead, and saw three men conferring. Suddenly one pointed at him ferociously and pulled something from behind. In the wind and noise, he couldn't quite make it out, but it sure looked like—

*He has a gun!* And so Dex ran. He ran as fast as he could, his right leg still shaky from holding down the pedal. Still, he practically leaped a small blue 'muter in his path, planting one foot on its hood and jumping to the other side. Then he heard a ping and saw a hole appear just next to his foot as he launched off the car. He pitched himself onto the ground sideways, at full speed, and rolled into the ditch, and against the storm drain door.

He landed against it with all of his momentum, and the safety latch snapped and broke. Dex tumbled through the hole and fell into the darkness of the sewer.

Thelo wished for rain.

Not that it would come. It hadn't rained in a year; probably wouldn't rain for another. You could just tell by the, well, by the smell. How the afternoon air smelled. The stale dryness had an edge that promised to be there for a while. But Thelo still longed to feel the cool drops against his massive, tattooed shoulders, bare except for the light t-shirt. He closed his eyes and lifted his face upward, imagining the cold pelts against his eyelids, his lips, his cheeks.

There was a time, when he was still living in the orph with Dex and crazy ol' Jones, when it had rained for thirty-six straight days, big gloppy drops of rain that slammed into your head. That kind of rain, they say, hadn't surfaced in the West for thirty or forty years, not since the days before the township federation. It took down a bunch of cozy bungs that had sprung up on the face of Pikes Peak, and brought down a bunch of mud and debris where they'd cleared the last set of trees.

They'd called it the Great Flood of '06. The streets flooded, and the entire Greater Metropolitan Front Range slowed, and then came to a stop. There was nowhere for all the water to go. In response, they'd built all those storm tunnels under everything. The tunnels that now housed a large part of the unaccepted populations. The tunnels that had been dry since construction had finished.

During that epic rainstorm, Dex and Thelo would sneak out of the orphanage window with Jones and they would just sit on the roof, quiet, not saying a word, and let the rain pour down on them. They didn't go run and play in it, because the grassless yard had turned into two feet of mud underneath six inches of flowing water. But they still went out, every night, for thirty-six nights, and let the rain soak them until they were too tired to stay out any longer. Jones would fall asleep, and Thelo would shake him awake to go in. Dex would usually stay out all night.

Thelo pretended that rain was falling now, washing him clean, pouring over his face, down his neck, over his shoulders. The rain would make little rivers down his oversized biceps, find a path around his elbow and down his forearms. Then it would rinse over his hands,

turn all the blood into a diluted orange, and then, as if from a faucet, pour off his clenched fists. It would fall onto the cold cement floor and make a puddle, then a river, and the body that lay at his feet would slowly drift away, and out of his mind.

Thelo opened his eyes. The blue sky burned bright, the late afternoon wind already whipping in from the mountains. There was no rain. Just blood everywhere and a dead man at his feet.

You didn't need to check for a pulse when you saw that much blood. There just wasn't enough left inside to run any of the moving parts. Thelo couldn't recognize the person, but it looked to be someone important. Rich people clothes. Rich people shoes.

When the blackout wore off, and Thelo regained consciousness, it wasn't like a switch turning on and off. It was always a blurry reentry, and he'd found it best to stand still until he could get his bearings. He looked around. He was on the roof of a low-rise; it was probably apartments. He had a view of the downtown skyline to the east, but he was at a lower level than most buildings to the west. Downtown Grenver, probably the Mid District. For a moment he listened for traffic. He couldn't place somewhere this close to the metro center that had no traffic. Maybe he was more north than he expected.

Still, there should be some traffic noise. And indeed, there were a few blares, but it was far from the dull rush he would expect.

He realized that his fists were still clenched, and aching, so he loosened the grip, and heard a clatter. He looked down at the cement. His fold-away knife had been in his left hand, and now it lay there unfolded, the blade covered in blood and clots of skin, the sharpened tip pointing directly back at him.

*I'm not left-handed. And it never rains when you need it to.*

## *Seven.*

---

Mal looked at the clock on her portable. The sun would just about be dipping below the Peak. She looked at her 'cast snooping prog again. Still no signal. She pulled a new list down and sent the review snoop across a new band, but there was nothing. Nobody this low was broadcasting for a signal, so she'd just have to wait. Sooner or later,

someone would want to get hold of the day's events, pull it down to their viewer, check in. Folks that lived in the storm sewers were not that different from anyone else. They knew when things happened. They talked to each other, had communities, opinions. And they were connected. More than anyone on the surface suspected.

And they still liked to catch the occasional broadcast, especially with events such as today's. But no one was putting up a signal right now. *Damn it.* Mal changed her band spectrum again and sent out a snoop.

