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Opening Extract from...

Binary

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writing as John Lange

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Los Angeles: 5 a.m. PDT
Hour 12

The gray government sedan was waiting in a deserted corner of Los Angeles International Airport. Seen from the air, it cast a long shadow across the concrete runway in the pale morning light. He watched the sedan as his helicopter descended and landed a short distance from the car.

The driver came running up, bent over beneath the spinning blades, and opened the door. A gust of warm, dry August air swirled into the interior of the helicopter.

“Mr. Graves?”

“That’s right.”

“Come with me please.”

Graves got out, carrying his briefcase, and walked to the car. He climbed into the back seat and they drove off away from the runway toward the freeway.

“Do you know where we’re going?” Graves asked.

The driver consulted a clipboard. “One-oh-one-three-one Washington, Culver City, I have.”

“I think that’s right.” Graves settled back in the seat. California numbering: he’d never get used to it. It was as bad as a zip code. He opened his early edition of the *New York Times* and tried to read it. He had tried on the helicopter but had found it impossible to concentrate. He assumed that was because of the noise. And the distractions: when they passed over San Clemente, halfway between Los Angeles and San Diego, he had been craning his neck, peering out the window like an ordinary tourist. The President was there now, had been for the last week.

He looked at the headlines: trouble in the UN, arguments in the German parliament about the mark, Britain and France squabbling. He put the paper aside and stared out the window at Los Angeles, flat and bleak in the early morning light.

“Good trip, sir?” the driver asked. It was perfectly said—no inflection, no prying, just detached polite interest. The driver didn’t know who Graves was. He didn’t know where he had come from. He didn’t know what his business was. All the driver knew was that Graves was important enough to have a government helicopter fly him in and a government sedan pick him up.

“Fine, thanks.” Graves smiled, staring out the window. In fact the trip had been horrible. Phelps had called him just an hour before and asked him to come up and give a briefing on Wright. That was the way Phelps worked—everything was a crisis, there were no routine activities. It was typical that Phelps hadn’t bothered to let Graves know beforehand that he was even in Los Angeles.

Although on reflection, Graves knew he should have expected that. With the

Republican Convention in San Diego, all the activity of the country had shifted from Washington to the West Coast. The President was in the Western White House in San Clemente; the Convention was 80 miles to the south; and Phelps—what would Phelps do? Obviously, relocate discreetly in the nearest large city, which was Los Angeles. As Graves considered it, Los Angeles became the inevitable choice.

Phelps needed the telephone lines for data transmission. It was as simple as that. L.A. was the third largest city in America, and it would have plenty of telephone lines that the Department of State (Intelligence Division) could take over on short notice. It was inevitable.

“Here we are, sir,” the driver said, pulling over to the curb. He got out and opened the door for Graves. “Am I to wait for you, sir?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Very good, sir.”

Graves paused and looked up at the building. It was a rather ordinary four-story office building in an area of Los Angeles that seemed almost a slum. The building, not particularly new, was outstandingly ugly. And the paint was flaking away from the facade.

Graves walked up the steps and entered the lobby. As he went through the doors he looked at his watch. It was exactly 5 a.m. Phelps was waiting for him in the deserted lobby. Phelps wore a lightweight glen-plaid suit and a worried expression. He shook hands with Graves and said, “How was your flight?” His voice echoed slightly in the lobby.

“Fine,” Graves said.

They walked to the elevators, passing the ground-floor offices, which seemed mostly devoted to a bank.

“Like this place?” Phelps said.

“Not much.”

“It was the best we could find on short notice,” he said.

A guard with a sign-in book stood in front of the elevators. Graves let Phelps sign first; then he took the pen and wrote his name, his authorization, and the time. He saw that Decker and Venn were already there.

They got onto the elevator and pressed the button for the third floor. “Decker and Venn are already here,” Phelps said.

“I saw.”

Phelps nodded and smiled, as much as he ever smiled. “I keep forgetting about you

and your powers of observation.”

“I keep forgetting about you, too,” Graves said.

Phelps ignored the remark. “I’ve planned two meetings for today,” he said. “You’ve got the briefing in an hour—Wilson, Peckham, and a couple of others. But I think you should hear about Sigma Station first.”

“All right,” Graves said. He didn’t know what the hell Phelps was talking about, but he wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of asking.

They got off at the third floor and walked past some peeling posters of Milan and Tahiti and through a small typing pool, the desks now deserted, the typewriters neatly covered.

“What is this place?” Graves said.

“Travel agency,” Phelps said. “They went out of business but they had a lot of—”

“Telephone lines.”

“Yes. We took over the floor.”

“How long you planning to stay?” Graves asked. There was an edge to his voice that he didn’t bother to conceal. Phelps knew how he felt about the Department.

“Just through the Convention,” Phelps said, with elaborate innocence. “What did you think?”

“I thought it might be permanent.”

“Good Lord, no. Why would we do a thing like that?”

“I can’t imagine,” Graves said.

Past the typing pool they came to a section of private offices. The walls were painted an institutional beige. It reminded Graves of a prison, or a hospital. No wonder the travel agency went out of business, he thought.

“I know how you feel,” Phelps said.

“Do you?” Graves asked.

“Yes. You’re...ambivalent about the section.”

“I’m ambivalent about the domestic activities.”

“We all are,” Phelps said. He said it easily, in the smooth, oil-on-the-waters manner that he had perfected. And his father before him. Phelps’s father had been an undersecretary of state during the Roosevelt administration. Phelps himself was a

product of The Dalton School, Andover, Yale, and Harvard Law School. If he sat still, ivy would sprout from his ears. But he never sat still.

“How do you find San Diego?” he asked, walking along with his maddeningly springy step.

“Boring and hot.”

Phelps sighed. “Don’t blame me. *I* didn’t choose it.”

Graves did not reply. They continued down a corridor and came upon a guard, who nodded to Phelps. “Good morning, Mr. Phelps.” And to Graves: “Good morning, sir.” Phelps flashed his pink card; so did Graves. The guard allowed them to pass further down the corridor past a large banner that read FIRST CLASS SERVICE ON COACH.

“You’ve got a guard already,” Graves said.

“There’s a lot of expensive equipment to look after,” Phelps said. They made a right turn and entered a conference room.

There were just four of them: Graves; Phelps, looking springy and alert as he greeted everyone; Decker, who was thin and dark, intense-looking; and Venn, who was nearly fifty, graying, sloppy in his dress. Graves had never met Decker or Venn before, but he knew they were both scientists. They were too academic and too uncomfortable to be anything else.

Phelps ran the meeting. “This is John Graves, who is the world’s foremost expert on John Wright.” He smiled slightly. “Mr. Graves has plenty of background, so you can speak as technically as you want. Decker, why don’t you begin.”

Decker cleared his throat and opened a briefcase in front of him, removing a sheaf of computer printout. He slipped through the green pages as he spoke. “I’ve been working in Special Projects Division for the last six months,” he said. “I was assigned to establish redundancy programs on certain limited-access files so that we could check call-up locations to these data banks, which are mostly located in Arlington Hall in Washington.”

He paused and glanced at Graves to see if the information was making sense. Graves nodded.

“The problem is basically one of access-line proliferation. A data bank is just a collection of information stored on magnetic tape drums. It can be anywhere in the country. To get information out of it, you need to hook into the main computer with an access substation. That can also be anywhere in the country. Every major data bank has a large number of access substations. For limited or special-purpose access—stations that need to draw out information once or twice a week, let’s say—we employ commercial telephone lines; we don’t have our own lines. To tie in to a peripheral computer substation, you telephone a call number and hook your phone up to the computer terminal. That’s it. As long as you have a half-duplex or full-duplex

telephone line, you're in business."

Graves nodded. "How is the call number coded?"

"We'll come to that," Decker said, looking at Venn. "For now, we'll concentrate on the system. Some of the major data banks, like the ones held by Defense, may have five hundred or a thousand access lines. A year ago, Wilkens's congressional committee started to worry about unauthorized tapping into those access lines. In theory, a bright boy who knew computers could tap into the system and call out any information he wanted from the data banks. He could get all sorts of classified information."

Decker sighed. "So I was hired to install redundancy checks on the system. Echo checks, bit additions, that sort of thing. My job was to make sure we could verify which stations drew out information from the data banks, and what information they drew. I finished that work a month ago."

Graves glanced at Phelps. Phelps was watching them all intently, pretending he was following the discussion. Graves knew that it was over Phelps's head.

"Just before I finished," Decker said, "we discovered that an unauthorized station was tapping into the system. We called it Sigma Station, but we were unable to characterize it. By that I mean that we knew Sigma was drawing information, but we didn't know where, or how."

He flipped to a green sheet of computer printout and pushed it across the table to Graves. "Sigma is the underlined station. You can see that on this particular day, July 21, 1972, it tapped into the system at ten oh four p.m. Eastern time and maintained the contact for seven minutes; then it broke out. We determined that Sigma was tapping in at around ten o'clock two or three nights a week. But that was all we knew."