Should have scripted this process a long time ago, she thought. But she hadn't. She would always start, but then look at the blank screen and not really be able to think where to begin. Besides, she had to admit that she liked keeping it all inside her head. *When you write something down, you give yourself an excuse to forget it.* Those were Jones' words, and she liked them. She told herself it was a safety precaution, but she knew that if her portable was ever taken into custody they wouldn't be worried about a few illegal snoop programs. They'd take one look at all the illegal data she had stored and know enough to put her on ice forever.

She pulled a new list and expanded the frequency range. This time, she got feedback, on a really low band. Someone is trying to hide their signal, she thought. And they were doing a good job of it. Typing madly, she wrote her usual Trojan horse prog and attached it to the signal. Then, because of the frequency range, she added an independent default recast, in case her carrier dropped before she was done. Then she waited. In just a few seconds, her prog had done the work and she was being asked if she would accept a loop transfer. She said yes, hardwired the link to her location, and began typing.

She always rewrote the application on the spot. It meant that there was never a way to track her interference based on an application footprint—another reason to avoid scripts. The 'bots that roamed the database thrived on patterns. It was how they operated; they were hardwired into their little triggered brains. Once the application was written, she scrolled the directories until she found the entrance she was looking for. Then she used the same back-door procedure she'd been using for years, ever since she'd fled Academy. With a few more keystrokes, she was in. A flashing cursor was all it was, but to her it

looked like an open door, beckoning.

The Charts. She knew the real name of the singular database format used by the ruling American elite to track the medical and personal data of each citizen: The International Citizen Safety and Welfare Information Tracker, or ICSWIT. It had become known as “the Charts” back when it was primarily a unified database for medical tracking. The name had stuck, even though its use had been expanded to incorporate nearly every piece of data that was generated by almost anyone or any connected thing within the United States, or by anyone outside the United States deemed worthwhile of tracking.

And it only took twelve minutes to crack in, if you knew what you were doing. And happened to have a root-level, permanent security key, Mal thought uneasily. No reason to be that proud of her programming skills.

She immediately navigated to new criminal record activity and pulled up the base table for any new ice that had been created since early that morning. She selected Unaccepted Citizens to narrow the list down to a manageable amount of data, but still the list scrolled off her display. She ran the query again, and then watched the list of names.

No Dexter Maxwell.

She changed her selection to Unnamed Unaccepted, but none of them matched his description or whereabouts either.

As of seven-thirty, Dex was still running free. A readout on her display told her that the original connection she’d piggy-backed had dropped, so she was now running an independent line. There was a risk, but she was too anxious to keep her eyes off the Charts. She ran through the list again.

No Thelonus Hollywood. Still free, as of 19:30 hours.

Habitually, she moved to the med records and started digging. Back when she’d first met Dex, she’d started looking for a record, any record, of his existence prior to when they’d met. It had turned into a routine to get warmed up to the Charts and its organizational systems. She’d looked through meds, births, arrests, obits. She’d cross-referenced the orphanage that he’d spent all those years in, and found a loose thread or two of data. These were mostly records of trouble, violence, or mischief, always cross-referenced with one Thelonus Hol-

lywood. Then there were the records of the chemicals they had put into Dex. She pulled up the list of drugs again; it had always amazed her that he was still standing, let alone a coherent and intelligent young man, considering the types of compounds and the dosage levels they were pumping through his body at the age of thirteen. But it did explain the destruction of most of his early childhood memories.

When she tried to dig any deeper, any farther back, the Charts were a dead end. So she'd cross reference with Thelo's name, because they'd been attached at the hip as long as either of them could remember. Now Thelo, she'd been able to track his path from the first orphanage, as a small child, all the way to them being bunk-mates when Dex had arrived at age thirteen.

But no Dex. Where he came from, what his life had been prior to the orph—the Charts didn't know anything about it. And so neither did she. Dex never talked about it, and when asked, he always just said his parents had raised him in the old hills and then they'd gotten in an accident and been killed.

So she'd cross-referenced accidental deaths in the days leading up to Dex's incarceration at the orph, but every surviving child of every dead parent could be accounted for on the Charts. There was no line that connected Dex to anything, anywhere.

As she looked through the same old records, she heard someone approaching her room, the echo of footsteps on concrete. She dropped the hard link and cleared the display in a mad tapping of keys. A knock came to at her door.

"Yeah, who is it?" she asked.

"Money."

"Come on in."

Money walked in, looking exhausted, like everyone else. "Hey, I used a low frequency band to order up some broadcast loops of the day's news reels. We're gonna watch them on Pedro's display. See if we can catch anything on Dex or Thelo."

Mal closed her eyes. "Low frequency bands, eh? No chance of a trace?"

"Not a chance," Money said. "No one hits the bands that low except for dirt-bags like me."

Mal gave an exhausted smirk. "I'll be right there."