Decker turned to Venn, who said, "I came into the picture at this point. I'd been at Bell Labs working on telephone tracer mechanisms. The telephone company has a problem with unauthorized calls—calls verbally charged to a phony number, calls charged to a wrong credit card number, that kind of thing. I was working on a computer tracing system. Defense asked me to look at the Sigma Station problem."

"One ought to say," Phelps said, "that the data bank being tapped by Sigma was a Defense bank."

"Yes," Venn said. "It was a Defense bank. With two or three taps a week at about ten p.m. That was all I knew when I began. However, I made some simple assumptions. First, you've got to have a computer terminal in order to tap the system. That is, once you've called the number that links you to the computer, you must use a teletype-writing or CRT apparatus compatible with the Defense system."

"Are those terminals common?"

"No," Venn said. "They are quite advanced and fairly uncommon. I started with a list of them."

Graves nodded.

“Then I considered the timing. Ten p.m. Eastern time is seven p.m. in California, where most of these sophisticated terminals in defense industry applications are located. If an employee were illegally using a terminal to tap into Defense, he couldn’t do it during office hours. On the other hand, it requires an extraordinary access to get into an East Coast terminal location at ten at night—or into a Midwest location at eight or nine. Therefore Sigma was probably on the West Coast.”

“So you checked the West Coast terminals?”

“Yes. Because in order to hook into the Defense system, you’d have to unhook from your existing system. What corporation, R&D group, or production unit had a terminal that was unhooked at seven p.m. Western time twice a week? Answer: None. New question: What group had its terminals repaired twice a week? Repairing would entail unhooking. Answer: The Southern California Association of Insurance Underwriters, a company based in San Diego.”

Graves said, “So you investigated the repairman and you found—”

“We found our man,” Venn said, looking slightly annoyed with Graves. “His name is Timothy Drew. He has been doing repair work on the S.C. Association computers for about six weeks. It turns out nobody authorized those repairs; he just showed up and—”

“But you haven’t picked him up.”

Phelps coughed. “No, actually. We haven’t picked him up yet because he’s—”

“Disappeared,” Graves said.

“That’s right,” Phelps said. “How did you know?”

“Tim Drew is a friend of John Wright. He’s had dinner with him several times a week for the last month or so.” As he spoke, Graves had a mental image of Drew—early thirties, blond-looking, muscular. Graves had run a check on him some weeks back and had discovered only that Drew was an ex-Army lieutenant, discharged one year before. A clean record in computer work, nothing good, nothing bad.

“We weren’t able to find him,” Venn said, “but we’re still looking. We thought—”

Graves said, “There’s only one thing I want to know. What information did Drew tap from the classified files?”

There was a long silence around the table. Finally Decker said, “We don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Graves lit a cigarette. “But that’s the most important question—”

“Let me explain,” Decker said. “Drew was an ex-Army officer with knowledge of

computer systems. He knew that he couldn't call in on any old number. The call-in numbers are changed at irregular intervals, roughly once a week. But the possible permutations of the call-in number aren't great. With trial and error, he might have found it."

"You know he found the number," Graves said, "because you know he tapped in. The question is, what did he tap *out* from the system?"

"Well, once he was hooked up, he still had a problem. You need subroutine codes to extract various kinds of information, and—"

"How often are the codes changed?"

"Not very often."

Graves found himself getting impatient. "How often are the codes changed?"

"About once a year."

Graves sighed. "So Drew might have used his old codes to get what he wanted?"

"Yes."

"Then we want to know what codes he knew. What sort of work did Drew do when he was in the Army?"

"He did topological work. Surface configurations, shipment routings, that sort of thing."

Graves glanced at Phelps. "Can we be more specific?"

"I'm afraid not," Phelps said. "Defense is unwilling to release Drew's work record to us. Defense is a little defensive, you might say, about the fact that this tap occurred in the first place."

There was a long silence. Graves stared at the men around the table. There were times, he thought, when working for the government was an exercise in total stupidity. Finally he said, "How can you get Defense to release the information?"

"I'm not sure we can," Phelps said. "But one of the reasons you're being briefed is that we were hoping you might be able to shed light on the situation."

"I might?"

"Yes. Drew was working for Wright, after all."

Before Graves could answer, the telephone rang. Phelps answered it, and said, "Yes, thank you," and hung up. He looked at Graves. "Do you have any thoughts about this?"

“None,” Graves said.

“None at all?”

“None at all.”

“Well,” Phelps said, “perhaps something will occur to you in the next hour.” He gave Graves a heavily disapproving look, then stood up and turned to Decker and Venn.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” he said. And to Graves: “Let’s go.”

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